



Arts Council of Northern Ireland
Qualitative Research:
Arts Engagement and Covid

March 2021

Scope

In November 2020 the Arts Council of Northern Ireland (ACNI) carried out general population survey looking at levels of arts and culture engagement levels in Northern Ireland during the COVID-19 Pandemic.

This research found that:

- Patterns of consumption pre-lockdown are largely consistent with those reported at the general population level through government surveys which provides a degree of reassurance that the results are representative.
- High levels of engagement online since lockdown with a large proportion doing so more, or for the first time.
- Interestingly, the characteristics of these respondents were more in line with who don't tend to engage, in normal times e.g. older people, the economically inactive and those with disabilities.

Building on this study ACNI would like to know more about people accessing the arts through engaging with specific groups in society to:

- establish levels of engagement with the arts;
- preferred methods of engagement; and
- chill factors

In particular, ACNI would like those from socially deprived backgrounds; those with a disability; and ethnic minority groups to be consulted across NI on a Belfast, Derry, rest of NI and urban rural basis.

ACNI commissioned thrive to deliver this group consultation.

Methodology

Four groups were recruited and group discussions held during February and March 2021.

Recruitment was challenging due to Covid restrictions and all groups took place using zoom.

The 4 groups were:

Group 1 – Adults aged 25-60 with a learning disability. Some of the group also had physical disabilities. Mixed gender. Location: Greater Belfast

Group 2: Adults aged 35-65+. Mixed Gender Location: Garvagh and surrounding areas. One person was from a minority ethnic group.

Group 3: Adults aged 35-65+. Mixed gender Location: Derry/Londonderry and surrounding areas. Three people in this group came from a minority ethnic community.

Group 4: Adults aged 35-65+ from a mainly minority ethnic group. Location: Across NI but mainly in the North West

Across the 4 groups 34 people were part of the discussions.

Arts engagement before Covid

Across the groups people were doing many different types of arts and cultural activity for many different reasons

This trend was already evident in both the Belfast City Council and North West Cultural Engagement baselines thrive carried out in previous years.

¹In 2018, thrive's research found that 98 % of North West residents have engaged in arts, culture, or heritage in the past year and in 2016 this figure was 94% for residents in the Belfast City Council area.

The groups reflected this range of activity with only a small number of people saying that they did no arts activity. Even those who for various reasons didn't attend things regularly, they were still reading and listening to music.

"Before lockdown I was pretty active doing yoga and different types of dancing including set dancing" – Female, retired, DCSDC area

"I attended the Black Box for comedy and Out to Lunch events. Really enjoyed that."
– Female, adult with learning disabilities, Greater Belfast

¹ See Appendix 1 for the definitions used in the North West Baseline.

People in the groups didn't always see what they do as arts and they don't always do arts activity within designated arts spaces or programmes.

"I do crafts on my own at home. Not really in groups. I suppose I'd call it pottering about." – Female, 45-54, Garvagh

This disconnect is also reflected in previous thrive research. Some activity like crafts is not always viewed as 'arts'. There tends to be an association of more traditional activities like theatre, classical music, opera and visual art as defining the term 'arts'. However, when probed, people do acknowledge that their activity could be counted as arts activity.

The presence of children in the home is a big driver in the availability of time to take part or attend arts activity. In addition, the presence of children also influences **what** activity is chosen.

"I've two kids, 4 and 7. Lots of exhibitions I'd love to go to but wouldn't get the peace. Last thing I remember going to was Dippy in The Ulster Museum with the kids."
– Female, 35-44, Newry

The benefits of engaging in arts activity before Covid was easily recalled across all groups.

These included the importance of a shared experience, immersion in the moment, intensity, fun and learning.

"Arts do exist in my life but not as an important feature but if arts weren't there it would leave a bigger hole than I realise." – Male, 65+, Eglington

A similar range of benefits is also reflected in thrive's Covid Beyond Culture survey².

- Over 80% of audiences engage in cultural experiences to have fun – they primarily go for entertainment and enjoyment.
- 75% of audiences also go to see a specific artist or performer.
- 58% to be inspired and 57% to experience something new.

² Full report can be found at <https://wewillthrive.co.uk/audience-insights/reports/culture-beyond-covid-insights>

Audiences also look to culture to be inspired, experience something new, or go for social reasons – to spend time with their loved ones.

But as expected, some people talked about the difficulties before Covid in accessing some arts and culture.

These difficulties or chill factors included practical aspects as well as perceptions.

