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**Mid-term Evaluation Report  
for The Cultural Spring's Phase 3  
Creative People and Places (CPP) Project**

23<sup>rd</sup> September 2021

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*'A world without art is an inhuman world. Making and consuming art lifts our spirits and keeps us sane. Art, like science and religion, helps us make meaning from our lives, and to make meaning is to make us feel'.*

Grayson Perry, Artist

## 1. Executive Summary

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If Cultural Spring was a stick of rock, 'arts participation and engagement' would be writ large through its core. So when the coronavirus pandemic struck in 2020 and all face-to-face arts and cultural gatherings were prohibited to quell the spread of the virus – Cultural Spring had no choice but to dramatically rethink its delivery model. Faced with the dilemma of no in-person activities, the team pivoted and successfully re-engineered delivery to ensure continued access to and engagement in art, cultural and creative activities for their communities in Sunderland and South Tyneside. In so doing, they: supported a number of artists and creative practitioners to re-think their delivery models and projects; created a mix of on and offline arts engagement opportunities; worked in partnership to ensure access and to extend reach to groups particularly impacted by the pandemic; helped and supported the local arts ecology and; supported community members to maintain engagement in various decision making fora.

Hybrid workshops were developed with creative activities being undertaken in individuals own homes with online support, other workshops were shifted entirely online, new craft packs were created and delivered to people's homes, additional funding was secured to support those at risk of/experiencing loneliness and social isolation through creative endeavour and artists/creative practitioners were supported with new commissioning opportunities and reflective practice. Online offerings and delivered art packs enabled Cultural Spring to reach and support greater numbers of people with disabilities and others, who for various reasons, were not able to leave their homes e.g. mental health anxieties or care responsibilities.

When the normal rules of engagement apply, developing and delivering diverse, quality and relevant arts and cultural activities/experiences, reaching those least engaged, encouraging community ownerships and involvement in decision making is no easy feat. During a pandemic this is doubly difficult when all connections are shifted to being remote in nature. However, human beings are social animals and need 'connections' to both survive and thrive. Cultural Spring's range of arts and cultural engagement opportunities provided vehicles for these connections to be made, created a sense of 'all being in it together' and the much needed safe, calm spaces and time out where individuals could temporarily immerse and distract themselves from the stresses caused by Covid-19. Thus individuals were supported to connect with others through shared endeavours, learn new things/develop new skills, take notice of others, remain mentally and physically active and to give back (support one another). The wellbeing benefits of this engagement and participation should not be underestimated and are evidenced in participant feedback. The crucial role arts and culture played in helping people through this crisis could be seen worldwide, from balcony sing-alongs in Italy, to rooftop flamenco performances in Spain, to the Together In Art Kids program in Australia. Collectively these cultural and creative activities provided much needed and valued distraction, immersion, enjoyment, joy and connection during these unprecedented times.

More and more people now appreciate that arts and culture play a valuable part in helping to tackle social and health challenges. If nothing else, Covid-19 helped to shine a light on the therapeutic and wellbeing benefits of taking part in creative activities.

Cultural Spring played to their strength of being a non-venue based CPP and further refined and developed their outreach based approach to working in, with and through stakeholder and gateway organisations to extend their reach to the least engaged and most disadvantaged community members across South Tyneside and Sunderland.

Business as usual was not possible, but Cultural Spring ensured a diverse range of arts engagement and participation opportunities. They exceeded target numbers for participants, commissioned artists/creative practitioners and new companies, almost achieved targets for commissioned organisations, community arts champions and commissioning forums. They fell short (understandably) in terms of achieving audience numbers for large scale events and volunteer recruited.

Both the supply side (artists and creative practitioners) and demand side (participants) of the Cultural Spring's project were vocal in voicing their appreciation of the new and ongoing arts and cultural offerings and support made available during the pandemic. These contributed to the improved wellbeing of participants, enhanced connections and the financial wellbeing of the local arts economy.

In summary, to date, the Cultural Spring has delivered: 5 Community Research & Development projects, 4 Your Art projects, 23 workshops (digital and non-digital) and distributed 2120 Craft Packs. They have successfully engaged 3837 participants, 23 Community Arts Champions and 4 Community Forums. They have secured just shy of £38,000.00 to support and extend activities and provided income for 29 local creative practitioners/artist and 3 commissioned organisations. Project expenditure up to the end of June 2021 stood at £208,375.00, which considering Covid related delivery challenges and the range of activities delivered represents excellent value for money.

## 2. Introduction

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This report is an interim, mid-term, formative evaluation of The Cultural Spring's Phase 3 Creative People and Places (CPP) Project. It covers an eighteen month period from the 1<sup>st</sup> April 2020 to the 30<sup>th</sup> August 2021, during which time restrictive Covid-19 operating conditions were in place. Cultural Spring is an Arts Council England (ACE) Creative People and Places programme (CPP) funded project. CPP aims for more people to take the lead in choosing, creating and participating in arts and culture experiences in the places where they live. There are currently 33 CPP projects across England, each located in areas of low arts engagement.

