Barking & Dagenham

Driving social impact though digital inclusion initiatives

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Courtesy Green Shoes Arts

Overview

Interviewees:

Lena Smith, library project manager, Pen to Print
Natalie Smith, education director, Arc Theatre
Sam Miller, artistic director, Green Shoes Arts

www.pentoprint.org, www.arctheatre.com, www.greenshoesarts.com

With thanks to Tamara Horbacka, cultural commissioner for the London Borough of Barking and Dagenham Council (LBBD), for convening the meetings online.

This case study seeks to outline the resilience and impact of three arts organisations within LBBD as they produced a related series of works over the period of the pandemic. Insights are drawn from interviews conducted between January and March 2022.

This cluster of arts organisations provides vital education resources, delivered through inclusive frontline arts programmes to LBBD residents who may be facing challenges of socio-economic exclusion or barriers to cultural participation. Learnings resulting from pandemic restrictions and the ongoing structural considerations facing arts organisations in the digital delivery of inclusion programmes are highlighted.

Participating organisations

Pen to Print

Pen to Print believes everybody should have a chance to tell their story, and aims to support aspiring writers in LBBD. Pen to Print provides a safe, collaborative environment that attracts and supports a network of diverse writers across a range of genres. By learning to develop their authentic voices, writers are encouraged to reach local, national and international communities with their stories, reflecting their own journeys and inspiring potential in others.

Established by Barking and Dagenham Libraries in 2014, Pen to Print is a not-for-profit organisation. It became an Arts Council England National Portfolio Organisation (NPO) in 2018 and is now led by the borough's Libraries team, in conjunction with an advisory panel that includes local people, founder members and industry experts.

Arc Theatre

Arc Theatre specialises in creating and performing theatre that challenges assumptions about the way people relate to one another at work, at school and in the community. A pioneering organisation founded in 1984, Arc Theatre was instrumental in bringing the issue of racism in football to the forefront of public awareness.

Arc Theatre works with organisations seeking to achieve a lasting difference in fields such as diversity, inclusion, education, health, criminal justice and community cohesion.

Arc Theatre implements a range of learning strategies including theatre, storytelling, drama workshops and the interactive, participatory Forum Theatre technique. The success of Arc Theatre's work is underpinned by first-class facilitation and meticulous research and preparation. Facilitators, performers, storytellers and workshop leaders are trained to the highest standards and bring passion, energy and commitment to this work.

Green Shoes Arts

Green Shoes Arts aims to deliver quality arts projects for the community of Barking & Dagenham, enabling people of all ages and backgrounds to access and engage with wide-ranging creative activities. The organisation believes that artistic and creative activity provides huge benefits to individual and group wellbeing and personal development. Its projects offer opportunities to disadvantaged and vulnerable young people and adults with lived experience of mental health issues, physical and learning disabilities, and social deprivation. Green Shoes Arts supports the needs of its community, working to see positive change through enabling participation in the arts.

Thematic clusters

Across the three interviews conducted, four primary questions helped to outline the following recurring themes:

1) Organisational readiness: how did each organisation enter the pandemic in terms of latent digital know-how and the ability to pivot to online programme delivery?
2) Digital divide: what observations emerged around issues of reduced or limited access to means of engaging with digital programmes ?
3) Audience demographics: how did the closure of in-person activities and the move to online provision (where feasible) impact audience demographics?
4) Funding: how did funding bodies respond to delayed/postponed delivery of grant-supported programmes and activities, and what lessons might we take from the pandemic?

Organisational readiness

All three organisations reported the requirement to assess the suitability of existing programmes and core services to pivot to online delivery.

Arc Theatre's central programming work is usually delivered in schools for primary and secondary students. As such, a move to replace in-person, group-based educational theatre with online workshops was not immediately possible — or desirable.

Consequently, the majority of Arc Theatre's activity was placed on hold and several staff furloughed, in order to rethink the approach to maintaining a positive operation and ensure financial resilience.

