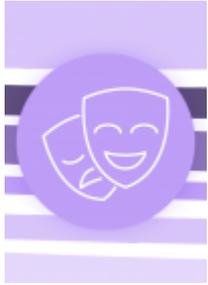


# Leisure under lockdown: how culture and leisure services responded to COVID-19 - full report



## Case study report

Culture, tourism, leisure and sport

10 Nov 2020

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## Foreword

During the first lockdown people sang and danced in the streets, they covered communities with rainbows, embraced open spaces and rallied round to support the most vulnerable in society. We witnessed the very best of humanity and people used culture, sport and leisure to connect and take care of each other.

From online murder mysteries to virtual gyms, streamed rhyme time sessions and lamppost artwork, culture and leisure services across the country have responded to the needs of communities in lockdown: reaching people who face digital exclusion, supporting children's creative learning at home and connecting to people who were isolated and alone.

Engagement in culture and leisure activity delivered or funded by local authorities provided many with a lifeline in the early days of the pandemic, while across the country people found solace in their local parks and open spaces. Alongside this staff and volunteers across these services have joined the front line in response to the crisis: making visitors for care homes, managing food bank distributions, preparing and delivering meals and making regular phone calls for people shielding.

The massive popularity of creative, cultural and leisure activities during lockdown demonstrates the true value of these often-squeezed services. In extreme circumstances, they have been priceless in preserving people's mental and physical

wellbeing. We must not forget this lesson.

“ Challenging budget positions led to spend on culture and related services being reduced by 45 percent in the nine years between 2009/10 and 2018/19.

Despite this, councils remain one of the biggest investors in the sector, spending over £2 billion a year on services related to culture. Many services also generate significant levels of income and inward investment, as well as have a multiplier effect on the local economy, under normal economic conditions.

Council budgets will be under even greater strain coming out of this crisis, but it would be short-sighted to put culture and leisure services at the front of the list for cuts. Besides playing a vital role in supporting better outcomes in health, education, community cohesion and equalities, culture and the creative industries also contribute £10.8 billion to the UK economy each year and were among the fastest growing sectors in 2019. We need to ensure that Government also recognises this.

We must embrace the new ambition for innovative digital solutions that reach new audiences, while also recognising that they remain out of reach for the most vulnerable, for whom access to public buildings has never been more important. We must consolidate the new partnerships generated by the crisis to ensure culture and leisure is central to efforts to tackle the challenges faced by our communities. We must continue to give services permission to innovate.

Spending on culture and leisure is not a luxury: it is a commitment to the wellbeing of our residents and the economic future of our local places. We hope the case studies in this report will go some way to illustrating the impact of this commitment.

Cllr Gerald Vernon-Jackson, Chair of the LGA Culture, Tourism and Sport Board

## Summary

The case studies in this publication highlight just a few of the many ways in which culture, leisure and sports have responded quickly and innovatively to the challenges posed by COVID-19.

They are representative of huge swathes of activity happening throughout the country and there are many more examples which we were unable to include here. They represent a snapshot in time from lockdown in March 2020 to the easing of lockdown and reopening of museums, libraries, leisure centres and theatres from August 2020.

We have grouped the case studies into three broad themes.

### 1. **Digital Innovation**

Council services responded quickly to the closure of their buildings by expanding their digital offer. These examples illustrate some of this new work and explore the impact on services and communities.

### 2. **Community action**

Access to the internet is by no means universal and the examples in this section highlight some of the important ways in which culture and leisure services and organisations connected with vulnerable communities, tackled loneliness and engaged directly with those affected by COVID-19.

### 3. **Frontline response**

Many culture and leisure staff were redeployed during the early days of the pandemic, to support wider council efforts to address the impact of the pandemic. These case studies demonstrate some of the ways in which their specialist professional skills were vital to response work outside culture and leisure.

The examples captured in this report highlights the important role culture and leisure was able to play at this time, connecting people, combatting loneliness, supporting educational outcomes, and helping those who were shielding. They show that public interest in these services was high during the first lockdown.