The table below provides an overview of the strategic framework within which the Cultural Spring operates:

<b>VISION</b>  For arts and culture to be an expected and accepted part of everyone's lives in Sunderland and South Tyneside.
<b>MISSION (to deliver against this Vision, Cultural Spring will ...)</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Develop a programme of all art forms to encourage and enable everyone to get involved and to establish a new cultural environment.</li><li>• Attract great musicians, writers and artists (locally and nationally) to work in and with our communities.</li><li>• Provide opportunities for people to enjoy new experiences, discover new passions, learn new skills and be involved in decisions about the types of activities available to them.</li><li>• Develop a rich programme capable of catalysing previously untapped partnerships and opportunities.</li></ul>
<b>IMPACTS (longer term changes brought about will include ...)</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Improved wellbeing</li><li>• Enhanced Community cohesion and self-reliance</li><li>• Improved local image and civic pride</li><li>• Economic benefits</li></ul>

### Planned outputs

Projected outputs for the Cultural Spring's Phase 3 CPP Project 2020 -2023 include:

- 4000 participants (500 Go and See & 3500 Workshop participants)
- 42 artists, creative practitioners and commissioned organisations engaged and supported (30 creative practitioners/workshop leaders, 10 commissioned organisations & 2 new companies)
- 8000 audience members
- 80 co-creators (50 community arts champions, 20 volunteers & 10 commissioning forums)

### 3. Background and Context

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The Art Council England's Creative People and Places Programme focusses on those parts of the country where involvement in arts and culture is significantly below the national average. Sunderland and South Tyneside are two such areas. Cultural Spring's Phase 3 CPP Project builds on activities and developments delivered in their previous Phase 1 and 2 Projects and is focussed on increasing the numbers of people resident in South Tyneside and Sunderland engaged in arts and cultural activities. In Phase 3, Cultural Spring extended its geographical focus to cover the six new wards of: Ryhope, Silksworth and Doxford in Sunderland, and Hebburn North, Hebburn South and Primrose in South Tyneside. These new wards have a combined population of 59,000 people.

The project was strategically managed by a consortium of local partners, comprising:

- Graeme Thompson – Pro Vice Chancellor External Relations, University of Sunderland (Chairperson) <https://www.sunderland.ac.uk/>.
- Ray Spencer- Executive Director, The Customs House Trust Ltd <https://www.customshouse.co.uk/>
- Fiona Martin, The Customs House Trust
- Paul Callaghan- Sunderland Music, Arts and Culture (MAC) Trust <https://www.mactrust.org.uk/>
- Rob Lawson – Sunderland Music, Arts and Culture Trust
- Padma Rao – Sangini, <https://sanginiafriend.wordpress.com/>
- Kathleen Boodhai – Sangini
- Richard Barber – Cultural Spring Charity
- Ian High – Cultural Spring Charity
- Emma Horsman – Project Director, Cultural Spring
- Councillor Linda Williams – Sunderland City Council
- Councillor Joan Atkinson – South Tyneside Council
- Katie Whiteoak – Community Champion
- Sandra Naglis – Community Champion
- Diane Gray – Community Champion
- Sinead Burke – ACE Relationship Manager (Observer), <http://www.artscouncil.org.uk/>
- Tony Davey – Community Champion, (From 2017 To January 2021)

Additional support was provided through Chrissie Tiller who acts as a critical friend to Cultural Spring.

Day-to-day project management was delivered by a small and highly capable team of six people, comprising:

- Emma Horsman – Project Director (Staff)
- Emma Scarr – Project Co-ordinator (Staff)
- Michael Barrass - Project Producer (Freelancer, From February 2020 To June 2021)
- Rob Lawson – Press and PR, (Freelancer)

- Iam Burn – Data and Admin. Co-ordinator (Staff)
- Si Beckwith - Audience Engagement Co-ordinator (Freelancer)

**Note:** The team equates to just 2.2 full time equivalents (FTE). A new Community Engagement role is due to commence in November 2021 (0.8 FTE).

## **Approach**

Cultural Spring’s Phase 3 project has identified six main ways to bring about increased participation in the arts. These relate to the ways in which individuals and communities are to be involved as audience members, participants, co-creators, co-commissioners, champions and advocates alike and cover the following strands:

- i. **Community Engagement Activities**  
Delivering regular, generally weekly art and craft workshops for participants, decided upon through community consultation and based in venues in the six new wards.
- ii. **Your Art**  
Co-commissioning and working with community champions to select the proposals they want to support.
- iii. **Go & See**  
Organising and scheduling a range of opportunities for people from across Sunderland and South Tyneside to go, see and experience art, both locally and further afield - with targeted offerings to engage specific groups to increase diversity and extend reach.
- iv. **Community Research & Developments**  
R & D call-outs developed by and with community partners and local people, with artists selected by the communities themselves. Enabling work with non-venue based organisations and where appropriate, working with appointed artists to scale-up and scale-out their work to continue community engagement.
- v. **Social Prescribing**  
Partnership and network development to explore and pilot a social prescribing project such as ‘arts on prescription’ to extend reach and further demonstrate the value of the arts to health and wellbeing outcomes.
- vi. **Cultural Friends**  
Recruiting and deploying ‘Cultural Friends’ to befriend, encourage, support and accompany individuals to access arts and cultural opportunities - both Cultural Spring’s and others.

Trying to deliver what is essentially an arts and cultural participation and engagement project, during social lockdown was a challenge to say the very least. Coronavirus restrictions severely limited face-to-face group participation, meetings and gatherings of any kind. However, Cultural Spring successfully pivoted and re-engineered activities and project delivery to ensure continued access to arts and cultural activities and ways of offering ongoing engagement opportunities for their

communities. Wherever possible, activities were shifted on-line and for those without digital access, alternative delivery mechanisms were developed and delivered to ensure the widest possible inclusion and to mitigate against digital exclusion.

**Note:** In September 2020, Cultural Spring became incorporated as a registered charity.



## 4. Research Objectives and Questions

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Readers of this report will be all too aware that the pandemic put pay to any business as usual. Nowhere was this more acutely felt, than amongst organisations and businesses focussed on participation and physical engagement activities with theatres, museums and venues closed, festivals, workshops and outdoor events cancelled to stem the spread of the virus.

Given these extraordinary and extenuating circumstances it did not therefore make sense to compare Cultural Spring's Phase 3 delivery against its original plans – since many of these had to be jettisoned to ensure safe and Covid free ways of working and delivery.

