

Final Report for the Celebrating Age funded programme

*It's easy to forget that all the extraordinary has its roots in the ordinary – Sally Tonge*

**Summary**

**Creative Conversations, a rural collaboration led by Arts Alive and MediaActive**, was a three and a half year partnership development that linked experienced agencies and individuals for arts, and community, to help establish a new exciting Shropshire-wide development.

We aimed to generate new local opportunities for people, aged 55 and over and including those at risk of loneliness, to get creative, to take part, to enjoy the arts, and to raise their voices and celebrate their creativity and life experiences.

Alongside the shared ambition to increase access and provision for older people, was the concern to build capacity at a local level. We did this in partnership with the community, health and social care providers, the council, and by investing in our community of artists, through bespoke training, professional development and commission opportunities. Visit [www.creative-conversations.co.uk](http://www.creative-conversations.co.uk)



**Community groups, organisations and venues involved have included:**

Age UK Choirs in Shropshire and Telford, Age UK Diamond Drop Ins, U3A, Wem Town Hall, Qube, The Mayfair Centre, Shropshire Wildlife Trust, Montgomery House Care Home, Millington Hospital Almshouses, The Redwoods Centre, Greenacres Sheltered Housing, SAND, (safer ageing no discrimination), Time Together, Shrewsbury Museum and Art Gallery, Shropshire Libraries: Whitchurch / Market Drayton/ Church Stretton/ Ludlow, Bishops Castle Town Hall, Craven Arms Community Centre, Theatre Severn, Cliffdale Care Home, The Hive, Whitchurch Town Hall, Betjemen Lodge, Stone House Care Home, Whitefriars, and The Grange Sheltered Housing.

Thanks to additional funding from the Eveson Trust, the On Your Doorstep show also toured out of county to: About Face Theatre, Leominster, MAC, Birmingham, Ledbury Market Theatre, Leominster Library, Burley Gate Village Hall, Lady Emily Hall, Tarrington, and Burghill Village Hall.

One of only four initiatives to be funded in the whole of the Midlands through the Celebrating Age programme, jointly funded by the Arts Council through the National Lottery and the Baring Foundation, the project partnership included: Shropshire Council, Age UK Shropshire Telford & Wrekin, social housing providers Connexus, along with a number of community organisations, including Wem Town Hall and SAND (Safer Ageing No Discrimination).

From the outset in April 2018, the project sought to offer a breadth of artforms and cultural experiences in a variety of contexts and locations, reflecting the collaboration between the two lead organisations, whilst also responding to the interests of our many rural and community-based partners. As such, the menu of opportunities has included performing arts, digital arts and cinema, and sometimes a combination of them all! Activity took place in: day centres, care homes, community and cultural spaces, and online, giving older people, 55 to 100+ years a chance to take part in an array of arts activities and events including: storytelling, music making, singing, poetry, visual arts, movement and dance, touring theatre, filmmaking, animation, digital arts, Live Cinema, exhibition, and the creative use of technology.

Although the project was interrupted by the pandemic, delivery continued by pivoting workshops and events to online sessions, with some outdoor activity, and this is covered in more detail later in the report.

## **What We Did**

**Arts Alive and MediaActive served as Project Managers and Creative Producers**, co-designing the programme of activities and events in consultation with the host organisations, groups and participating individuals, and with our team of Creative Conversations artists. However, it should be noted, that the bespoke nature of every workshop and residency benefitted hugely from the skills and experience of the artists, who were recruited for their specialist artform and community experience, and commitment to working creatively with and alongside older people.

**The core creative team were:** Adrian Plant (Musicologist & Curator), Jill Impey (Visual & Digital Artist), Sally Tonge (Storyteller & Musician), Jean Atkin (Poet and Writer), Rachel Liggitt (Dance Artist), Samantha Moore (Animator), Dea Paradisos (Visual Artist) and Hannah Prior (Theatre Maker), Sian Allen & Cerin Mills (Creative Producers /Arts Alive), and Sue Gainsborough (Creative Producer/MediaActive). Importantly, 75% of the lead creative team were older people.

The artists had opportunity to work solo, in a variety of community settings, and the project also afforded opportunity for artists to collaborate and to share skills with each other, as well as with the participants.