- Some libraries saw a 600 percent increase in digital membership as well as fourfold increase in the number of ebooks borrowed. Estimates suggest that libraries made 5 million additional digital loans and loaned 3.5 million more ebooks than usual.
- Loans of online e-books, e-magazines and audiobooks went up an average of 63 percent in March compared with the previous year
- 120,000 people joined libraries in the three weeks after lockdown began, a significant increase on previous years.
- Kingston Library Service reached on average 10,000 people for each of its online Rhyme Time sessions.
- Norfolk Libraries' filmed activities were viewed over 172,000 times. That includes over 93,000 views of Bounce and Rhyme session videos.
- Barnsley Museums Facebook page alone had a reach of over 5 million people. Around 500 people a day took part in online daily challenges created under the banner of 'Beat the Boredom'. Over 20,000 took part in tours online around exhibitions

- Hackney Council had around 1,700 viewers on their Windrush council page and around 3,000 in total for their virtual Windrush Festival.

The case studies also demonstrate the positive impact these services had on residents and on council staff.

- Magna Vitae in Lincolnshire were able to undertake 1,539 wellbeing calls and to distribute 110 'Bags of Happiness Survival Kits' across 4 towns.
- The Festival Bridge organisation in Norwich distributed printed creative learning packs to 7,500 families in May, and 18,000 families ahead of the summer holidays.
- Gateshead Libraries produced 7,500 visors and made deliveries to over 60 different private care homes, paramedics, the Red Cross, the Council's undertaker service, schools and nurseries as well as satisfying the demand to help protect Council care workers.
- The archive team in Gloucestershire allowed over 2000 colleagues to work successfully from home and continue delivering the councils' wide range of services by creating a new system for logging and delivering post.
- The Rugby parks team made up and distributed nearly 1,700 supply packages to over 300 shielding residents. Supply packages also contained activity packs created by Rugby Art Gallery and Museum, which included puzzle books, sketch pads, pencils, paints and 'lockdown diaries' for children. Their foodbank operation provided more than 700 food parcels to residents and delivered nearly 150 parcels to people unable to visit the foodbank to collect.

While culture and leisure services and organisations have played a vital role within their communities, they also face uncertain futures. The Government's announcement of a £1.57 billion support package for the arts is very welcome, and yet it may be too late for many. The experience of a second lockdown will place further pressure on organisations already at breaking point.

Julian Bird, CEO of UK Theatre and the Society of London Theatre, told the Digital, Media, Culture and Sport Committee that **70 per cent of theatres and production companies risk going out of business by the end of this year**. The Music Venue Trust estimates that 93 per cent of the grassroots venue network faces permanent closure and **The Association of Independent Festivals says that 92 per cent of its members face permanent collapse** <sup>[1]</sup>.

The leisure sector continues to feel the impact of COVID-19, with many providers facing the risk of closure. The majority of council leisure providers have been ineligible for much of the initial funding support due to their business models and typically charitable status. They have high fixed operating costs, which they have continued to

incur whilst closed and are reliant on income generation, which has been placed under pressure by closures and reduced capacity on reopening due to social distancing.

Community Leisure UK indicates that as of September 2020 returning gym memberships have stalled and started to decline because of a loss of consumer confidence<sup>[2]</sup>. Their research also showed that only 56 percent of facilities reopened when they were allowed to, with the most common reason for keeping facilities closed being the economic unviability of reopening. In addition to this, **over a third of leisure trusts feel their future is insecure and facilities remain at risk** <sup>[3]</sup>.

This is a significant concern for councils, who in England are responsible for a third of swimming pools and grass pitches; 13 per cent of sports halls; and almost of fifth of all health and fitness facilities. They also run nearly **3000 libraries**, over **350 museums**, numerous theatres and galleries, and are responsible for many historic building and monuments.

Losing these services would leave many people and families without access to affordable culture, leisure and physical activity provision. Besides their intrinsic value to society, they play an important role in tackling health inequalities, delivering educational opportunity, promoting community cohesion and generating economic growth.

As some of the stories in this publication show, the impact of the pandemic has not been evenly distributed in communities. **Public Health England research** has shown that among people already diagnosed with COVID-19, people who were 80 or older were seventy times more likely to die than those under 40. The risk of dying among those diagnosed with COVID-19 was also higher in those living in the more deprived areas than those living in the least deprived; and higher in those in Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic groups than in White ethnic groups <sup>[4]</sup>.