We have therefore sought to explore the following research questions in this mid-term evaluation:

- (i) What was The Cultural Spring's response to Covid-19 in terms of ensuring continued delivery and access to arts and culture?
- (ii) How successful was The Cultural Spring in pivoting and re-engineering activities?
- (iii) How did creativity and the arts support communities during lockdown?
- (iv) How was inclusion addressed?
- (v) How did artists and creative practitioners respond to these changing circumstances?

As well as considering Art Council England's required evaluation questions of:

- (i) Are more people from places of least engagement experiencing and inspired by the arts?
- (ii) The extent to which the aspiration for excellence of art and excellence in the process of engaging communities has been achieved?
- (iii) Which approaches have been successful and what lessons can be learned?

## 5. Findings

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This section details Cultural Spring’s re-engineered delivery under the six key activity strands during the first eighteen months of its Phase 3 CPP Project.

### (i) Community Engagement Activities

Twenty eight (28) workshops were delivered in safe, secure, remote and digital ways and attended by 417 participants. Eighty or 19% of participants engaged in non-digital workshops/activities and 337 or 81% engaged in digital workshops/activities. For the purposes of this report we have analysed results from the five Staying Connected projects attended by 140 participants and from the ten Winter Workshops (20/21) attended by 170 participants.

**Note:** Evaluation feedback from the Summer 2021 workshops was still being collected at the time of this evaluation and will therefore be included in the next Evaluation Report.

### Digital Workshops

The following thirteen digital workshops were developed and delivered:

Workshop	Description
Writing Bootcamp	YouTube sessions delivered over four weeks taking individuals from raw ideas to a stack of writing
Card making	Creating beautiful cards to send to friends and family over two weeks.
Folking Around the World Part 1	Singing focussed workshops including stories about different countries the songs come from.
Folking Around the World Part 2	Exploring the world and folk traditions through the medium of song during weekly sessions over an eight week period.
Winter Writers	A course of ten creative writing workshops.
Summer Writers	A course of ten creative writing workshops and activities.
Christmas Cards: Surreal Collage	Four online sessions to create collage cards.
Winter Lights: Installations for Your Home.	Single session workshop exploring how to re-purpose and re-cycle old Christmas lights into new light installations.
Christmas Street Gallery: Creating and Showing Work for your Window	A forty minute session to create an eye catching piece of festive or winter art to be hung in windows.
Awesome Artists (2D & 3D)	Mindful art sessions to support creativity involving a series of fun activities
We Make Culture	Adult song writing sessions delivered over two weeks
Animal Face/Pen Portraits	A single session opportunity to learn the fun skills in collage and mixed media.
Introduction to Podcasting	Two sessions to introduce participants to the world of podcasting and editing.

**Note:** Free materials for a number of these workshops were provided, upon request.

## Non-digital Workshops

Five non-digital workshops were programmed to ensure that digitally excluded, disinterested or disengaged individuals had opportunities to participate in creative activities. These workshops included:

Workshop	Description
Wish you were here - Postcards	Participants were sent blank postcards with instructions to create a card for onward posting. Different instructions were given over a twelve week period, for instance .... In words, drawing, collage, paint, print or sewing please detail your favourite recipe or a happy childhood memory etc. Each participant received 11 cards from others and had one card of their own. It is hoped an anonymised exhibition of the work can be created in the future.
We Make Culture: Singing Your Stories and	This project combined singing and letter writing groups. Participants wrote weekly letters over a six week period on different subjects e.g. What home means to you? Selected passages were read out and recorded. The letters were used by a composer to create songs which were subsequently performed at six weekly workshops.
Front Street Songs	A socially-distanced music performance project, aimed at families with children under 11 years, to introduce children to live performances of familiar and original songs, playing simple instruments and making their own music using household objects.
Letter Writing & Musical Collage	This project aimed to create and tell the stories of the people through audio collage, interweaving spoken words and songs from local residents through teleconferencing. Teleconferencing proved difficult, so artists worked with Cultural Spring and others to deliver the project in person, once conditions allowed. <b>Note:</b> At the time of writing this report – this project was still ongoing.
Postal Art Workshops	Fortnightly art activity packs were posted to participants. These packs explored: urban landscapes, self-portraits, sketching and drawing, creative writing, drawing with stitch and collage. The project was open to beginners and more experienced artists and crafters and aimed to focus on the positive encouraging participants to create unique and meaningful responses to their time in lockdown. Work created was collected and made into a book for participants to keep as a memento.

## Workshop outcomes

The table below reports on the five ways to wellbeing outcomes previously agreed for participants and is based on a sample of seventy seven (77) participants, from both digital (40) and non-digital (37) workshops/activities - representing a healthy sample size of 25%.

Measure	Non digital workshop participant	Digital workshop participant
Reporting that participation had made them feel happy	100%	90%
Sense of achievement	100%	95%
Learned something new	88%	93%
Appetite/intention to engage in future arts activities	100%	100%
Would recommend to others	100%	100%
Valued the social aspect of the engagement	78%	55%
No previous arts engagement in the last 12 months	11%	-
Engaged 1-3 times in the previous 12 months	25%	-
Engaged 3+ times in previous 12 months	64%	-

Women	89%	-
Men	11%	-
Disabled	27%	-
Minority ethnic group	0%	10.5%

Participants gave various reasons for joining workshops. The vast majority of which coalesced around feeling connected to others and improving wellbeing. For example:

*'Giving something back for very little effort. Plus I live on my own, so good to be in touch with others'*

*'A good way to connect with others at a time when we can't take part in face to face activities'*

*'Loneliness'*

*'Try something new and learn new skills'*

Examples of participant reported benefits included:

*' Helped keep a positive outlook and cheered me up'*

*' Something to focus on during a difficult time'*

*'Feel great after each workshop. Connected and a bit lighter'*

*'I liked this because I don't have transport to go to workshops and lots of classes pretend to be disabled and wheelchair accessible but are not. This class was free and easy to do any time of day'*