### **Adrian Plant – Musician, Musicologist & Curator**

Adrian's considerable experience of working with older people and in care settings informed the project from the outset. In addition to a series of care home and day centre music and song sessions, and Songs from the Movies singalong sessions at Wem Town Hall, Adrian worked over an extended period with a group recruited from the Shrewsbury AGE UK choir. Initially, in collaboration with Jean Atkin (poet) the group composed a series of new songs, based on the groups reflections and memories shared. Adrian then followed up by working with the group to develop a pilot podcast (which became a vodcast), that could be used in care settings or at home to support singalongs, and to encourage participation in community choirs. The podcast included songs performed by the choir, providing a friendly "everyone is welcome" atmosphere, that encourages the listener to join in.

*“Getting involved with Creative Conversations projects has added another hugely important and enjoyable dimension to D’s social (and creative) life. D describes his involvement in both these activities as having become a 'life-line' for him. The really major good and most significant changes that I've noticed in the group is a slow, but huge, increase in their confidence (and belief) that – even at this stage of life they can still sing and rediscover playing musical instruments – and be creative!*

*Typical of the majority of my older singers, D had lapsed into a self- perception that '... oh I maybe had a half-decent voice when I was younger - but of course that's all now gone with age' ”. Adrian*



recording songs for the podcast /vodcast

When the pandemic hit and the AGE UK choir could no longer meet, Creative Conversations stepped in to support the sessions moving online. The group trialled using different types of devices including tablets, laptops and Facebook Portal. The facilitated online weekly singing sessions continued throughout the pandemic up until they were able to again meet in person.



singing sessions continued over Zoom during the pandemic

*“Due to the limitations of the tech (for online live music making), so many of the group, through having to sing solo and acapella 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*

## Jill Impey – Visual Artist

When we invited Jill to work with older people exploring the creative use of iPads, Jill suggested a focus that responded to the diminishing access many older people have to nature, and the ability to independently go outdoors, into woodland or even a garden. Working with groups of older people in varying contexts and settings, Jill sought to find new ways of connecting with nature and with each other.

Jill brought the outdoors in, first setting the workshop space to reflect the calming sounds, smells and visuals of nature, by using projected film, audio of birdsong and a suitcase of natural objects, including leaves, shells and a huge bundle of aromatic lavender.

Sessions involved creative play with: collage, printmaking, film, animation, photography, digital drawings, poetry and audio recording. The resulting films incorporate the artworks created and the conversations shared by the participants.

Jill also ran a series of one-off workshops in community and care settings, and was supported to devise and deliver online sessions during the lockdowns.

Jill worked with clients of the Redwoods Centre, and separately with a group of older volunteers of Shropshire Wildlife Trust' (SWT) Feed the Birds project. Both groups explored a variety of creative techniques, including the use of iPads. Jill's work with SWT volunteers 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.



