



# **The Gathering Project 2021**

**Recommendations to Hampshire County Council to  
support Health & Social Care Services**

## **Brief Context of Project**

The project ran from May 2021 to March 2022 with six different partner organisations. The batch of four sessions with each partner ran weekly, and sessions were two hours long with a break in the middle.

The session plans followed a clear structure of 'Warm Up', 'Main Tasks' and 'Cool Down'. Each workshop had specific creative tasks linked to the session topic (which flowed progressively from week one to week four).

Session topics were:

- Week 1: Isolation
- Week 2: Loss
- Week 3: Coping
- Week 4: Emergence

The aims and objectives were:

- To improve adults' physical and mental wellbeing, providing positive coping mechanisms that may have been lost during lockdown and that have suffered during the COVID-19 pandemic
- To better equip adults to process their feelings, anxieties and actions, so that they can start to rebuild, recover and thrive again
- To provide a safe space where adults can reflect on Covid-19 and the lockdown periods to support their recovery
- To allow adults to better understand how theatre and other creative activities can be a positive outlet for them, and act as a tool to help support their ongoing wellbeing.

## **Context of paper**

For the purposes of this research paper, Fluid Motion Theatre Company has collated specific findings from The Gathering Project 2021 which relate to how the project has or hasn't benefitted participants.

By placing the project under a magnifying glass, we can make recommendations for further activity that can reduce pressure on Hampshire County Council services, as well as for projects which involve the wider arts and health sectors.

Research has been undertaken through collation and analysis of feedback from data (completed by each participant at the end of the project), and via an interview with the Project Coordinator.

## **Findings**

### **Activity-based findings**

When exploring feedback relating to individual activities, data shows that just over half of the participants (58%) voted for the final workshop ('Emergence') as their favourite, with the next closest favourite session ('Coping') scoring 26%.

Within the 'Emergence' session, participants took part in a task called 'Positive Party', which is a group improvisation exercise designed to showcase the strengths and skills of

**Commented [ag1]:** A thought - when making a recommendation what about making it stand out more ? IE Recommendation 1 blah blah

Recommendation 2 blah blah ... What do you both think?

**Commented [ag2R1]:** Not trying to give you more work Claire - sorry. Although this is potentially covered at the end in the conclusion?

**Commented [CR3R1]:** I did try to do this, then realised it left the actual point I was making very sparse because it took it away from the fluff of the stats and quotes. Extracting categoric suggestions from the data was quite difficult in the end!

**Commented [ag4R1]:** No I agree with your points leave as is 😊

every single participant in the group. Ahead of the activity, the Practitioner procured the participants' favourite tracks (or 'anthems'), and then secretly created a playlist of these songs for use during the party.

Comments suggest that the incorporation of a party or celebratory activity helps the participants to bond as a group: *'Because you come together as a group and learn about yourself and others'*.

Additionally, participants *'LOVED'* the music and dancing, the fact that the session was *'active'*, the focus on the future (raising aspirations and offering hope) and the opportunity to *'discuss thoughts and express emotions'* in a *'non-judgemental'* space.

This was supported by the Practitioner, who reflected that the Positive Party *'was enjoyed by everyone because it provided a space for people to just let go and at that time, (coming out of a period of lockdowns) reminded them of what it felt like to go out and socialise.'*

Interestingly, participants' collective votes for their favourite session increased each week (with week 1 being the minority favourite and week 4 being the majority favourite). This could be because (as someone has commented) the group is *'knowing everyone better by [the] end session'*. As a result, we must consider that the results may be skewed by the timing of the session, as one may feel more likely to relax and enjoy an activity if they feel more at ease with the group: *'I was more relaxed for [session] 4 & knew everyone a little better'*.

However, it can also be argued that the final session simply offered the most enjoyable selection of activities and that these would have had success whenever they occurred within the project. Perhaps if it were to feature at multiple points throughout the project, and not just at the end, it would offer peak moments of extreme highs for the group, with an additional benefit being that they gel sooner: *'Enjoyed seeing other[s] gaining something out of it too'* (this paper will touch more on community cohesion later).

Either way, we can surmise from the data that it is important that activity is fun, uplifting, pro-active, physical' and provides the opportunity for people to *'be with others'*. The additional efforts to tailor the workshop to individuals (creating a personalised playlist for the group party), would have also endeared the activity to the group and given them ownership and a sense of belonging.