*'This workshop has given me a little happiness in the strange times we are currently living in'*

### **Craft Packs**

Cultural Spring commissioned and delivered a diverse range of craft packs, each containing instructions and kit, and all designed to engage and distract people through creative pursuits in their own homes during lock down. Some were targeted at specific groups of people and others were designed for families to do together. The table below summarises the range of creative craft packs circulated:

Month	Nos	Description	Cost	Target participants	Locations
May	200	Eco crafts	900.00	Families with children 5-11 years	South Tyneside
May	200		990.00	Families	Sunderland
July	100	Textile crafts	1000.00	Socially isolated adults	South Tyneside and Sunderland
August	100	Various crafts	500.00	Families	Sunderland

August	100	Eco crafts	500.00	Families with children 5-11 years	South Tyneside
October	60	Mixed crafts	650.00	Families with older children	Sunderland
October	60	Mixed crafts	438.00	Teenagers	Sunderland
October	120	Eco crafts	600.00	Families with children 5-11 years	South Tyneside
November	50	Xmas crafts	50.00	Isolated adults	South Tyneside
December	70	Xmas crafts	796.00	Adults – primarily men	Sunderland
December	120	Sketching	810.00	Adults – primarily men	Sunderland
December	120	Mixed crafts	600.00	Families with children under 5 years	Sunderland
December	40	Calligraphy	300.00	Adults	Sunderland
December	50	Mixed crafts	500.00	Adults – primarily men	Sunderland
December	400	Mixed crafts	2000.00	Families	Sunderland
December	35	Mixed crafts	210.00	Care experienced students and care leavers	Sunderland
December	35	Mixed crafts	210.00	Bereaved parents	Sunderland
December	40	Sketching crafts	430.00	16-18 year olds	South Tyneside
	2120		£12084.00		

In total £12084.00 was spent on creative craft packs which were delivered to 2120 addresses. 560 of which were in South Tyneside and 1560 in Sunderland. £2980.00 or (25%) of this budget was spent in South Tyneside and £9104.00 or 75% in Sunderland. The reason for increased craft pack distribution and expenditure in Sunderland was because Cultural Spring was successful in securing additional funding for Sunderland focussed activities as follows: £6366.00 to cover online workshops, non-digital projects and craft packs from six wards (5 in the East Area and 1 in the West Area of Sunderland); £3600.00 (£600.00 per ward) specifically for craft packs.

**Note:** £600.00 was also secured from South Tyneside Council's CAF programme for Hebburn North, Hebburn South and Primrose.

The £6366.00 from Sunderland Council's East and West Area Committees' Community Chest which enabled them to commission six artists to produce 720 creative activity packs. These packs were distributed to the six Sunderland communities of Ryhope, Hendon, Doxford, St Michaels Ward, Millfield and Silksworth. Cultural Spring worked with: Blue Watch Youth Group, Ryhope Community Centre, CHANCE, Young Asian Voices, Gentoo, The Box Youth Project, City Life Church and the Youth Almighty Project – who distributed the packs to their users and beneficiaries.

Unfortunately no evaluation feedback was collected from the recipients of the Craft Packs. Packs were distributed either directly by the artists commissioned or the gateway organisations in the different localities and little contact information exists to enable representative follow up. Anecdotal evidence suggests that the packs were really well received and that outcomes were similar to those for the workshops. Furthermore, it appears that Craft Packs were successful in reaching more children and young people. The packs were distributed to 2120 addresses, so a minimum of 2120 individuals participated and a maximum of 3420 if family members were included too. The unit cost of craft packs is calculated as follows: £12084.00/2120 households = £5.70 or £12084/3420 participants = £3.50.

Feedback from participants included:

*'Brilliant idea. Made me feel really special to be receiving a pack of treasures and treats to create. It really changed my mood and gave me something worthwhile to do'*

*'Great idea. Lovely surprise not knowing what to expect, but having the opportunity to create an art piece of your own out of something'*

*'Due to the unprecedented situation, my kids cannot have a normal life, so this type of activity helps their mind and body to be active'*

*'As a carer, I need an outlet and, for me, crafting is it. The craft is also easy enough for my relative with dementia to join in too.'*

## **(ii) Your Art**

Your Art provides support for new arts and cultural engagement activities developed and devised by amateur/community arts, cultural or creative groups. During Covid-19 Cultural Spring adapted Your Art to improve its reach with people who were particularly isolated and negatively impacted by the pandemic. This involved:

- (a) The creation and appointment of two Community Connectors, namely a South Shields writer and broadcaster and a public health practitioner in Sunderland. Each worked with identified community organisations to further develop their Your Art project ideas.
- (b) The selection of four local community organisations to improve and extend reach, namely:
  - Regeneration North East was awarded £350.00 to develop a Butterfly Project, supporting people with lived experience of mental health by asking individuals to send images of artwork depicting butterflies to create a virtual gallery, whose launch coincided with World Mental Health Day on October 10<sup>th</sup>, 2020. Regeneration North East CIC is a disability led organisation which delivers creative interventions to support the physical and mental wellbeing.
  - Sunderland MIND's Total Arts Project was awarded £500.00 for the creation of a youth drama group to help boost confidence amongst young people. Sunderland MIND is a charity run by and for local people which provides support for individuals, carers and families experiencing emotional or mental health problems.
  - The Let Your Soul Grow project was awarded £450.00 towards the costs of photography and music sessions to support vulnerable people including asylum seekers, refugees, those with mental health problems and disaffected youth. Just Let Your Soul Grow supports young adults with learning disabilities.
  - Into the Spotlight was awarded £250.00 to provide entertainment for residential and care home residents during lockdown. For example, performers Elaine Rennie (runner up of

1999's TV Stars in Your Eyes), Johnny B Goode and Daniel James (runner up in South Tyneside's Young Performer of the Year – Pride of South Tyneside Awards 2019) staged performances in the car park of Deneside Court Care Home in Jarrow.