learning then sharing new creative skills

*“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*

*“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*

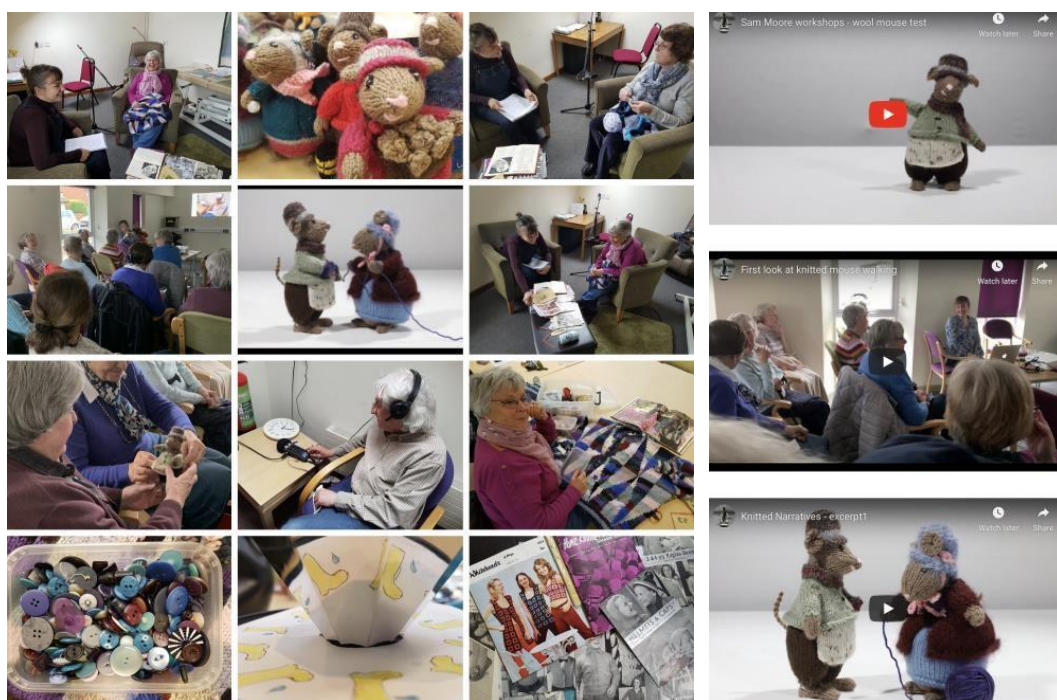
*would be really interesting to do more of this with other people who are more wary of nature. It's been lovely to respond to nature, using the senses, the sounds and smells, and touch...." Diane Monether, SWT*

### **Samantha Moore – Animated Documentary Maker**

As a keen knitter, Sam is all too aware of how crafting skills, particularly those associated with older women, are often undervalued by society. At the heart of Sam's creative approach is exploration through conversation, and so she embarked upon a series of visits to knit and natter, and crafting groups across the county, in order to find her creative collaborators. The Merry-makers crafting group has been meeting for over 25 years and welcomed Sam into their sessions. They swapped knitting techniques with each other, had a play with animating, and gifted Sam a collection of knitted mice. With the help of a retired radio engineer, Sam captured individual reflections from the knitters on their relationship to knitting. Sam also met with scientists who research the benefits of knitting to mental wellbeing. The knitted mice have been brought to life through stop motion techniques. The resulting audio interviews have been transcribed, and a selection serve as the soundtrack for the tender and beautiful animations. The group were delighted by the resulting animations.

Sam has since achieved significant development funding for a follow up animation, again, in partnership with the Merry-makers.

*"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 Creative Conversations sessions ..... My ambition was that the sessions 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" Sam*



Developing knitted narratives with the Merry-makers crafting group

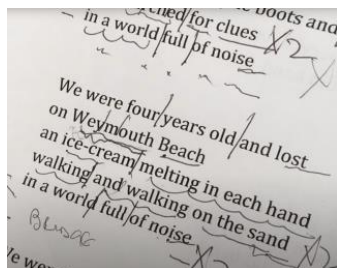
## Jean Atkin – Poet & Writer

Jean worked in a variety of community, care and cultural settings, and online, both as a solo artist and in collaboration with the project artists: Adrian, Sal and MediaActive Projects. Jean used poetry, objects, archive film, and countryside walking to stimulate conversation and sharing of reflections, which were then captured and crafted into poems and songs. Jean worked with community groups, with groups of individuals and also had opportunity to work on a one-to-one basis with elders, which proved a powerful experience for the participants, for Jean and for the audiences of the works created.

During the pandemic, (through additional Loneliness Fund activity), Jean delivered online sessions, using archive film as a stimulus to develop poetry and spoken word performances. Through Wem Town Hall she served as artist in residence on both the outdoor weekly market and on the local Meals on Wheels scheme (using the phone for the initial conversations with service users, then performing the poems created on their doorsteps, as part of the meal delivery service).



