**Aebischer, Pascale:** Hello I'm Pascale Aebischer and welcome to the second in a series of new podcasts from the *Pandemic and Beyond,* a project funded by the Arts and Humanities Research Council at the University of Exeter. To show how research in the Arts and Humanities is helping us to live through and make sense of and also recover from the Covid 19 pandemic. We all know that the pandemic has had a huge impact on mental health and on everyone's ability to access arts and culture. But the difficulties in accessing cultural services whether that's theatre or a reading group, dance or music has been especially acutely felt amongst the most vulnerable in our society. So homeless people, sex workers, people in mental health wards, prisons or care homes, elderly people who are living on their own. Or families who don't have ready access to internet connections and digital devices, or the digital skill sets that they would need to be able to access online provision.

To understand this problem and how it is affecting vulnerable communities in the Liverpool city region. I'm talking today to Professor Josie Billington who is leading the Covid-19 care project that is looking at how Arts and Culture provision in the Liverpool city region was affected by the pandemic. And she's examining the highly creative and collaborative ways in which providers have adapted to the lockdowns.

We're also joined by two of Josies key partners. We've got Lucy Geddes, who is the partnership and evaluation manager for the Liverpool Philharmonic and Helen Wilson, who is head of shared reading programs at The Reader, a national charity dedicated to bringing about a reading revolution that will enable everyone to experience and enjoy good writing.

So Lucy and Helen, you've both been on the front line of providing access to music and reading as a means of helping people who suffer from poor mental health or social isolation. How has the pandemic really affected your work and the people that you work with and perhaps we can start with Lucy.

**Lucy Geddes:** So Liverpool Philharmonic, we usually deliver a variety of music making programs for people of all ages to participate in the arts, to develop their skills and improve their health and well being. And one of these is our music and mental health program, which has been run for 13 years in partnership with Mersey Care NHS Trust to support the wellbeing and recovery of adults living with mental ill health across the city region.

So before Covid-19, we were delivering a variety of different participatory activities and live performances in different mental health settings across the region. So community mental health settings and also inpatient wards and high secure services as well. As a result of Covid-19 with hospitals not allowing visitors, community venues shutting for a few months, and a lot of our staff being on furlough. That activity was all paused for a few months in early spring 2020 and we had to really look at the way that we could adapt to the way that we would usually work to respond to the increased challenges that people were facing.

So we knew from speaking to our participants, running surveys and focus groups that participants are experiencing a lot of challenges with their mental health, so low mood, anxiety, fear of going out, fluctuating emotions was something that were referenced a lot but also financial problems and physical health as well and lack of support services. So we really tried to look at how we could support the people that we work with and we began running online groups, so participatory music making groups on Zoom and on Teams for people who are living at home, who might be isolated, and people also in mental health wards, impatient wards through Mersey Care and through our partnership with Cheshire and Wirral Partnership NHS Trust. So those have those activities have been wide ranging and we've reached over 300 people in the last eight months and have tried lots of different things along the way.

**Aebischer, Pascale:** Brilliant, thank you. Helen is that sort of similar to the picture that you've encountered at The Reader?

**Helen Wilson:** Yes, absolutely at The Reader we used to have around 700 groups going up the week and around 1200 volunteers supporting those groups across the UK. Chevy's is a model that uses what we would call literature, but i'd like to stress that by that we mean writing, reading material that has human content, so something that people can relate to and explore. We get people together as Lucy was saying in small groups in person, usually to read slowly aloud and pause for conversation. All of the reading is held by a trained volunteer, so people who perhaps lack confidence or ability around literacy can join in just as anyone else can and also it creates a wonderful live experience in the room.

The problem of course brought by the pandemic is that we can't get together in person. So we had to completely rethink all of our delivery and move again as Lucy was saying to online, but also we set up a reading by phone service and what we call our lifelines reading activity packs*.* So these are easy to print, easy to download packs where we curate reading material and add some reading notes to always walk people through it. We’ve seen really fantastic results with that, as people can sign up themselves, have something delivered every week by email or, of course, to help take on that digital divide that we've seen. We’ve worked with lots of partner organizations, who can distribute those materials. Or particularly mental health inpatient services, we work with a number of trusts throughout the UK but particularly the Northwest so we've seen partner staff print out these packs and distribute them, whether that be on wards, but also throughout our justice settings as well. That people would be in prison, have increased isolation beyond anything else most have experienced recently.