Many of these have been well documented:

- Cost
- Travel
- Time
- Perception of 'not for me'
- Other priorities like caring responsibilities taking precedence

"I'm not working so can't really afford much and the ability to get there is also a problem." Female from a minority ethnic group, 35-45

"Most important thing is making people feel arts is part of their life. I sometimes feel I have to find my way in. Good if people felt more connected."

– Male, 35-45, d/Deaf and disabled community, Greater Belfast

"I don't have much free time. I am a carer for my disabled son and he is a big influence." – Female from a minority ethnic group, 35-44, Carrick

Arts engagement during Covid

Taking part or attending in arts activity remains important in people's lives during Covid, but some differences were flagged in the groups.

1. Some things people had done before but now doing them online.

"Seen National Theatre production in cinema so now great to have that beamed into your home." – Female, 65+, rural

"Immensely grateful for libraries service (LIBBY). Not a day I don't have an audio book on." – Female, 45-55, rural

"Doing first art class on zoom next week. Rather paint in a group for inspiration but this keeps the group going." – Female, 45-55, Rural

2. For some this period opened up new things

"First lockdown I was unsure but I got support to learn online and now I'm doing junk journaling, a new thing from America." Female, 25–60, d/Deaf and disabled community, Greater Belfast

"Yes probably watched more theatre and listened to writers I wouldn't have before. Suddenly my world was open." – Female, MINORITY ETHNIC, 35-45, rural

3. As well as new content, people discovered new platforms and apps.

"I've discovered different apps that I wouldn't have known about before like the BBC Sounds app. Listen to music but also radio plays...I've discovered Words and Music which is poetry and prose read by famous people." – Female, 35-45, rural

"Online was able to open up some cultural experiences, say museums in other parts of the world and start conversations with my 15 year old." – Female, 35-45, rural

Across the groups, people were open to continuing to do some arts and culture activity online but some things to note.

1. Online activity is ok but does not replace live/being in the room.

“Concerts are a group experience. A group of people experiencing a performance adds another dimension and gives emotional intensity. You get invested and will notice a cough or a phone.” – Female, 45-55, rural

“(Online) Good for many but I’d rather be part of live venue. Going out to the cinema is different from watching.” – Male, 45-55, rural

2. People could see arts organisations getting better at online activity as time went on and that was appreciated especially in local organisations.

“People went online and tried to do the same as they would physically and over the year tried to do it more cleverly or differently because the online performance is so different to the onstage performance.” Female from a minority ethnic group, 35-45, rural

“You can see the evolution. I love the interactive bits when the theatre performers tried to engage the audience online.” – Female from a minority ethnic group, 35-45, rural

3. Across all groups, although there is a definite desire to get back out and among friends and family, people can see that the acceleration of arts activity being available online is a good thing and so they want to have a mix of online and physical experiences in the future.

Zoom was an experiment but very successful. We had to make a shift. There are definite benefits in keeping a wider group involved. I want to keep the mix.” Male, 25-60, d/Deaf and disabled community, Greater Belfast

Emerging changes in people's lives

Through the focus group discussions, and in other thrive research, a number of topics kept being referenced which indicates what aspects of life are top-of-mind.

Wellbeing is constantly being referenced. People talked a lot about their mental and physical health and how they have tried to manage this during Covid. They also felt that ongoing management of wellbeing will be a massive issue across NI society in the months to come.

Spending better time with family. Covid restrictions removed some of the things that get in the way of quality family time. Less commuting and a reduction in the need to ferrying children to out of school activities were all mentioned as being replaced by more time spent with immediate family. This was viewed as positive and hoped it would continue.

For some though, work time had increased during Covid and the pressures of home-schooling and caring responsibilities were actually creating less quality family time. For some, a return to a more normal routine was seen as a positive.

For a few in the group this had led to reassessing their priorities and wanting a simpler life as we emerge from lockdown.

"Covid has shown me it's better to do less...I was doing too much before Covid."

– Female, 55-65, DSCDC

Being outdoors and in nature was called out by most people across the groups. This was important for wellbeing benefits but also seen as a safer place to be rather than indoors, due to the spread of Covid.

This positivity towards outdoor has been echoed in Culture Beyond Covid arts and heritage surveys.

"If we are not home-schooling we go out for walks and explore the area a bit."

– Female, 35-45 Rural, with kids

"I will not be rushing back to indoors so important to communicate that the outdoors are safer and reminding people of what outdoor are over indoor going forward."