The Positive Party task is not art-form specific, but if it was to be found less suitable for a group who are not attending a performing arts and wellbeing project, a similar celebratory 'moment' can and should still be created through some kind of exhibition or group sharing.

Furthermore, below is a selection of quotes by Gathering participants relating to the Positive Party:

- *'Very engaging + fun with lots of laughs + banter.'*
- *'We had an exceptional fun time dancing at the PARTY.'*
- *'It freed myself of pain and the activities were very positive.'*
- *'Relevant to us all; and in a way less probing and challenging.'*
- *'I found it positive and uplifting.'*

## Practitioner-based findings

It is important to respond to feedback about the Practitioner. This feedback came in response to the question: *Is there anything else that you would like to tell us?*

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<sup>1</sup> 7 out of 22 comments featured physical activity as a reason why this was the favourite workshop.

**Commented [ag5]:** Do we need to reference this Gathering Participant 2021 ??

**Commented [ag6]:** Ref? Sorry - reading this with my academia hat on.

**Commented [ag7R6]:** We have several quotes from practitioners/participants, what do you think Leigh - am I being too precious?

**Commented [ag8R6]:** Alternatively we just put all quotes in italics - which I would like to see anyway.

**Commented [CR9R6]:** I will italicise, thanks! (too many to ref I think and might spoil the flow...but it's been a loooong time since I've referenced so happy to follow your lead if you disagree!

**Commented [ag10R6]:** No italics, only time we need reference is if its unclear who said it.

**Commented [ag11]:** I've changed this, removing 'we'll' less colloquial and more research language.

**Commented [ag12]:** Added by me

This was an open question where feedback about any aspect of the project could be given, including positive or negative comments.

Of the 30 answers given, exactly half mentioned the Practitioner, and 100% of these were positive comments.

For example: *'So well led by [Practitioner]. Group more deeply connected to each other. Lots of laughter. Hope inspired. Creative ideas.'*

Across all six groups, there was a consensus that the workshop leader's delivery was high-quality and that she contributed positively to the experience.

Extraordinarily, four answers suggest a link between the Practitioner, and the impact that the project will have in the future e.g. *'I found the tutor very patient, empowering & fun, she worked really hard & made sure everyone was included. I feel more positive going into the future now.'*

Of the sessions, the Practitioner said her most positive moment was *'providing a space for people to be listened to during a very vulnerable time. Reminding adults of the act of playing/being creative and how important this is.'*

Suffice to say, it is important that the *right* Practitioner is selected to deliver projects like these, and that their qualities and skills/experience equip them for delivering all aspects of the sessions (in this case, a theatre *and* wellbeing focus), so that there can be greater commitment from, and therefore a greater depth of impact on, participants who attend.

For a project with a wellbeing element, we recommend<sup>2</sup> that the Practitioner has experience delivering in a mental health context/working with vulnerable people, and that they preferably have lived experience of poor mental health (to enhance empathy/understanding).

For the creative element (which for the purposes of making a recommendation can be replaced by any pursuit e.g. sports, bee-keeping, gardening etc.), we recommend that the Practitioner has an interest in improving and supporting people's mental health and wellbeing through [specific activity], and significant experience leading [workshops/sessions/experiences] with adult communities.

When thinking about qualities that the Practitioner needs, Fluid Motion desires a positive and enthusiastic attitude, however, answers from the participants tell us that it helps if the Practitioner is also:

- *A really good facilitator*
- *Patient*
- *Empowering*
- *Fun*
- *Hard working*
- *Supportive*
- *Wise*
- *Friendly*
- *Encouraging*
- *Genuine*
- *Kind*
- *Helpful*
- *Polite*
- *A good listener*

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<sup>2</sup> The Fluid Motion Creative Practitioner job description has been referenced in the following section.

Clearly, working with vulnerable audiences requires a specialist approach, and the Practitioner's ability to build a supportive, professional relationship with the participants did not go unnoticed.