So we have seen great success with that and we've seen, as I can touch upon later, some of the most consistent evaluation results being repeated during the pandemic. So around activity, helping people feel relaxed, giving people something different to think about which is more valued recently, having something important to look forward to. I think this is my favorite one that people are still feeling more connected to others, and in a different way, as well as saying that the groups and meeting experiences help them feel better.

**Aebischer, Pascale:** Yeah oh that's brilliant. So you've touched there on different ways of solving the problems that you encounter when you can't get people in the same room together and sort of feel the warmth of a shared moment and space and presumably it can be quite challenging to do things via Zoom and you found other ways of overcoming those challenges. So, Helen could you talk a little bit more about how you've managed to find alternative ways of of working with people. When you haven't been able to get to them through Zoom session, so you mentioned phones and, but you mentioned also those lifeline packs, can you say a bit more about those?

**Helen Wilson:** Yeah absolutely, so as I think I said, the lifelines packs are really carefully curated reading materials, which we then try and share the experience of being in shared reading groups by having reading notes to take people through the material, but also prompt questions, perhaps help people explore ideas they might have about the material, feel more connected to it. I think it's really easy, particularly for people such as myself who have always found great solace in reading and I was lucky enough to be supported and learning to read and being read to as a young person, to forget that there can be real challenges going on with people around that. So we've really worked hard to make sure that everything now offered is really inclusive and helps people feel welcome and very, very accessible.

So that might be anything from font size but also down to the way that we communicate through all these different delivery mechanisms, it's conversational, it's warm, it's about being a person. Which I think perhaps it's easy to forget about that, when we start talking about mental health that, bit of a bold statement, perhaps, but I think that just means being a person in the world, and what it feels like. So the lifelines packs have proved enormously popular and I think again, as I said, it's because they can be used in various ways, someone can sign up themselves, but we've tried to take it off from all angles, by having lots of partner organizations that we work with.

For example, an organization in Manchester has been printing out the lifelines packs and putting them in food parcels that been distributed to the people, we've got a number of care homes that signed up to lifelines and we've also created some bespoke bundles for them. So the likes of care home staff and people working on impatient wards and also within, as Lucy was saying secure settings, we started up a free do it yourself shared reading workshop to help people gain skills and confidence, while we couldn't carry out formal training to use those packs. So if somebody was a key worker, for instance, think they were in a hospital or they would still go into a prison, they could help people use those packs as much as was possible with our field restrictions we've been living under.

**Aebischer, Pascale:** Sounds amazing, so you've been doing things to train people to help other people, and also things that give people something very tangible to hold on to, to print out and to share with other people, so that there is a conversation about the things that they are reading that is able to develop. Is that what you're saying? Is that something that you're finding as well Lucy, is that something that music can do as well?

**Lucy Geddes:** Definitely Pascale and I really agree with Helen that the arts are an amazing way to bring out the human in us, our sort of true feelings, our true selves, our true identities and to be able to connect in a group with like minded people who share a common interest in whatever that may be whether that's reading or music or other arts, is such a valuable tool to do that. And we've seen the impact of our online groups in lots of different ways, with people rediscovering their love of music again where it might have previously been challenging for them in the past, feeling comfortable to explore that again or growing in confidence and believing that they've got the ability to do something and to contribute to the group as well.

**Aebischer, Pascale:** Is there a sense that in lockdown actually some people have saught that sort of activity more than they did before, so that they’re engaging with reading and with music more because they have more time, presumably, but also they’re isolated. Is that what you're saying?

**Lucy Geddes**: Yes, we've certainly seen more people, new people join our activities than they were before, despite the challenges of online, and I think for some people it's perhaps been about finding meaning in their life and and finding purpose. We’ll seek to do that in different ways and and the arts can help us make sense of what we're living through. And like I said before, such an amazing way to to come together too.

**Aebischer, Pascale:** So what sorts of clients are you working with, you know just talk me through a little bit of the range of the people that you're engaging with?

**Lucy Geddes:** It's all adults, throughout our two mental health programs, variety of different ages and people living across the city region and its people who like I said, both living at home and also having stays in inpatient wards as well, for a variety of different reasons. We support people with brain injuries, people with eating disorders, people living with dementia. But the thing about music is that it's something that everyone has an interest or connection with whether they realize it or not, it's all around us in our everyday lives and most of us have an interest or like or dislike about music and it's such a good way of enabling anyone to connect and to explore that further. So we've really seen a lot of different people and our musicians have been amazing at adapting to to meet their needs really and ideas.