These inequalities are not limited to medical outcomes. Many of the groups most affected by COVID-19 are also more likely to experience digital poverty, while research from **Public Health England has shown** that the most economically deprived areas have less available good quality public greenspace and that people exposed to poor quality environments are more likely to experience poorer health outcomes than people who enjoy good quality environments <sup>[5]</sup>.

Councils will have a significant role to play in defining the 'new normal' for communities, in tackling health inequalities and delivering the 'levelling up' agenda. These case studies demonstrate that culture and leisure can be central to these objectives.

Councils currently spend £2.2 billion a year on culture and leisure services in England, making them one of the biggest investors in this area. As largely discretionary services, they will be under huge pressure as a result of the **current gap in council finances**, so it is essential we acknowledge the important role culture and leisure has played in community health and wellbeing during COVID-19 and its potential in supporting a positive recovery.

There is an opportunity to build back better and it should not be a question of health *or* culture when it comes to investment. As these case studies show, the two are deeply intertwined.

“ Through the creativity of our artists, arts organisations, museums and libraries, we will be heard, and we will explore the meaning of all this. We will celebrate, console, commemorate and come together. Through creativity and culture, we will heal.

**Darren Henley, Arts Council England**

[1] DCMS Select Committee, Impact of COVID-19 on DCMS sectors: **First Report** ,  
Published: 23 July 2020

[2] Community Leisure UK, Reopening tracker information based on surveys run from mid-August until early October 2020.

[3] **Community Leisure UK Covid-19 Impact Report - August 2020**

[4] Public Health England, **Disparities in the Risk and Outcomes of COVID-19**

[5] Public Health England, **Improving access to greenspace A new review for 2020**

## Digital Innovation

When the first lockdown began in March 2020, public buildings across the UK had to close their doors. Despite this, many of the services within them swiftly began to adapt to deliver their offer in different ways to existing customers and new communities.

The following case studies highlight the ways in which culture, leisure and sports services responded quickly and innovatively to provide digital content during lockdown. By creating and delivering digital activities, services maintained a connection to their local communities and in many cases significantly increased their reach.

These examples showcase digital work which often took place in conjunction with direct engagement and/or community action. Most services consulted through this work noted that in future they will be looking to digital solutions to enable them to enhance their core offer. The digital element has not replaced the need for human interaction, but it has successfully enabled services to expand their audiences and make activities more accessible. Key to ensuring the longer-term success of this blended offer is investment in equipment and training for digital activity.

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## Case studies

- **Libraries providing a lifeline: Libraries from home**
- **Barnsley Museums: Staying safe and engaged**
- **Digital Bootcamp: Building skills to enable local sporting and activity groups to get more people active**
- **Virtual Windrush Generations Festival - Hackney Council**

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## Community Action

In England, 2.2 million people were identified as being vulnerable to severe impact from the coronavirus (COVID-19). These people were advised to shield from others to protect themselves from the virus. Others found themselves vulnerable in different ways, facing serious challenges to their mental wellbeing through loneliness, or additional pressures placed upon them by the impact of COVID-19.

Many culture, leisure and sports services were well placed to provide their communities with direct support. They used existing networks and connections to ensure some of the most vulnerable people in their communities were looked after during lockdown.

One of the key drivers for services was the recognition of digital exclusion amongst their communities. Digital exclusion relates to people have one or more of the following barriers:

- Lack of personal access
- Lack of basic digital skills or confidence to use the internet
- Lack of motivation or perceive the internet to not be relevant to them.

In the UK there are stark inequalities when it comes to digital exclusion. The Good Things Foundation (a social change charity, helping people to improve their lives through digital inclusion) reports that:

- 9 million people struggle to use the internet independently.
- 7 million people are still offline
- At least 82 percent of jobs require digital skills.
- In England, the digital divide is also a north/south divide. 49 percent of people in the South East using the internet fully compared to 18 percent in the North East, and 31 percent in the North West.

The Good Things Foundation warns that COVID-19 exacerbates the digital divide. The challenges compounded by COVID-19 include reduced incomes, redundancies, not being able to afford internet access, isolation, and not knowing where to turn. They report in **Digital Nation 2020** that a recent public poll indicates support for internet access to be recognised as a utility and for every community to have a place to get help with internet skills. In September 2020 they released a **Digital Blueprint** calling for Investment of £130m over 4 years to #FixtheDigitalDivide.