These four projects were co-created with local people and designed to reach people with limited and access to creative experiences and activities. Additional capacity was brought to bear by the two Community Connectors, who collaborated with the projects and shared their experiences and insights of getting community-based arts projects off the ground.

### **Added value**

Cultural Spring was successful in securing £31,000.00 from ACE for a bespoke Loneliness project. This comprised of thirteen micro-projects – each designed to support those experiencing, or at risk of, social isolation and loneliness during the pandemic. Examples of the micro projects delivered with this funding included: Postcards, Singing your stories, Postal Arts Project, Big Fat Sunderland Colouring Book, Poetry project, Baby book club and an LGBTQi mini project with Customs House.

**Note:** These projects have not been evaluated since they sit out with/alongside the ACE CPP funding and have been reported on separately by Cultural Spring.

### **(iii) Go and See**

Physically visiting museums, art galleries, exhibitions and installations in small groups was not possible during lockdown. No Go and See activities, virtual or otherwise, were delivered by Cultural Spring during the period covered by this evaluation.

### **(iv) Community R&D**

Staying Connected was Cultural Spring's first set of artist/creative practitioner commissions which sought to increase participation by involving people in the local communities choosing five artists to explore new ways of connecting people and communities with arts and culture during the pandemic. The following five diverse projects were selected and delivered:

- **The Super-Human Art Project – Gary Nicholson**  
This commission involved art and collage materials being posted to participants with disabilities, who were asked and supported to create self-portraits of themselves as a Super-Hero with special powers and a suitable name. Completed artwork were scanned and images uploaded to a dedicated Facebook page, with an accompanying YouTube.
- **Craft Packs and Online Tutorials - Claire Finlay**  
Craft kits were created and delivered to 320 individuals with accompanying online support through either Facebook Live, Skype or other platforms.
- **An Adventure for Lives Less Ordinary - Katy Weir**  
This commission was part epic poem, part spoken word, part song and part Zoom celebration of everything that's great about Sunderland. This project provided people aged sixteen and over with the opportunity to participate and perform to varying degrees and British Sign

Language interpretation was provided. This project was originally conceived as part epic poem, part spoken word, part song and part zoom celebration of everything that's great about Sunderland. It changed a lot from its original concept and became a deaf focussed project with participants engaging in a visual arts workshop.

- **Theatre Space North East - Corinne Kilvington**

This commission involved delivering a range of online theatre skills workshops, run over four sessions using Zoom and open to all.

- **Lockdown Writing - Carol Cooke**

This commission involved a South Shields writer and broadcaster creating an archive of lockdown writings, recordings, photos, videos and sounds. (See

<https://youtu.be/1uKa06DjjRk>)

### **Additional Commissions/Projects**

To ensure widest possible inclusion, Cultural Spring commissioned the following projects to add to their creative offerings:

- Artists Padma Rao and Miki Z were commissioned to deliver creative online workshops for women asylum seekers and refugees in Sunderland  
(See: <http://theculturalspring.org.uk/gallery/sanginis-online-felting-technique-sessions>)
- Liz Million was commissioned to curate and produce Resilient Ryhope Lockdown Life Stories – a book containing poems, photographs and drawings from Ryhope villagers of all ages – describing the trials, tribulations, boredom and laughs experienced during lockdown.

#### **(v) Social Prescribing**

Development work in this area was limited due to the pandemic. A joint Social Prescribing application with partners from across South Tyneside to the Arts Council was unsuccessful, however, there may be similar funding opportunities later in the year. The additional funding Cultural Spring secured from the Arts Council for their Loneliness Project was successful in attracting a number of social prescriptions for arts engagement activities from social prescribers and link workers.

Cultural Spring are members of All Together Better, an alliance of health and social care providers, local commissioners and the voluntary sector, which is aiming for a single integrated social prescribing service for Sunderland.

#### **(vi) Cultural Friends**

The intention was for cultural friends to be recruited to provide support to individuals, who have an interest in engaging in art and cultural activities, but who may need support to do so. To date sixteen Cultural Friends have been recruited and meeting virtually in a private Facebook group.



## OUTPUTS

The table below details Cultural Spring’s three year outputs, taken from the original CPP Project application to ACE:

Target outputs for the 3 years	Mid-point outputs delivered	Notes
4000 participants (500 Go and See and 3500 workshop participants)	3420 craft packs, 417 workshops 0 Go and See <b>Total 3837</b>	96% met
30 creative practitioners commissioned	29	97% met
10 commissioned organisations	3	30% met
2 new companies commissioned	2	100% met
8000 audience members	0	Delivery not possible
50 community arts champions	16 – Cultural Friends, 7 Community Champions – Loneliness Project Total - 23	46% met
20 volunteers	2 Your Art Community Connectors	10% met
10 commissioning forums	4 – Your Art: R & D Staying Connected, Community commissions; Online Workshop Programme and Non digital commissions.	40% met

### Artist/Creative Practitioner Feedback

An online survey to gather insights and outcome data linked to Cultural Spring’s Theory of Change as circulated to twenty nine individuals – each commissioned by Cultural spring. Fifteen responses were received which represents a healthy response rate of 52%. Survey findings are presented below:

#### Adaptations

88% of respondents reported having to significantly adapt their delivery methods during the pandemic. One artist said it had been a whole new way of working and one they would not have tried pre-Covid. Another reported: *‘I have had the opportunity to develop my existing workshop skills into a format that works in Zoom, and to design a 7 week online course, which I can now take with me into future projects.’*