**Aebischer, Pascale:** Do you find that your experiences over the past few months have changed how the communities that you work with will access music, even once the the lockdowns are over and the pandemic has ended? Have there been any sort of surprise benefits of the new ways of working and other things that you've learned that you think you'll continue to do, beyond the pandemic?

**Lucy Geddes:** Like what was reflected in Josies policy briefing from the Covid Care study, we really view digital provision now as a valuable addition to our services as usual, rather than a sort of temporary solution and we're now you know, in consultation with all of our groups and participants to find out more about how they would like to take part, moving forwards, without assuming anything. And we are being even more flexible in how we approach that and in how we truly listen to what's right for individuals and for groups. And because I think one of the beauties of online is that it's quite accessible for people who live in quite spread out geographical locations, it's also positive in terms of removing transport barriers as well. So we really have had to consider that and we're working really closely with with Mersey care and their life room centres which are based in multiple areas of the city region to look at when and how we run both in person and online activities.

**Aebischer, Pascale:** That's brilliant and Helen is that similar for you? Have you have you also found that there are things that you will carry on doing beyond the pandemic and have there been any surprises in what you found, a sort of surprise benefit side effects of working in this way?

**Helen Wilso**n: Yes, absolutely I think the key thing has been accessibility. So to having a mixed model of delivery whether that's online groups, call-on-me shared reading by phone or the lifelines activity packs as well as our excitement about moving back to in person. We can make sure that we can meet people's needs wherever they are, whatever they're working patterns may be, wherever they find themselves post-Covid. I think we've seen some enormous benefits for over 65s population, particularly around the call-on-me shared reading by phone service. Perhaps in part due to a lack of confidence or access to the internet or the equipment necessary to access it. We've also seen an increase in the number of men volunteering with us, which has been wonderful, we’re yet to dig into why that might be, but it seems to be as a result, again, of these different ways for people to engage and in ways that fit around various timetables and commitments.

**Aebischer, Pascale:** That's brilliant so specifically men are volunteering more?

**Helen Wilson :** We've seen that, certainly in our children, young people's work yeah.

**Aebischer, Pascale:** That's fantastic, yeah so can I turn to Josie now because one of the things that's so interesting about the work that you're doing is that you started off elsewhere. You're actually a specialist in Victorian literature and you're the author of a book called *Is Literature Healthy?* How did you come to be the person who does this sort of work and how did you become interested in that relationship between the arts and health? So could you tell us a little bit about how the research that you did before prepared you for the work that you're doing now, with the Arts and Culture providers in the Liverpool city region?

**Josie Billington:** Yeah, so I am a Victorianist and I specialize in people like Elizabeth Gaskell, George Elliot, Leo Tolstoy and one of the things that all of those writers have in common is that they wanted their work to matter in the world. They didn't want to see their work not have an impact in the world. So I was already kind of primed for this sort of work and then I looked at the brilliant work that was being done by The Reader. This is about 15 or 20 years ago when I first encountered this and I actually went to visit an ex student of mine, who had been a Victorian literature student, reading with a group of people who were living in a care home with dementia. I went to see her, but when I came out of the reading group I was a convert to this organizations which were taking books, like those Victorian Literature books out into the world and palpably it was making a difference, it was having a making a difference and transforming people's lives in the moment and beyond, and that gave me an interest in Arts and Culture, more generally.

I was particularly, I became particularly interested in, and haven't pursued this so far, in what different things Arts and Culture can bring. Music, books, can they work together in a person's life as a form of life support? What distinct things that they bring? And I was actually working on a project and application to HRC when Covid-19 hit. So I saw it firsthand what was happening to arts organizations and I knew very well that the people that they were reaching every week and who'd come to rely on their services every week we're not able to access them. So, it was just something I had to do, I started a project around this and and just see what the results were for vulnerable people, of not having access to these really valuable organizations work.

**Aebischer, Pascale:** So you were exactly in the right place in your academic work, at the right time to take this study that you're doing of the whole provision across that region. Now what interests me is that underpinning your own research and the entire conversation that we're having today is that notion that accessing Arts and Culture is a really, really important means of improving the mental health of the people that you work with. And in your book you actually speak about how literature puts people quote ‘in the right place for the awakening of feeling and the vital beginning of thinking. The right place, that is, for being more fully alive’ and that chimes with something that Lucy was saying before as well and it's come out of Helens answers as well. So it's i'm just wondering, can you tell us something about how important Arts and Culture have been to the mental health of vulnerable communities during the pandemic. So you entered into the project with a hunch that it might be really significant, but what have you found?