*'Thank you for [Practitioner's] support and wisdom it [has] been nice being around you'.*

### The importance of take-aways

This section analyses answers to the question: *'Which exercises or techniques from the project might you use to help with your mental health in the future?'*

Within The Gathering Project, there were a multitude of activities delivered, all pulling on different skills and providing opportunities for creativity, personal exploration, and reflection. All answers have been put into the following word cloud, where the most sizeable words are the ones that were most commonly used:



Themes<sup>3</sup> which came out of the answers were:

- Different creative activities: singing, dancing, art, poetry/writing, and storytelling
- Games i.e. icebreaker activities and games which develop from one week to the next
- Meditative tasks: Mantras, mindfulness, relaxation, and structured breathing
- Discussion and reflection as a group

Creative activities (including the word 'creative') were mentioned 24 times, games (ball game, numbers game and icebreakers) were mentioned six times, meditative tasks were mentioned seven times and group discussion was mentioned 10 times.

34 of 38 respondents were able to give one or more answers. This demonstrates how important it is that wellbeing projects equip participants with a variety of tools which they learn,

<sup>3</sup> Thematic analysis has been completed using all words featured in the answers given, and not just those included in the word cloud, which was capped at 100 words by the design template.

practise, and then feel confident and knowledgeable enough to transfer to their everyday lives. For example: *'Meditation – Discussion led me to reanalyse its potential role in the future for me'* and *'Definitely writing down how I feel i.e. Poetry to stop the crowding in my mind and know I am making progress when I read back thoughts/ feelings'*.

Not only would we recommend these individual activities e.g. meditation, as tools which can be provided as 'take-away' activities, but we would encourage future projects to include bite-size tasks which can be repeated week on week and which allow for some personalisation from individuals.

It is important that participants enjoy the activity first and foremost e.g. *'groups also enjoyed the creative writing task. Again allowing them to be creative'*<sup>4</sup>, and then feel equipped and empowered to replicate it themselves away from the group. The workshop leader could provide notebooks at the start of the project for participants to journal in, for example, or they could write down a framework for a structured breathing activity which the group completes each week, which can then be given out at the end of the project.

### The opportunity to meet others

This section of this paper responds to the prevalence of comments across all feedback about the benefits of *'being able to meet others'*. There were 15 individual comments relating to this, for example: *'Helped to be more connected to the group'* and *'made me realise I am not on my own'*.

From answers given, it would seem that there is an additional benefit if the group are pre-formed prior to the project, as opposed to brought together because of the project. This also provides more opportunity for that bond to continue after the project ends e.g. *'made us learn more about each other'* (indicating that they knew each other before, and can now apply this depth of knowledge going forward).

As shared in the evaluation form, 73% of participants said they feel more connected to their community rating their experience either 4 or 5 (where 1 is 'no, not at all' and 5 is 'yes, very much so'). This will be a direct result of the shared experience, as no other links to the community (apart from signposting to community support services) were made.

When asked what three words come to mind when you think of The Gathering Project 2021, the Practitioner answered: *'Community - bringing people together. Fun - a place to let go and play. Open - a place that isn't about judgment or prejudice.'*

Other comments include:

- *'Made good friends'*
- *'Maybe we will all meet again for further sessions'*
- *'Positive community support'*
- *'Sharing feelings & thoughts with some of the group'*
- *'It was comforting to hear other people's struggle and overcoming them during lockdown...'*

We recommend that there is ongoing support beyond projects which enables the same group of people to meet on a regular basis, or if they are already meeting, to revisit the content every now and again to remind themselves of their shared experience and the support they can find within each other. For example, one group continue to run the Positive Party at the end of every quarter and have made a book full of photos and comments from the 2021 project.

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<sup>4</sup> Practitioner reflection.

Commented [ag13]: Is this right or should it be 'participants'??

Commented [ag14]: Right word for community group?

## Negative comments (participant welfare)

This paper cannot be completed without fairly analysing the negative feedback given about the project and making recommendations for future projects where this can be transferred (and avoided).

There were three negative comments given by participants across the whole project. These are listed below:

- 1) *'The first couple of groups brought up a lot of emotion which I did not know how to deal with. It opened the feelings, but I had no outlet for them!'*
- 2) *'I didn't care for the clapping game. I felt left out (rejected) when it wasn't my turn. And some people seemed to dominate the exercise.'*
- 3) *'...The need for imagination to answer such big probing questions made it seem demanding'.*

Commented [ag15]: Is this a practitioner comment, if so we need to say

All three comments speak of similar themes – activities which are thought-provoking, and participant conduct/personal responsibility.