#### Social capital development and new work.

80% of respondents reported making a number of useful contacts to help further their creative practice and enhance their reputation/raise their profile. One artist said *‘The team at Cultural Spring (Iam Burn, Emma Horsman and Emma Scarr) have been extremely helpful and have linked me up to many other arts organisations and community organisations throughout this project.’* Another reported *‘This project has involved collaborating with South Tyneside Council. Their support and the way they have promoted the project as well as promotion from Cultural Spring has certainly raised my profile in South Tyneside and beyond.’* Others commented on how, *‘More people now know about my work. Participants have been encouraged to look at my other textile pieces’* and *‘Through working with the staff at Cultural Spring, I have established links with a number of professionals who have helped me to develop my creative practice and could help me with projects in the future.’* One artist attributed new contracts to Cultural Spring, saying *‘I’ve done more work in the area and this could be*

*down to being part of the programme I think, and being able to put this on my CV/ people may have heard of me via the programme’ and another reported how ‘We have had re-occurring orders for our craft packs’.*

### **New Learning and Cultural Spring Support**

80% of respondents reported learning something new or developing new skills and 67% felt this had improved their artistic practice. One artist said *‘I learnt how to create simple activities that were easy to follow/try for people at home, when I couldn’t be there to assist them in person. I learnt how to talk about what I am doing in an easy to follow way. I learnt how to check-in with people to make sure they were following the activity ok. I now like working online and would like to run more online activities as part of my practice’.* Another artist commented on how *‘Working to such specific and personal briefs, whilst maintaining a high quality of work and meeting deadlines, has definitely enhanced my reputation as a commission based songwriter’.* Others said of their experience, *‘It has been a steep learning curve as this was the first postal project that I had completed. The team at Cultural Spring could not have been more supportive’ and ‘I’ve been able to work with a different group of participants and had to adapt my practice to best suit their needs and interests. I’ve undertaken training on first aid for mental health, which was useful and practical’.*

### **Increased confidence**

88% of respondents reported feeling more confident and able to deliver similar projects in the community in the future. For instance, *‘My self-confidence has increased because of this process’ and ‘The flexibility and support the Cultural Spring team give allowed me to feel confident and design a programme that let me practice new skills’.*

### **Making a difference**

88% of respondents felt they had made a positive difference to the participants they had worked with. One artist cited *‘An 82 year old grandma worked on the project with her 5 year old grand-daughter. People were delighted to receive a package by mail which didn’t contain bad news or a bill. It got families talking and older people reminiscing. It was inclusive and intergenerational.’* Another said *‘Seeing participants smile and build in confidence is always a joy! Likewise, seeing them achieve wonderful things is a privilege - and more so, when new friendships form, and they are all rooting for each other - supporting each other in their creative pursuits! I am happy I could have been part of that’.*

### **Quality Artistic Experiences**

94% believed they had delivered/achieved a quality artistic experience for participants – in spite of Coronavirus restrictions. One artist explained their approach *‘ We co-designed the workshops, and they could be participated in by artists and non-artists, beginners and more expert practitioners. The background material and artistic history and context we set as part of the workshops helped ensure the artistic quality was high’.*

### **Descriptive words**

When asked to use three words to sum up their experiences of delivering creative activities during the pandemic, a wide range of adjectives were used, and all were positive. The most commonly cited adjectives referred to the importance of community connection and engagement. The second largest grouping related to positive aspects experienced such as: uplifting, heart-warming, rewarding,

enriching and affirming. The other biggest category referred to how enjoyable and fun their experiences had been.

Three facilitated focus groups were held with artists/creative practitioners to capture their experiences and learning during the pandemic. Sixteen artists attended one of three online focus groups (digital, non-digital and craft pack artists) and the key findings of which are presented below:

- Artists had to re-think their own delivery models during lockdown to accommodate remote, online and offline delivery. For some this meant using online facilitation and instructions through for example Zoom, YouTube or Tik Tok and for others it meant having to create detailed written instructions for participants and offering telephone tuition.
- Creating meaningful connections with remote participants was important for artists/creative practitioners. This was achieved in various ways: creating 'a web of a postal network'; allocating time for calling or texting participants; inserting handwritten messages in craft packs, bicycle deliveries, knocking on participants' doors and waving.
- Artists and creative practitioners recognised that delivery had benefited them too, as one artist said of their experience *'Encouraging and emotional and therapeutic – both for me and the participants'*.
- Artists and creative practitioners had to operate outside their comfort zones – in terms of having to learn and use new technologies to aid delivery during the pandemic, and/or through working with different groups of people/participants that they would not normally work with.
- For those artists who mainly delivered online, they reported Zoom fatigue and identified challenges in reading people online.

The following two case studies illustrate partnership development and the mutually beneficial relationships developed during Covid-19:

**Danielle Pollard, Williby Roc's CIC, Education Director 5<sup>th</sup> May**

Danielle worked with the Cultural Spring during the pandemic to adapt and deliver 460 Eco Craft Activity Packs to the local community. The packs were so successful and the increased demand has enabled Williby Roc's CIC to expand and start delivering the packs to other organisations such as local primary schools and Bright Futures. Danielle said the project had been a real lifeline for them.

Williby Roc's CIC is pleased they have been able to both keep afloat and expand during the pandemic. They are now undertaking more work in Sunderland too. They believe their relationship with the Cultural Spring and the scale of the activity has meant that more people, who would not normally have access to or become involved in art and creative activity, have been involved. This way of working has also created a new way of working for the CIC.

### **Claire Finlay, Artist**

Claire is a self-employed local artist in her final year of her a Glass and Ceramics degree at the University of Sunderland. Her project focussed on developing and delivering craft packs to the local community for use during lockdown. Her Craft Packs covered a variety of crafts including needlework, felting kits and textiles and she developed YouTube step-by-step instruction videos to accompany them. Claire reported that Zoom did not work great for this type of activity.