**Josie Billington:** So I mean at the most basic level, and Helen and Lucy have already touched on this, it's been essential, the arts been essential in alleviating the effects of social isolation and loneliness and many people have actually described the arts and culture they've accessed online as a lifeline. It's interesting that Helens packs are called lifeline packs. And it's very easy when people are down or low or lonely to lose a sense of the resources that they still do have within themselves, you know, a capacity to feel intensely and to feel among other things, intense joy. And encounters with the arts, I mean Helen and Lucy have both touched on this, can move people, can surprise them into a very sudden recovery of parts of themselves they'd forgotten, but which still exists, and then, in some ways they need reminding, but they need a reminder that isn't like formal therapy, they need something that does take them by surprise.

And so it's interesting that in our study, again i'm repeating things that these wonderful people have already done and said but, people talk about Arts taking them out of the negative and making them feel more alive and also giving them a sense of of belonging to the world as well as to other people. So, if anything, I think there has been a renewed sense of the immense value of the arts and of these organizations who are providing it. I mean that might be one of the great things that comes out of this awful situation, a really new appreciation of the humanizing and connective power of Arts and Culture.

**Aebischer, Pascale:** And you've carried out a couple of surveys haven't you with Civic Community Arts organization, so i'm just wondering what you've learned from doing that work what you found out about what's working, why some things are working and others aren't and who these things are working for?

**Josie Billington:** So the Arts and Cultural organisations that Helen and Lucy represent, I mean they said something about how they did adapt so rapidly and so creatively and imaginatively to reach their usual, as well as new, audiences. And, the flexibility of this provision has meant that, I may be repeating what Lucy and Helen have already said, but that they are reaching people who wouldn't normally, for reasons of mobility or health or location or caring responsibilities, have been able to access these services and they're bringing people together across the country and the globe and it's been freeing in that way. There have been challenges and existing technologies have been limited, contact time is often shorter. The kind of personal things that go with in-person contact are often missing: conversations, food having food together, sharing food, breaking bread together. And so that loss of the kind of tactile nature of meeting has gone and those organizations like The Reader and The Liverpool Phillharmonic have had the most success, often in reaching very vulnerable people, have to thank in many ways their existing partnership with health organizations who have often provided the online platform and allowed them in various ways to reach vulnerable isolated and disadvantaged populations.

So there is also of course, related to that the difficulty of digital exclusion for many people, for whom this is an entirely new world and a new universe, and I remember Helen saying to me this cuts both ways, because people are not accessing the service and the organization doesn't know which people they’re reaching and actually finding those usual beneficiaries again is going to be one of the big challenges. But a plus has been reaching new people as Helen was saying.

**Aebischer, Pascale:** Yeah and you've actually looked at audiences haven't you, you've also talked to the beneficiaries of these provisions and i'm just wondering, what are the most important things that you've learned from the users about what it's like to be accessing these services online during the pandemic or over the phone or through a lifeline pack?

**Josie Billington**: Yeah perhaps one of the most alarming things that's come out of speaking to beneficiaries, so these are kind of usual audiences rather than people who are reached via the kind of partnership that Lucy and Helen have with health organizations. One of the really difficult things is that people who are saying that they often, before lockdown, would go to the Philharmonic or access music or museums or exhibitions have reported almost never engaging with Arts and Culture during lockdown, which is a very worrying statistic. And rarely engaging at time periods, where restrictions were temporarily relaxed. And they've reported lots of reasons for this, I mean some of this is a kind of anxiety that is going with the Covid-19 generally under lockdown and the pandemic, the lack of motivation to do things. But it's also to do with the difficulty, which Lucy and Helen will know all too well, of recreating the experience online. And the difficulty that all of us are facing, I suppose, of difficulties of connection, the strain- the visual strain of screen time and issues with cameras. Just very simple matters of accessing technology. So there are a number of barriers, I think, to kind of usual audiences accessing Arts and Culture.

**Aebischer, Pascale**: Yeah that's really sad because, clearly, new audiences are being reached but old audiences are being lost along the way, and the idea would be to just manage to reach both the old audiences and the new users of the services. So i'm wondering what, in your view, are the most important things that we now need to put in place to help Arts and Culture organizations be as effective as possible in reaching especially the vulnerable and disadvantaged people who are most at risk of mental health issues. And is this something that should be perhaps scaled up beyond the Liverpool city region, you know could other parts of the UK, like the southwest where i'm sitting, also benefit from this?