Jean performing a bespoke poem for archive film. Responding to BFI's Love is All on Valentines Day



*"P's life has been eventful, as he pointed out. His poems reflect his experiences, told simply, but with the reflective distance of age we reasonably call wisdom. I sat with him, and the wonderful facilitator at his sheltered housing scheme, and made notes, page after page of unpunctuated scribbling, with my own peculiar short-forms. We drank tea and ate cake, and at intervals I read back to Peter what he had told me, and we amended where necessary. I find the shape and form of the poem emerging during this process, where my main aim is to capture a voice as truthfully as possible. Later, I work on the poems and finish editing them before returning them to the person whose stories they tell.*

*P talks with his hands, and has never learned to read and write. An email from the facilitator said:*

*'Can I just say you have made P's world with the few pages you did? He's so happy, [he says] it's ear pleasing and "good for the grandchildren". He has been sharing the poems with his family and friends and has put them in a folder and is just so impressed, his words "Isn't it gorgeous?"'*

*It was a pleasure and an honour to work with P, and hear these moving, extraordinary and historic human experiences". Jean*

### Sally Tonge – Storyteller & Musician

Sal's considerable experience of working in care settings influenced the ambition of the project from the outset. During the project she worked in different locations and contexts, in care homes, day centres and online, and with established community groups and individual. Using her storytelling and musical skills, both as a solo artist, and in collaboration, Sal also worked with dance artist Rachel at Cliffdale Care Home, and with poet Jean on *Whatever the Weather* walking for wellbeing creative walks.

Sal's inclination towards play and experimentation meant that she was always exploring new approaches to working in community contexts. From familiar singalongs to bespoke songs and stories crafted from conversations shared, in the moment.

Sal's responsive practice was rooted in having a physical and emotional presence. When the pandemic hit, Sal didn't feel her practice could be transferred to an online format. However, with some research and development support, she was able to devise and deliver intergenerational Spontaneous Storytelling sessions. This proved to be a significant development for Sal's practice, and she went on to progress a proposal to Arts Council England based on her learning.



*“People went and found their own objects and told stories, the places and times they evoked and the place these simple objects had in their lives. It was a warm and flowing session and everyone took part. I was pretty magicked by how embodied the session was – the words are all about appreciation, hands and holding, the objects were twisted and turned in front of the screen cameras and for a remote session, there was a sense that this was a very real experience” Sal*

### Rachel Liggitt – Dance Artist

A first time collaboration with Sally Tonge gave experienced community dance artist Rachel the opportunity to work with residents of Cliffdale Care Home over a 6 week period. Sessions used everyday objects to prompt conversation and play, leading to music, singing and movement, and through collaboration, creating new stories. The weekly sessions allowed the relationships to develop between the residents and the artists, giving time to explore and build on the elements that worked best for the group.

*“During one session, in which I was dancing ‘freely’ to Sal’s music, I caught M with tears in her eyes. She said, ‘This is bringing back a lot of memories, I used to dance a lot and love dancing, and now I can’t dance anymore’. She spoke from the heart. Through my eyes we are all dancers, and it is ‘in all of us’...but I am conscious that part of my role is to facilitate the individual finding and reconnecting with the dancer inside themselves. In that moment, accompanied by Sal, I took her hands and we danced. We looked into one another’s eyes, connected through our hands and found the rhythm and flow between us. I was moved by this experience and it had not occurred to me that by being ‘myself’, dancing freely in front of others, could reflect a sense of loss and engender a sense of sadness that an important part of a person’s life was no longer present. In that moment I connected with M in a deeper*

*level and with very few words – without any need to offer comfort or moving on swiftly, M's response needed to be heard, responded to and acknowledged. She found her dance.” Rachel*