– Female, 70+, Rural

"Might be nervous regarding crowds. Interested in outdoor spaces." – Female, 25-60, d/Deaf and disabled community, Greater Belfast

"I like National Trust places – Mount Stewart and Rowallane." – Female, 25-60, Adult with learning disability, Greater Belfast

Valuing local was also a theme that came up in discussions. Covid restrictions has meant that people have been staying local for essential shopping and exercise. This is seen as a good thing with a new appreciation for local shops, parks and other facilities.

“Covid has limited how far I can go so I’m staying in my immediate area.”
– Male, 45-55, Rural

A few in the groups mentioned a time when they felt there was more arts activity in their locality and this was most mentioned by those in more rural areas.

“There is a lack of community arts and crafts. Gone downhill over the years. There was more when I was younger.” Female, 65+, Rural

“I can’t say I was interested so I didn’t really look. If its local it might make a difference now and change my interest.” Female, -35-45, Rural

The digital divide was discussed a lot in the more rural groups and the next section looks at digital in a bit more detail.

Digital – pros and cons

Covid has accelerated both the availability and the uptake of online arts and cultural experience. This will not go back even as Covid restrictions lift and arguably this move to digital experiences needed to happen. However, digital cultural experiences are not the same as physical and shouldn’t try to simply replicate what is available in physical spaces. To develop relevant and great digital arts and cultural activity, it is vital to understand how people view digital arts experiences.

There were many positive comments about opening up opportunities to new things and places.

Digital took away some of the barriers around cost, time, travel and access which helps to open up access to some who may have been excluded previously.

Many had gained new digital skills like using Zoom or other platforms and this was seen as a good thing.

“We had to make a shift and now digital means we can take part in things even if we are not feeling well.” Male, Adult with learning disabilities, 45-55, Greater Belfast

For some digital was helping them to keep some of the benefits of arts engagement during lockdown, which was appreciated.

During lockdown people really appreciated the availability of arts online and it did help, at the very least, to pass the time.

People recognised that this online shift gave them the opportunity to look at arts internationally but also avail of local NI arts too when they couldn't attend local activity.

While there were many positives, the groups also saw the flip side to digital arts experiences.

Most felt it was hard to create the same vibe as actually being somewhere live. It just is not the same as attending a play, concert or even art class online as it is in-person.

Online experiences offer different benefits to when you are in the room with the artist and other members of the public.

"Watched Lyric shows at Xmas as Xmas is strange without a panto. Like to see these things online but want to go back to Grand Opera House too." Male, 25-60, d/Deaf and disabled community, Greater Belfast

Some access issues still exist as audio description, clarity of information on websites and relevance of the event are still not as prevalent as they need to be for everyone to have access of opportunity. There was a concern that in the rush to get arts activity online, some organisations had forgotten the need to think about access beyond the physical.

"Having a basis in online and live is a way forward for people with disabilities or other access issues." Male, 25-60, Greater Belfast

Digital exclusion was a big hurdle especially for those living in rural areas. This was probably seen as the number 1 issue for people in certain parts of NI. We know that access to broadband across particular regions is still a problem which the government is trying to fix.

"Real treat to see theatre online and not be tired coming back from a trip to Belfast but broadband was a huge issue. Lots of freezing and dropping off."
– Female, 60+, Rural

While digital arts activity kept some of the overall benefits of the arts going, it misses other benefits like social interaction, doing something special and getting out of the house.

"We're a hands-on family and like experiential learning and we have missed that."

– Female 35-45, rural with kids

Screen fatigue was also referenced as now setting in, especially in the current lockdown.

"By the time I've done my Men's Shed newsletter and emails, I want to do something that doesn't involve a screen." – Male, 65+, rural

After the initial rush driven by the novelty factor, people are now making more discerning choices about what is available online. As online simply becomes another 'stage' or space for arts activity, people will choose that activity based on their needs and motivations, not just because it's there.

Outdoors – the 'winner' coming out of Covid

As well as digital, the outdoors came up a lot in these groups. Many arts organisations have already used outdoor spaces to deliver activity and there are moves in other sectors like hospitality to make more use of outdoor – as the government's path out of lockdown uses outdoor to allow meeting up earlier than indoor activity restarting.

Across these groups and research carried out by thrive for National Lottery Heritage Fund, there is a recognition of and appreciation for outdoors and nature.