To start to build connections Claire delivered Craft Packs directly to people's homes (in socially distanced ways) , mainly in South Tyneside and also in Sunderland too. She also provided tutorials by calling and texting participants to talk them through the activities and to answer any questions they may have had. She believes that the project was particularly successful in reaching those who lack the confidence to join a classroom environment and in enabling people to try new crafts, learn new skills and One local group - Perth Green Community Association - even became constituted whilst carrying out this activity.

*Claire said 'Creating craft kits for Cultural Spring has given learners a focus through lockdown, but it has also helped me, by giving me the drive and focus through a difficult time for everyone.'*

Claire exhibited her course work at The Glass Centre in Sunderland in July 2021.

### **Cultural Spring Team's Learning**

Discussions with team members highlighted the following learning points from delivering during a pandemic:

- The team were able to quickly implement remote working.
- Clear and regular communication and transparent planning were key to successfully re-engineering delivery.
- The team's flexibility and collegiate approach was instrumental in being able to pivot quickly.
- Valuable ad-hoc missed water cooler conversations were missed and not possible when working remotely.
- Informal team/colleague support was previously taken for granted and will not be done so in the future. Support from colleagues during uncertain and stressful times was much appreciated.
- The team took advantage of the plethora of accessible, cheaper and/or free online training during the pandemic for continual professional development purposes. Collectively they have benefited from training in: Mental Health First Aid, LGBTQI awareness, Safeguarding, Active Listening and Coaching skills, Social media and marketing, CRM systems.
- Craft Packs to support engagement were started in May 2020, however, non-digital workshops were not scheduled until the beginning of January 2021. With the benefit of hindsight the team would have started the non-digital workshops sooner. However, this is caveated by the fact that scheduling delivery in times of such uncertainty made planning very difficult and the team were keen to ensure capacity, ensure safety and manage finances.
- Regular online Zoom catch ups with the evaluators has proved to be useful and cost effective.

## 6. Conclusions

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For ease of access the conclusions are framed in line with the evaluation research questions.

### **Cultural Spring's response to Covid-19 in terms of ensuring continued delivery and access to arts and culture?**

The Cultural Spring is no stranger to working hand-in-hand with communities, however, lockdown caused a profound shift in how they could do this. The team had to rethink how to work alongside artists, communities, groups and organisations in socially distanced and inclusive ways. In so doing, they balanced a thoughtful, responsible and co-created ethos, with the need to move at pace to provide nourishing creative activities. These creative activities were perceived as being needed more than ever, given the uncertainty, social isolation and stress communities were experiencing and to continue to support the local creative ecosystems.

The uncertainty caused by the pandemic played to the strengths of the Cultural Spring – being flexible, adaptable and with an action research mindset which enabled them to test, refine and where necessary abandon things that did not work. They maximised local community based assets, worked in collaborative and co-productive ways with communities, voluntary and community organisations and groups, engaged individuals as connectors and champions and strengthened partnerships and networks – all of which added value.

Embracing uncertainty enabled meaningful collaboration between artists, communities and places which resulted in a range of digital and non-digital opportunities for arts engagement and participation under extraordinary circumstances. Cultural Spring reached out to help artists and creative practitioners reimagine how they could work for and with communities, and in turn the artists and creative practitioners reached out to individuals to ensure people felt connected, not forgotten about, supported through arts engagement.

New digital delivery mechanisms deployed during Covid helped to extend reach and widen engagement, particularly for groups, whom for whatever reasons, find leaving the home a challenge e.g. individuals with lived experience of mental health, disabilities or those with caring responsibilities. Similarly this digital engagement has helped to shape community consultation and co-design activities, through both Your Art and Community Conversations.

Whilst the pandemic accelerated the pace of digital development and engagement amongst communities and artists alike, Cultural Spring were mindful that this dash to move creative activities online risked exacerbating digital and social divides. They therefore developed non digital based opportunities in the form of workshops and craft packs - thereby ensuring new and ongoing access for those individuals who were either digitally excluded, disengaged or disinterested. They also acknowledged that hybrid models which combine the benefits of face-to-face (deeper connections) and digital (reach, access) need to be incorporated in the future.

### **Cultural Spring's success in pivoting and re-engineering activities under challenging circumstances?**

Cultural Spring has always sought to work outside conventional art infrastructure – with activities happening where they need to be in local community and in non-traditional venues. Being a non-venue based CPP Project, Cultural Spring were able to play to this strength and to further develop the ways in which they work with, in and through a diverse group of community groups, stakeholders and gateway organisations to ensure best reach into communities and to ensure widest possible access to programmed activities.

The team successfully re-engineered activities in timely and considered ways to ensure access to a wide range of digital and non-digital participation and in ways which ensured individuals and local communities remained engaged in decision making, co-creation and co-commissioning activities – thereby ensuring their ethos of doing with rather than for or to the communities they serve.

### **How did creativity and the arts support communities during lockdown?**

As can be seen from the findings section, Cultural Spring ensured ongoing provision of arts engagement and participation opportunities – albeit in different socially distanced and digital ways. These activities provided much needed immersion and distraction, which in turn enabled individuals to find a sense of calm and peace, creative release and expression, learn new skills, connect with others, develop imaginations and be more active. All of which reduced social isolation, lowered stress levels and improved wellbeing.