Sal and Rachel dancing and singing with Cliffdale residents

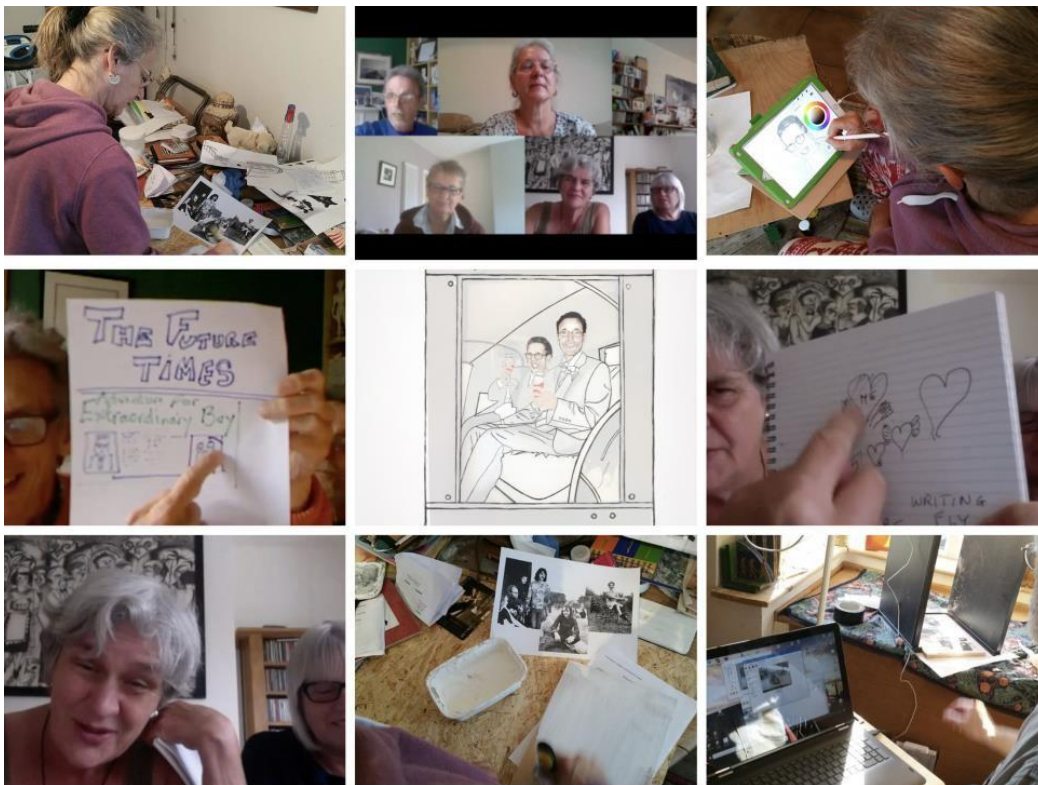
### **Dea Paradisos – Visual Artist**

In collaboration with campaigning organisation SAND (Safer Ageing No Discrimination), we invited Dea to work with older members of the LGBTQ+ community. Face to face sessions were just about to start when the pandemic hit, and so Dea, with the technical 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 generosity of the shared project experience.

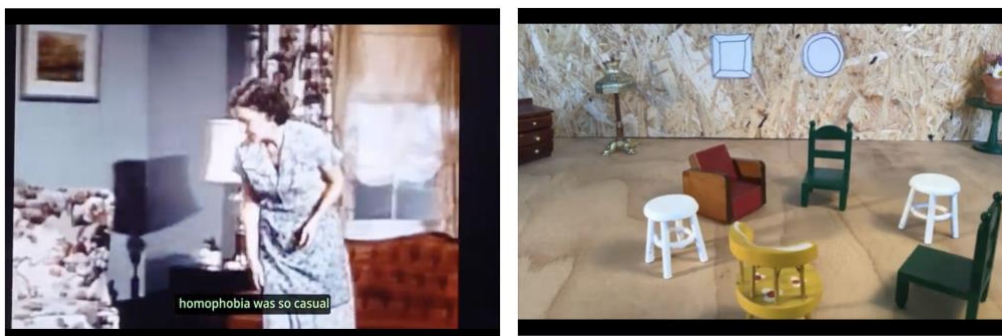
At the groups prompting Dea and Richard then went on to work with an intergenerational group. Again, the conversation-based sessions were held over Zoom, using the film “Celluloid Closet” as a springboard for discussion about on-screen representation of the LGBTQ+ community. The resulting film made by the group includes excerpts of the captured conversation which serve as the soundtrack to a film, whilst archive footage illustrates the discussion. Through the project both Dea and Richard, both older creatives themselves, had opportunity to extend their creative and technical skills through training and guidance.