It is understandable within a wellbeing project that a range of emotions are explored. What is important is providing participants with a way to deal with those emotions so that they leave in the same state, or better, than when they arrived for the session.

Below are some recommendations for how to avoid opening 'Pandora's Box'<sup>5</sup>, and how, if this does happen, to prevent participants feeling compromised emotionally.

1. Ahead of the sessions, it is helpful to ask the project partner/point of contact within the organisation to disclose any themes in connection to participants' backgrounds which may need to be avoided/treated with sensitivity (more than usual) throughout delivery. Workshops can then be adapted or navigated accordingly.
2. A great Practitioner will know where areas of risk are within the workshop plan, as well as being able to identify moments of discomfort or vulnerability throughout the session. This does rely on participants communicating to the Practitioner how it is going for them, so sessions would benefit from having a channel for subtle/private communication with the Practitioner to avoid participants feeling too inhibited to share.
3. Sessions need to be navigated carefully and at a pace that allows the group to digest the different tasks and reflections, and so that they have the chance to manage their own emotional wellness within the sessions (removing themselves from the task/room if necessary).
4. Sessions need regular signposting to support services as well as the point of support within the organisation who these group members are familiar with.
5. There needs to be a debrief with the project partner/organisation lead at the end of each session (if challenges have arisen) or at the end of the project as a minimum.

Performing arts workshops often ask participants to be vulnerable (within reason) e.g. getting up and being physical, playing games (being silly) and where appropriate and permitted participants may be touched or may touch others. As a result of this increased vulnerability, group bonds and personal outcomes are often greater, but we do need to remember that for some participants being vulnerable and open comes with risk.

This was noticed by the Practitioner, who reflected that: *'At times I was hesitant to challenge adults' creativity and push them further in case of making them feel uncomfortable.'*

<sup>5</sup> 'Opening Pandora's box is the same as *opening a can of worms*. It refers to a process that, once began, results in many unforeseen problems which were previously covered up. To open Pandora's box is to let things get out of control.' See [Pandora's Box](#)

There is another side of this though, that by avoiding thought-provoking tasks altogether, we do not create opportunities for personal development. Ultimately, if a project aims to improve wellbeing, and the vehicle for this is theatre (again, this can be replaced with any creative or non-creative pursuit), we must push forward with [the activity] (upscaling and downscaling the emotional depths of the tasks as necessary), in order to achieve the positive outcomes for the participants that we so passionately believe we can, and that the project partner (and they) signed up for.

Commented [ag16]: Do we need the word creative in front of this this? Also above if we are.

We can put many measures in place to minimise personal risk, but ultimately the 'wellbeing' of any person is their own responsibility, and we just need to make sure that every member of the group is well enough to attend in the first place (which comes down to working closely with the project partner who is making referrals to the sessions).

## Conclusion

To conclude, five main points have been explored throughout this paper in the hope that they will contribute to the success of future wellbeing projects across Hampshire, therefore easing the toll on Hampshire County Council Health and Social Care services. These can be applied to projects that do or don't have a creative element. They are summarised below for ease:

- 1) **Activity-based findings:** Incorporate high-energy, fun and physical activities into projects to help bond the group and to give them moments of extreme highs. Do this at multiple points for maximum enjoyment.
- 2) **Practitioner-based findings:** Select the *right* Practitioner for the role of delivering to a specialist audience. Think about their personal qualities as well as their skills and experience, a strong relationship with the practitioner will create longer-lasting positive impact on the participants.
- 3) **The importance of take-aways:** Make sure that projects are dotted with bite-size tasks which participants can enjoy, learn, and transfer to their home environment. From these findings, creative, games based, meditation-based or those generated by group discussion were most popular.
- 4) **The opportunity to meet others:** Make sure that projects have ample opportunity for participants to get to know each other, and to create shared experiences. Where possible, work with pre-existing groups to maximise project legacy. Encourage the revisiting of content so that group support can be ongoing.
- 5) **Participant welfare:** Work closely with the project partner to make sure that those who attend are well enough to explore thought-provoking activities. Make sure that the Practitioner is well trained to notice when participants may be 'triggered', and make sure that the participants and the Practitioner are equipped to pull on support where necessary to keep everybody safe.