### **How was inclusion addressed?**

Inclusion was at the heart of the Cultural Spring's approach and they continued to challenge the status quo and diversity deficit by focussing on particular low engagement areas and groups of people. Cultural Spring recognises that the areas of least engagement are not so because people are not interested in the arts, but rather because of confidence issues, ease of access, costs, or people not seeing what is on offer as being relevant to them or for them. Cultural Spring successfully addressed inclusion through:

- Promoting a wide range of arts engagement opportunities for communities of place, interest and identity through R&D call outs, Craft Pack distribution and the Loneliness Project's added value.
- Working in, with and through stakeholder and gateway organisations and local community groups to increase access for those with lived experience of mental health, learning disabilities, young people, people with disabilities, the elderly, families, LGBTQi+, minority ethnic groups and residents of social housing and care homes.
- Your Art panels enabling the commissioning of work to support specific local areas and specific groups of people and through involving local people in co-creating and co-commissioning projects.
- A community catch up survey
- Communities actively guiding the programme and providing regular opportunities for artists to create new work in response to community need.

### **How did artists and creative practitioners respond to these changing circumstances?**

As would be expected artists responded creatively to the changing circumstances resulting from Covid-19. Cultural Spring's R & D Call out to artists resulted in commissions which were both digital and non-digital in nature and which reached into communities particularly impacted by the pandemic. Artists and creative practitioners reported that Covid-19 had resulted in reflective practice, delivery developments, new learning and partnerships - all of which has aided their resilience and sustainability.

### **Are more people from places of least engagement experiencing and inspired by the arts?**

During the first eighteen months of project delivery, Cultural Spring has successfully exceeded participant numbers. The vast majority of participants have come from South Tyneside and Sunderland and there has been successful targeting within the six new wards. 11% of participants reported having no previous arts engagement in the preceding 12 months, thus demonstrating Cultural Springs success in reaching the least engaged of the least engaged cohort. 25% reported 1-3 art and cultural engagements in the past twelve months and often these were Cultural Spring programmed activities which suggest that arts participation is being successfully embedded and ultimately supports Cultural Spring's vision *'For arts and culture to be an expected and accepted part of everyone's lives in Sunderland and South Tyneside.'*

### **The extent to which the aspiration for excellence of art and excellence in the process of engaging communities has being achieved?**

Cultural Spring continues to demonstrate innovation and excellence in the process of engaging communities. This is evident in the numbers of people from the communities of least engagement participating and engaging in Cultural Spring's art and cultural activities (be they digital or non-digital), and also in terms of their active participation, voice and representation when designing and choosing the activities to be delivered through Your Art, co-commissioning, Community Champions and Steering Group representation.

In May 2020 Cultural Spring undertook a community catch up survey. This survey was sent to 1304 individuals and 165 responses were received. Findings from this survey revealed an appetite for monthly, hour long online community catch ups to promote and find out about Cultural Springs activities and opportunities. A 12% response rate is good for an online survey and particularly good during the pandemic when individuals were bombarded by electronic communications and had other priorities in play. This response rate is indicative of the importance individuals place on Cultural Spring's activities and offerings and how they have successfully embedded arts in the hearts and minds of the communities they serve.

All of the artists commissioned were found to be based in the North-East region, with two-thirds resident in either South Tyneside or Sunderland. Thus demonstrating Cultural Spring's commitment to supporting and engaging local talent and the local arts ecosystem.

Evidence to support delivery of quality, truly immersive artistic experiences, during difficult circumstances, can be found in the following quotes:

*'I can't believe that I sat for that long over so many days, working on this one piece that I'll not show to anybody, but it means the world to me'*

*'This afternoon, I'm doing this for me, for no other reason that I enjoy doing it'*

*'It fed my soul'*

*'It helped clear their minds of any Covid worries, as they were concentrating on the task at that time'.*

### **Which approaches have been successful and what lessons can be learned?**

Whilst Cultural Spring had understandable concerns about shifting delivery entirely online, one of the unanticipated successes of digital provision has been the engagement of greater numbers of individuals, who for whatever reason, find it difficult to attend venue based activities – for instance people with disabilities, confidence issues, lived experience of mental health, caring responsibilities or learning disabilities. Similarly enhanced partnership working in, with and through local gateway and stakeholder organisations and local groups has resulted in extended reach into certain communities of interest – for example people with learning disabilities, lived experience of mental health, minority ethnic groups and young people. However, this indirect relationship does present challenges in terms of relationship building, branding, information and feedback collection.

### **Miscellaneous**

Cultural Spring's incorporation as a charity will no doubt provide improved access to a range of grants from charitable trusts and foundations, not hitherto possible. Securing grants from these external sources will enable Cultural Spring to diversify funding, both scale-up and scale-out provision, identify match funding for the ACE CPP Project, develop new/additional projects and activities and ultimately support organisational sustainability and resilience



## 7. Recommendations

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Below, in no particular order, we make a number of recommendations for consideration:

- (i) Should the pandemic result in lock downs, consideration could be given to developing online Go and See visits – perhaps tapping into existing virtual museum and art gallery tours with facilitated zoom discussions afterwards to share learning and experience. Cultural Friends could have a role to play here in encouraging/supporting virtual visits.
- (ii) Retention of digital and non-digital provision and hybrid delivery models, as this has proven effective in widening access, participant diversification and maintaining connections.
- (iii) Following up/finishing off/celebrating projects – e.g. mounting exhibitions of work or creating booklets/displays etc.
- (iv) Hosting sessions for online participants to meet their fellow participants in person and the associated artists/creative practitioners.
- (v) Creating a file which contains a list of all activities developed/delivered, with a brief description, numbers of participants and demographic details for internal management purposes.
- (vi) Collecting images from Art/Craft pack participants, with the associated artists/creative practitioner's support to help further evidence these activities pictorially.
- (vii) Further develop and expand the role of Cultural Friends and explore their potential roles should a further lockdown arise.
- (viii) Further promote and push the Pay What You Feel system, introduced during Autumn 2021 to increase donation levels and free reserves.
- (ix) Creating/facilitating a network of commissioned artists/creative practitioners to provide peer support, enable collaboration, information exchange, sharing new delivering techniques and learning.

**Note:** We understand that a number of these recommendations have been actioned already.