Both films were been showcased at the 2021 and 2022 Shrewsbury LGBT History Festivals.



behind the scenes of A Message To My Younger Self



Scenes from the two films created by the project

*“Everyone was so generous, taking time to listen to each other and sharing very personal stories and points of view. Whilst the sessions were conversation based, everyone was asked to contribute ideas and feedback on the artwork as it progressed. Working over Zoom was new to me, as was using an iPad creatively and working with archive footage, so I’ve learned a lot from this experience.....but most of all, what I’ve valued is having the opportunity to share, listen and collaborate with people at a time when so many of us have felt isolated”. Dea*

## Hannah Prior – Theatre Maker

Hannah is a theatre maker who specialises in inclusive practice. She looked at all the written, audio, video and visual material created by project participants, and with older collaborators: actor John Cobb, designer Sue Hall, and producer Cerin Mills, shaped the theatre piece *On Your Doorstep* for touring.

In collaboration with MediaActive, Hannah and John also experimented with different forms of delivering performance and narrative for screen based exhibition, and created a series of filmed vignettes, from the show. The short films were filmed by Joe Gainsborough and edited by Russell Prior.



vignettes created for screen based sharing

The much awaited tour of *On Your Doorstep*, having been postponed twice due to the pandemic, finally went ahead, with post-show workshops, in autumn 2021 across the county, and to Birmingham, and thanks to additional funding from the Eveson Trust across Herefordshire, with a total of 25 performances across 18 venues.



the live show, at the Hive, Shrewsbury

Audience feedback was overwhelmingly positive.

*“What a revelation! A unique presentation that covered and addressed so many issues of life, relationships and getting old. Thank you, for your time remaking new memories and recalling old”. Betjemen Lodge, Ludlow, audience member.*

*“Just been to see On Your Doorstep at the Library. I loved it but you brought me close to tears on a Tuesday morning! There is so much in it. It is beautiful”. Whitchurch Library audience member.*

*“Excellent show- really moving and very imaginative. Our grandchildren 10, 8 and 6 were enchanted and there will be lots to discuss with them, thank you so much” Midlands Art Centre audience member.*

*“The last time I attended Live theatre was over 30 years ago. Like reading a well written book, this provided some thought -provoking images in my mind”. Wem Town Hall audience member.*

### **MediaActive Projects – Creative Media, Digital Arts & Cinema**

The MediaActive Projects team have led on developing the digital elements of the programme, liaising with artists, partners, participants and embedding creative digital practice and opportunities within the project. Donna Clifflands, Max Allwood and Richard Hepenstal have all provided creative and technical support.

Additionally, MediaActive linked some aspects of their wider programme to the project, building connectivity and capacity and enhancing partnership working. Adventures with Archives, a cinema and filmmaking programme that specialises in working with archive film is a good example of this. The Adventures expertise and resources supported artists training and a series of creative interventions that linked directly to partners’ and audiences’ interests.



Wem Jubille Band and Jean Atkin performing live to archive films at Wem Town Hall and The Hive

Prior to lockdown, and in direct response to feedback from Creative Conversations’ participants and partners, and inspired by the *At My Home* Helsinki pilot profiled at The Art of Ageing Artfully conference in February 2020, MediaActive had begun to consider how to support people unable to travel to take part in the arts. Connexus social housing joined us as a partner and funder for an offshoot pilot: Creative Conversations at Home. When Covid-19 struck some weeks later, the relevance of developing a virtual model became all too apparent! We moved quickly to support a number of the CC artists in their development of a virtual approach that related to their artform practice. CC supported artists development time, provided advice and guidance, and facilitated a number of test runs, trialing new arts participatory approaches using video conferencing, bringing together focus groups who have provided feedback from a range of societal and artform perspectives.



Focus groups provided feedback on creative Zoom session test runs

We attempted to find new ways to offer technical support whilst face to face home visits were not appropriate, but we had limited success in this area. As the pandemic eases, for the future there is scope to recruit Digital Buddies, volunteers who can provide hands on technical support and encouragement, as needed.

MediaActive established a new partnerships for the new “virtual” development (Connexus Housing: 25 supported living communities across Shropshire) and attracted investment from the Community Foundation for Staffordshire & the NET Coronavirus Appeal, Shropshire Council (Arts, Libraries, Museums), Connexus, and The National Lottery Community Fund. Whilst this development supported much needed research and development and artist-led activity during lockdowns , our commitment to this way of working remains long-term, post pandemic.