"My garden was my saviour." – Female, 65+, Derry/Londonderry

Going for walks and recording birdsong is something I've loved doing." Female, 25-60, d/Deaf and disabled community, Greater Belfast

People want to continue the benefits of outdoor post-Covid.

"Covid and lockdown have really changed my perspective on family activities. Being outside and exercising have such a positive effect on mental health and it's lovely to have a place to go to and spend the whole day exploring when you're spending a lot more time at home than usual." Female, 35-45, rural

As well as the wellbeing benefits of outdoor, Covid safety issues are also at play.

"I will not be rushing back to indoors so important to communicate that the outdoors are safer and reminding people of what outdoors available are over indoor going forward." – Female, 65+, Greater Belfast

Looking at both digital and outdoors, it is important to remember that the experience matters more than the platform.

As was the case before Covid, people will choose what arts activity they wish to attend or participate in according to their needs and motivations. As life opens up, their choice of activity and **where** that activity is will change. But what will not change is the importance of understanding people's needs and motivations to shape arts activity, where that activity is presented and how it is communicated, alongside Covid safety measures which will remain important for many months to come.

Chill factors

The things that got in the way of people accessing the arts before Covid still exist now. These are ongoing challenges for the arts sector and its stakeholders to minimise these chill factors where possible. However as was always the case, some are beyond the gift of the sector.

Cost

Cost is always mentioned but as previous studies have shown value is the key word here. If people perceive something is of value to them they are happy to pay, even a premium price. With foreign holidays unlikely this year, people will spend their holiday money at home and will want good experiences. However, Covid has negatively impacted many people's finances through redundancy and disposable income may be under pressure in the months to come.

Travel

The issue of better public transport continues to be a factor especially in rural areas. Getting to Belfast or Londonderry to avail of arts activity is seen as difficult due to timetabling, costly and, for some, exhausting. This challenge is beyond the gift of arts organisations but giving as much information as possible to people when they are looking for information will at least help.

Access

Access covers a wide range of areas from physical access to cultural spaces to more social access in terms of how people are treated when they come to arts activity. Online access is also a massive issue and before Covid. The fact that if you had physical access needs you would struggle to find the information you needed on arts organisation websites, and be unlikely to simply book a ticket, had been highlighted in a number of pieces of work. This deepening and widening of access must be a priority.

City Council had chairs and tables outside. It was beyond the pale for wheelchair access." Parent of adult from d/Deaf and disabled community, Greater Belfast

Information

The groups all said that they struggle to get information on what's available in different areas. In addition they said that information about Covid measures would be essential in helping them to make choices about what arts activity to engage with. The need for clear and consistent communication has come up across all of thrive's research this year and should be a priority for all arts organisations even more so than before Covid.

For smaller recitals and craft shows you really have to dig around to find out what's going on." Male, 35-60, Rural

Interest – some people say they just aren't interested

While most people in the groups did some level of activity, some did not and had really very little interest in starting arts activity. For others, while online experiences had opened up some new art forms, they will stick with what they know and like.

Solutions and opportunities coming from changes and emerging needs

Mix of experiences that meet needs

It cannot be stated often enough that people will choose their arts engagement activity based on their needs. Covid has changed what people need and that will develop as society moves through the next 12-18 months and the impacts of Covid on people's lives is revealed further.

Arts organisations need to understand these changing needs and shape their offer with that understanding in mind.

Great experiences are what people want and that might simply be some fun with friends or a chance to process and heal after a very traumatic period. Whether that activity is in cultural spaces, community places, outdoors, indoors, or online, is less important than whether it meets the needs people have.

Wellbeing

There is no doubt that wellbeing is the main thing talked about by people at this time. The evidence is clear that arts activity makes a huge contribution to wellbeing and how this rolls out over the next year will be essential for arts to remain relevant and plays its full role in the recovery of NI.

Local important

While the world has in some ways opened up through online, local is an increasingly important theme. Travel will remain limited and so the availability of great experiences near to where people live will be essential.

Connection and family

People have missed other people. For some who have been shielding, and even those who have been working from home, the loss of social connections has been huge. As restrictions ease, people want to come together again in shared experiences.

Fun

For many in the groups the last 12 months has been hard and fun is in short supply. People are looking forward to having a good time, laughing and talking to friends and family. The arts can provide fun and should reflect on this need going forward.

Open to new things

Covid has meant that people have opened themselves up to new things – including what arts activity they engaged with and how they engaged. This is positive but as life reopens it will be vital to communicate the benefits of these new experiences to embed them further. Arts organisations need to think about the benefits rather than the functions to ensure new experiences remain part of what people access.

