

## Policy Brief

# Together while Apart: Learning Disabilities and Inclusive Online Arts During COVID-19

Professor Matthew Reason, York St John University ([m.reason@yorks.ac.uk](mailto:m.reason@yorks.ac.uk))

### KEY INFO

**Research question:** The role and potential of online arts to support the wellbeing of learning disabled adults during COVID-19 lockdowns

**Policy area or themes**

- Places and Communities
- Arts & Health and Social Prescribing
- Equality, Diversity and Inclusion

**Methods:** Workshops with 31 community partners; qualitative interviews.

**Geographical area:** UK wide.

**Research stage:** Completed

## Summary of the research

During COVID-19 in-person community arts ceased, with the sector having little to zero prior experience of online delivery required to find new ways of engaging isolated and often vulnerable participants. This research project investigated the value and potential of inclusive online community arts for learning disabled adults during COVID-19 lockdowns. In collaboration with Mind the Gap Theatre and Totally Inclusive People we developed a model for online practice (named 'the Creative Doodle Book') that we delivered in conjunction with 31 partners across the UK, working primarily with people with learning disabilities but also in other contexts including mental health and dementia. Our policy findings describe the value of arts practice to wellbeing within these communities; their potential as inclusive spaces; and the need to provide ongoing training and support to enhance the inclusivity and accessibility of online resources.

## Policy recommendations

Our project highlighted significant existing gaps in knowledge and capacity for online learning disability support, including:

- 1) There is a current lack of bespoke, inclusive and accessible online community spaces for vulnerable learning disabled individuals. Experiences during COVID-19 have demonstrated the value of these services and their potential for ongoing wellbeing support.

- 2) There is strong potential for local community arts groups to fill this gap. With appropriate support in the form of investment, technological infrastructure and skills training, a low-cost, high-impact provision of inclusive online community arts could be developed.
- 3) Currently online engagement for learning disabled adults is limited by the lack of skills and knowledge of support workers, families and other carers. Training and digital resources would support digital engagement and wellbeing of learning-disabled and other vulnerable adults.

## Key findings

Covid-19 saw a rapid switch to online, digital provision across a huge range of areas of our society. This project worked with individuals – and their support networks – who were amongst those most affected by this switch as well as the wider impacts of COVID-19. In particular, learning disabled adults were amongst those most vulnerable to COVID-19 and simultaneously most negatively impacted by isolation and lockdown. The community arts adapted to this new scenario rapidly and creatively, and provided vital support to vulnerable individuals.

This research project developed a model for inclusive online practice tailored for learning disabilities adults and other community groups. In total we ran over 115 Creative Doodle Book workshops and also conducted interviews with practitioners and participants. A few considerations emerged from our work:

- Knowledge and support for learning disability digital services was low, with assistance dependent upon the high commitment of those involved, often operating under high stress and limited resources.
- With the proper access and inclusive practice, online community activities can be invaluable and rewarding for learning disabilities adults. Without this support the isolation of many vulnerable individuals would have been extreme.
- Creative arts provide opportunities for self-expression that supported wellbeing during isolation.
- Greater skills development and resources would have enabled stronger, more cohesive and more sustained delivery from community arts organisations.
- Barrier to engagement included a lack of training or resources amongst those supporting learning disabled adults; advantages included gains in accessibility and inclusion.

## Further information

- Project website. <https://www.mind-the-gap.org.uk/project/creative-doodle-book/>
- Together while Apart project report. <https://www.mind-the-gap.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2021/12/Creative-Doodle-Book-Report.pdf>
- End of project video. <https://youtu.be/MzotOdEyF8k>

## Contact details

Professor Matthew Reason, [m.reason@yorks.ac.uk](mailto:m.reason@yorks.ac.uk)

11 January 2022