*“We met up online with the At My Home team in Helsinki to share learning and ideas, and this was such a valuable experience...and inspiring! It served as a mutual peer review.... and enabled us to recognise that the projects approach to moving activity online and to supporting our artists to make this transition, was really quite special. For the future we have agreed to continue to meet to share ideas and learning with the Helsinki team, and to involve the CC artists and our partners in this process.” Sue Gainsborough, MediaActive Projects*

Finally, MediaActive launched a comprehensive online exhibition to showcase the project, to share learning and inspiration, and serve as an advocacy tool in moving forward:

[www.creative-conversations.co.uk](http://www.creative-conversations.co.uk)



**Arts Alive** have led on producing the creative writing and performing arts elements of the programme, as well as the visiting *Curious Shoes* tour and project's culminating touring show *On Your Doorstep*. In September 2020 Shropshire based Hannah Prior, director, and Sue Hall, designer, began working with older actor John Cobb, to devise a 45 minute touring show, in response to, and incorporating elements of, work created by the wider project. Hannah, who specialises in inclusive practice and performance work, looked at all of the written, audio, video and visual material created by project participants, and working collaboratively with John, shaped the piece entitled *On Your Doorstep*. The show's tour was twice postponed due to the pandemic but in October and November of 2021, to the delight of audiences and the project's community venues, the show, with post show workshops delivered by Sal and Jean, finally toured to venues across Shropshire, into Hereford and to the MAC, Birmingham.

### **CPD, Training and Go & See visits**

A distinctive aspect of the project has been the commitment to build the capacity to do more, and to do better, at a local level. We offered bespoke CPD opportunities to address gaps in knowledge or experience. We focussed on skills and knowledge sharing and creative collaborations.

As a consequence, a creative community with enhanced insight and understanding and creative energy has evolved that is well placed to support future ambitions for arts and older people, and Creative Conversations.



training days - for artists and partners



dementia & ageing awareness delivered by Curious Shoes director and performers

Activity included:

Skill sharing between artists through creative collaboration

Creative use of iPads – with We Engage

Creative Evaluation – with Sue Challis

Working creatively with archive film – with MediaActive Projects

Dementia Awareness – with Magdelana Schamberger

Clowning – with Holly Stoppit

Community Podcasting – with TAPE Music and Film

Devising Story from artefacts and shared memories – with Ruth Cockburn

The artists have been fully engaged and appreciative of all of CPD and experience sharing opportunities throughout the project:

*"It was a privilege to read each other's stories. We have all, in different ways, facilitated and validated the creative expressions of those many individuals in terms of their ability to share their experiences with others. We have created safe spaces for this to happen, listening and creatively responding, acknowledging, levelling and sowing seeds with the hope that some grow through further staff /participant interactions and sharing.*

*I noticed that a lot of artist development came from collaborations and indeed mine came through the sharing my SWT group did in different settings". Jill Impey*

*"I've thoroughly enjoyed being involved in Creative Conversations, meeting and sharing with you all, learning, working with you - Sal, seeing you all virtually and playing during CPD. It's great to have a hunger for the work we do - looking forward to reinventing/re-imagining the future and doing more". Rachel Liggitt*

*"Thanks for a really interesting Zoom meeting - and I've further enjoyed reading the detail of the artist stories. It just shows what a rich and inventive offering Creative Conversations has enabled in this project. And also how much we've all gained as artists from working closely and sometimes collaboratively together". Jean Atkin*

*"I think what really came across for me was how through Creative Conversations, the invitation to be a creative EXPLORER in later life has been offered. There was one thing that Jill said in an encounter with her case study, which went something like; ..'it's about just doing it and taking on board what you want from it' . This rang big in my mind. We live in such a product based time, with 'ready mades', kits, examples, movies and chances to watch creators in speeded up videos proliferating in these times through so many outlets that we can almost get paralysed by impossible models of perfection and the warmth of Jill's invite seemed to sum up some much of what we have been able to offer in this project.*

*We have offered a chance to take a wander down 'creativity street' and browse what's on offer there without pressure to produce or create which can stifle us at the outset. This then gives rise to Adrian's tale of a man reimagining himself as a 'creative agent' and Rachel's lady revisiting her peak time as a dance and my man Dennis - who, when freed from pressure to function, excels in conversation, a love of language and dance.....*