The case studies in this section of the report highlight some of the many ways in which culture and leisure services sought to bridge this divide by offering offline activities and developing community projects targeted at those most vulnerable to the effects of coronavirus.

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## Case studies

- **Slung Low and Social Care Referrals: No one in Holbeck and Beeston goes hungry**
- **Magna Vitae: Maintaining connections through community projects Local authority: East Lindsey District Council**
- **Festival Bridge: Let's Create - Art packs for children and young people**

- **FEAST: Re-Ignition, funding to support artist engagement in communities**

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## **Frontline Responses**

Culture and leisure staff also played an important role in supporting other services' efforts to tackle COVID-19 on the frontline.

The following case studies showcase a variety of ways in which culture, sport and leisure services deployed specialist skills, knowledge, expertise and utilised in-house resources to support frontline activity. This includes libraries making visors for care homes, archivist staff setting up a new postal system which enabled all council staff to work from home and repurposing leisure centres as food distribution hubs.

Each example provided here showcases services working far beyond business as usual. In each of these organisations, Heads of Service and staff recognised an immediate need to respond to the unprecedented crisis. They stepped up when they were most needed, forming a vital part of frontline efforts to tackle coronavirus.

People took on jobs they had never envisaged before. They played a key role in ensuring the safety of their communities and co-workers. Most of the ways of working outlined in these case studies have since stopped or are in the process of being phased out. Yet they serve as an important reminder of how responsive culture, sport and leisure services can be in a time of crisis.

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## **Case studies**

- **COVID-19 Emergency response - PPE production**
- **Nottingham Leisure Services - Creating a Community Hub**
- **Archive staff enable home working: Gloucestershire County Council and Gloucester City Council**
- **Parks responding to a crisis - Rugby Borough Council**
- **The Old Courts Arts Centre: Food parcels and welfare calls; A safety net for the people of Wigan**

## Conclusion

While each of the case studies in this publication are unique, they share common stories of adaptiveness, rapid response, community care and kindness. Across England thousands of organisations, their staff, volunteers and contracted artists have responded to the needs of their local communities.

Culture, leisure and sport services have used their existing connections and have sought to extend their reach to ensure no one is left behind. Theatres, museums, libraries, parks and leisure helped the most vulnerable members of their communities.

Throughout the pandemic, inequalities have become more starkly visible between those who have access to support networks, space, IT tools, equipment and skills, and those who don't. While the phrase 'we are all in this together' has often been used, it is clear that it has not been the same experience for everyone.

After the second World War the government recognised the need for investment in the arts alongside health and welfare. Access to great art and culture was seen as vital to helping society to heal. In the US, **Roosevelt's New Deal** supported many artists, actors and playwrights. It was understood that artists could help provide a **vision of US culture** that a nation in trouble could rally behind <sup>[8]</sup>.

Government has invested £1.57 billion in a rescue package for culture, which has been gratefully received by the sector. However, many organisations and individuals are still unable to access packages of support and face an uncertain future. The experience of a second lockdown is likely to increase these challenges.

It is also important to remember that councils themselves currently spend £2.2 billion a year on culture, sport and related services. This funding is now under great pressure as a result of the gap in local government finances that has opened up as a result of COVID-19. The **LGA has warned that councils in England will face a funding gap of more than £5 billion by 2024** to maintain services at current levels <sup>[9]</sup>.

We need to not only protect culture, sport and leisure services but invest in them. Investing in these services means an investment in the long-term health and wellbeing of communities. They are the heart and soul of communities and they are vital in building better societies.

[8]The Guardian, **arts in a pandemic: harness their power**, 9 August 2020

[9] **LGA, Rethinking Public Finances: submission to the 2020 Comprehensive Spending Review.**

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## Further information

**Public libraries in England: basic dataset** (gov.uk)

**The Mendoza Review: an independent review of museums in England** (gov.uk)

## More publications about Culture, tourism, leisure and sport

**Leisure under lockdown: how culture and leisure services responded to COVID-19 - full report**

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