**Josie Billington:** Absolutely and we've come up with kind of three clear interim recommendations, but we think they’re vital ones. One is about Arts and Cultural organizations needing support, expert advice, to retain the advantages of these digital services into the future and also to improve them. So, this would involve help with platforms, products and those products which best suit their needs and the needs of their beneficiaries. And things like online safeguarding procedures, and this means both the workforce and the people who are likely to benefit from this activity. So just giving people the right equipment is great, but it's not enough, so there needs to be investment in training, really.

One of the other areas that's come out very clearly is a need to coordinate the wonderful work that's gone on sort of ad hoc through the sheer goodwill of local organizations. Some kind of backbone organization or register and I would imagine this is pretty common across the nation that people are doing a lot of good work, but no one is quite coordinating the work of Arts and Cultural organizations in relation to vulnerable people. And we also think there should be a lot of thought given to creating sustainable partnerships between mental health providers and arts providers. As I was saying these organizations that have worked really successfully have done that, in part because they're collaborating already with regional health providers and social care providers. At the moment, there are many practitioners out of work, some of whom our studies showing are themselves suffering mental health difficulties because they've lost their own raison d'etre, their own kind of purpose in life. We have the most the biggest mental health problem we have ever had in this country, we need to put the two things together, we need to find a way of doing that formerly. Building on the kind of great experience that many people have but actually finding some kind of infrastructure for this to work into the future.

**Aebischer, Pascale:** Yeah I mean sounds like it's all around connecting people to the services and reconnecting parts of the provision that used to work and making new networks happen and finding a way of coordinating all of that into something that works with healthcare providers, so that the whole is like an ecosystem, of care and of Arts and Culture, can reboot after the pandemic. That's brilliant and so i'm just wondering Helen and Lucy, how important is it to the work that you're doing that someone like Josie is actually able to step outside the everyday concerns that you have and look at the bigger picture of Arts and Culture provision in the region. What sort of impact does the work that her team are doing have on you and on the people that you're working with and what are you hoping to get out of working with Josie?

**Lucy Geddes:** The work that Josie and her team are doing really has validated, a lot of the informal outcomes, or that we have seen through our work at Liverpool Phillharmonic and given them weight and validation, including the recommendations that Josie just described around training and digital literacy, cross-sector partnership and coordinated networks as well. Also for us actually being part of this process, gave us the time to take a pause and to reflect on what we've seen and experienced as an organization and as individuals during this time.

**Aebischer, Pascale:** How about you Helen? How about you?

**Helen Wilson - The Reader:** Absolutely, yes, I think one of the key things that Josies talked about really mirrors work we’ve done on the social prescribing teams as well, that there is so much great will, there is so much fantastic work. Often, the real you know grassroots community based organizations who know people, know the areas that they work and what the needs are, simply don't have the kind of resource that larger organizations or perhaps structures could really lend to those outcomes that we're seeing for people all the time. So I think the potential is enormous. I think, particularly the thing that you said Josie about the arts helping people to think and you take that from an individual experience, but then you look at what that collectively means if we can't do that, you know as a society and the organizations that exist within here and are made up of people.

So we were lucky enough to receive some additional funding to do work with national prison radio, so of course justice settings in the Northwest but across the UK benefited. And there was are fantastic read-a-story, which is what we call case studies, came from a woman who had her reservations about shared reading, but very, very generously gave her time to join in some groups that were recorded and then the audio was used to make a series of programs. And she had this to say, ‘There are so many times when you're in custody that you're just going through the motions almost like a zombie, just to make it to the next day. It's very easy to drift into that. I think what these poems do is bring you back to reality. Usually my mind works with things that have a definite answer like numbers and when you read it on your own you have a very one track mind about what something means. But it might mean something completely different to somebody else. When we are reading together things kept changing directions, we were bouncing ideas off each other and that's really good. It opens up your thought process.’

**Aebischer, Pascale:** That is the most beautiful ending we could imagine, so that's all we've got time for but thank you for just ending on a high note. Thank you to my guests Josie Billington, Lucy Geddes, and Helen Wilson. The *Pandemic and Beyond* team are Sarah Hartley, Victoria Tischler, Des Fitzgerald, Rachel Nicholas Benedict Morrison Garth Davies and me Pascale Aebischer. To get updates on the project, find out more about the latest Arts and Humanities Covid-19 research and to access future episodes of this series, you can find everything you need on our website, which is pandemicandbeyond, one word, .exeter.ac.uk. Thank you very much.