Skills development

Many in these groups agreed that their level of skill in all things online had increased. For some that required support and for others it was about being self-taught. Is there a role for arts organisations to help people feel comfortable online by offering simple guides to enjoying Zoom theatre or how to make the most out of art packs delivered to people's doors? There are examples of this work across NI and this should be shared to encourage best practice.

Conclusion

- Covid has impacted on what arts activity is available and how that activity has been accessed.
- People have continued to access arts activity in the ways that work for them and for some this has been new activity that they didn't know about and/or couldn't have accessed so easily before.
- Online and live experiences are seen as different and provide different benefits.
- The ideal is a mix of both online and live arts experiences for attending and participating in arts activity.
- Access in all its forms is not simply eradicated by going online.
- Outdoor offers 'safer' spaces especially initially post lockdown.
- Barriers still need work to ensure opportunities to engage are more readily available.
- Key to minimising those barriers is understanding what people's lives are like and what role arts activity can have in those lives.

Appendix 1 – Definition from North West Baseline cultural engagement survey

| Items included in cultural participation | Items included in cultural attendance |
|---|--|
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Played a musical instrument • Sang alone • Sang in a group with others • Acted or sang in an opera • Acted or sang in musical theatre • Written songs or composed music • Participated in a heritage or conservation project or group • Engaged in traditional building skills • Acted in a play/drama • Written plays • Danced • Recited poetry, folklore or storytelling • Participated in a book club or group • Written stories, poetry or comics • Read books or ebooks • Read out loud to children • Read out loud to adults • Painting, drawing, printmaking or sculpture • Photography (not selfies, family or holiday snaps) • Created a game, digital animation, or built a world within a game • Textile crafts • Wood crafts • Other crafts • Made films or videos | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Musical • Opera • Classical music • Rock or pop music • Country music • Jazz or blues music • Folk, traditional or world music • Band events • Techno or electronic music • Any National Trust property in the UK • Any heritage property managed by the Irish State • A national park or nature reserve • A historical or heritage exhibition in a museum • A historical or heritage exhibition in a different venue • Any other historic or heritage site • A heritage fieldtrip, walk or walking tour • Any public archives • Play or drama • Pantomime • Live screening in a cinema or venue • Live screening at home or in private • Watching a documentary, foreign language or arthouse film • Ballet • Folk, traditional or world dance • Other dance event • Carnival or parade • Big outdoor event or spectacle • Literary event • An exhibition or collection of art, photography, video, sculpture, or other visual art • An exhibition of textiles, pottery, jewellery or other crafts |

Attendance OR Participation = Engagement

Thrive can provide additional cuts of the baseline data on request.

Appendix 2: Selection of some additional verbatims from the groups.

Barriers/Chill factors:

No central point (for information). Each area has its own site. For small recitals, craft show you really have to dig to find out information. Male, Rural

I feel there is a lack of community arts and crafts. Back to my upbringing and experience of arts through school, youth organisations, things like that. I just don't think young people are getting that now and if you don't have that when you are young what interest would you have in going to theatre. Female, 45-54, Garvagh

Online experiences

Went to Belfast Children's Festival last year and loved it. Kinda looking forward to it online but don't think it will be the same. Might be wrong. NI Science Festival was online but we enjoyed a lot of that. Female, 35-45, rural

Part of the experience is leaving the house so could live events be streamed to cinemas or community centres so you could have a drink and meet people. I would watch in my living room but it's not the same. Experience is all part of it. Male, 35-60, Rural

Missing during lockdown

Before (lockdown) I was looking into classes, acting and music, for my son and that's what I miss most for him. Female from a minority ethnic group, 35-45, rural

All galleries are closed and we would have gone to openings. I miss all that activity and not getting the opportunity to see different perspectives. Female, 55-65, DSCDC

Coming back to arts activity

Keen to go to more relaxed performances like in cinemas. Male, 35-45, d/Deaf and disabled community, Greater Belfast

I welcome the opportunity to go back and support the arts because they've had it tough. Nervous about indoor. More comfortable outdoor. Female, 55-65, DSCDC

Vaccine roll out will help. Keen to get back in. Male, 35-60, Rural

The logo for 'thrive' is displayed in a bold, lowercase, sans-serif font. The letters 'thri' are dark blue, the letter 'v' is a vibrant pink, and the letter 'e' is dark blue. The logo is centered on a white background.

thrive

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