*It's easy to forget that all the extraordinary has its roots in the ordinary. I have been proud to be a part of all this". Sally Tonge*

## What We Learned

- The long-term impact of the project is the learning and inspiration that has been gained: by the lead organisations, our community, cultural and care partners and the creative practitioners and individual older participants. Through the project, existing partnerships have enhanced their working relationships and new partnerships have evolved with social housing providers, older people and diversity focussed community initiatives, health and social care providers, and between artists.... and with participants.
- Although the pandemic interrupted some aspects of the new partnership developments, as we learn to live with Covid there is commitment from all parties to revisit how we can continue to work together to improve cultural and creative opportunities for older people.
- A significant aspect of our project has been capacity building at a local level: supporting our artists and partners to develop understanding, expertise, and trial new approaches in the field of arts and older people. CPD, supported by mentoring and skill sharing offered to the artists, and opportunities for co-producing with our partners and participants has proved fruitful.
- We have had opportunity to trial one-to-one activity and better understand the enormous potential of providing one-to-one mentoring to older creatives, as well as the inclusion of intergenerational activities as part of a wider arts and older people offer.
- From the outset we intended to recruit artists who had specialist knowledge relevant to the project, artform and inclusive practice. If they didn't have significant experience of working with older people we looked for personal experience of ageing or of supporting older friends or family. This proved crucial, ensuring insight but avoiding stereotyped assumptions.
- We wanted to be ambitious and explore more than what might be considered the typical care home activity offer. We involved older people of all ages, from 55 to 100+ years, building in a breadth of creative opportunities, participants and settings, which in turn afforded a breadth of creative outcomes and learning – shared between all parties.
- We needed to make sure the opportunities for participants, hosts, and artists were relevant and inclusive, so we involved host organisations, artists and older people in devising the programme and bespoke projects, and this afforded a dynamic co-produced offer that had capacity to respond to opportunities and challenges as they arose. The trust that we placed in our artists' expertise and capacity to collaborate, to share learning and inspiration proved invaluable, shaping the programme as it developed and informing future ambitions.
- Initially we had assumed that most of the artist led sessions would be long-form residencies. However, following the initial taster programme in phase one, we recognised that shorter bursts of activity running over 6 or 7 weeks, tended to work better, both for the participants and for the artists' creative approaches. There were some exceptions to this, and with the impact of the pandemic we strove to maintain some ongoing regular activities for the sake of the isolated participants, as well as introducing a degree of one-to-one sessions. Where there has been regular longer-term input we strove to build in creative progression for those involved.

- Building in opportunities to support professional development for artists and partners was crucial, enhancing insight and understanding and providing routes for skills and knowledge sharing.
- Use of virtual tools and platforms was well trialled by artists and participants, so we can apply this learning to our future ambitions to upskill and equip older people who do not have online access.
- We did not see significant change in behaviours of and within care home settings in relation to how artists work in those settings. The pandemic negated the opportunity to progress this consideration further. Whilst affecting change in this context had not been a stated ambition of the project, we believe there is more work to do, to demonstrate the potential positive impact of arts in care homes, for both the benefit of the residents, and the artists who are committed to working in this field. To date, of the care homes we have worked with, those open to artists have remained so, whilst others have found it more difficult to host creative sessions. This isn't a criticism of those settings, but rather, an acknowledgement that demonstrating impact and value to decision makers, and managing change on the ground, particularly following a pandemic, is a long-term consideration that requires resources that are hard won. We are now considering how, in the immediate and longer-term future, we can work more effectively with our partners to continue to develop the Creative Conversations offer for residents in care settings.
- The project has been a catalyst for new developments and investment - a direct result of learning gained and implemented. Four of the CC artists and at least two arts organisations involved in the project progressed funding bids to develop their practice and/or older peoples' arts programme based directly on their experience of working on the project. These developments have achieved and supported R&D, a continuation of collaboration between artists, animation production funding, a digital access pilot with social housing providers and local authority, and enhancement of community-led dementia services.

Sue Gainsborough & Ian Kerry  
 MediaActive Projects CIC Arts Alive  
 March 2022