Pre-pandemic, Green Shoes Arts was already developing a hybrid model for delivering activities both in-person and online. In October 2020, prior to Sam Miller joining the company, Green Shoes Arts delivered a successful Listen Festival via a joint online and outdoor delivery model.

The flagship Creative for Life programme transitioned with little disruption to online provision. Similarly, a key piece of work for vulnerable young people, supporting drama and dance work and funded by Children in Need, had also moved online.

Green Shoes Arts also chose to invest resources into its website to help support people to engage in guided activities from their homes. In addition, links to mental health support and other related services were added to the website.

Organisational readiness

As part of LBBD's network of public services, Pen to Print faced the challenge of addressing the organisational safety considerations to working online. Lena Smith highlights the increased pressure on staff to provide adequate moderation of online sessions and ensure participant safety, which was contingent on vetted members of core permanent staff overseeing online participation through waiting room features and chat moderation. Lena Smith also outlined the need for understanding online social dynamics in order to ensure workshops and classes could run smoothly.

Overall, Pen to Print's team adapted swiftly to learning a broad set of technical and soft skills. Technical adaptation entailed self-taught adjustments to using online video conferencing through Microsoft Teams, and event promotion and ticketing using Eventbrite.

Miller joined Green Shoes Arts mid-pandemic in April 2021 and brought with him an extensive background in youth education theatre and arts programming from his previous role at Identity School of Acting.

In this post he had successfully transitioned the drama school's programmes to online delivery, accelerating resilience to the point of providing online classes to approximately 1,000 audience participants with an increasingly international demographic. Miller brought a highly relevant set of skills to Green Shoes Arts, which underwent a similar pivot in content delivery.

Courtesy Pen to Print

Digital divide

All three organisations were keen to unpick some of the complex and sensitive issues around digital access and barriers to accessing online experiences. Each organisation seeks to engage with disadvantaged groups that may experience challenges such as poor mental health, physical and mental disabilities, and/or socio-economic difficulties.

Basic access to computer devices such as laptops, tablets or smartphones is a critical issue. There is an incorrect assumption that all households have internet access and the three organisations were keen to highlight this cultural bias.

Attendant to this were challenges around digital literacy and audience familiarity with the software needed to access online user interfaces such as Zoom or Teams, which have become the predominant vehicles for engagement, as well as supporting processes to download and install programs on devices.

The team at Pen to Print sought to tackle this by offering additional support and guidance to audience participants in advance of online sessions. This 1:1 approach included a personal walkthrough of accessing a particular session, support for setting up any necessary accounts or email addresses, and guidance on using Google classroom features for sharing work or assignments.

This bespoke approach helped ensure the smooth transition of participants registered for in-person events to adopting online methods of delivery and engagement.

Courtesy Green Shoes Arts

Digital divide

The need to consider the full context of restrictions in the home space for participants was very important. Pen to Print and Green Shoes Arts also acknowledged that, for those who have disabilities that may prevent or limit in-person experiences, online engagement at home helped to combat these access issues.

Online spaces such as video conferencing can actually offer a more conducive participatory environment for some. For example, participants with autism spectrum disorder found they could appear on or off camera and mute sound when an experience was overwhelming.

Online engagement offered individuals a dynamic level of interaction across the course of a class or workshop that would be challenging in a physical environment.

Natalie Smith noted the sensitivities of some of the topics discussed across Arc Theatre's provision, and observed that moving programmes into the context of a home environment may reduce the willingness of participants to engage due to issues of privacy not being assured.

Programmes run in schools and community spaces also offer an important secondary function, providing discretion, privacy and autonomy from the pressures and restrictions that may exist in the home for some participants.

Miller outlined how Green Shoes' Speak Up workshops addressed mental health issues impacting Black and South Asian male youth communities. The ongoing stigma around such conversations and the restrictions of undertaking such conversations in the home highlighted the vital role of safe in-person spaces to facilitate open discussions among peers.
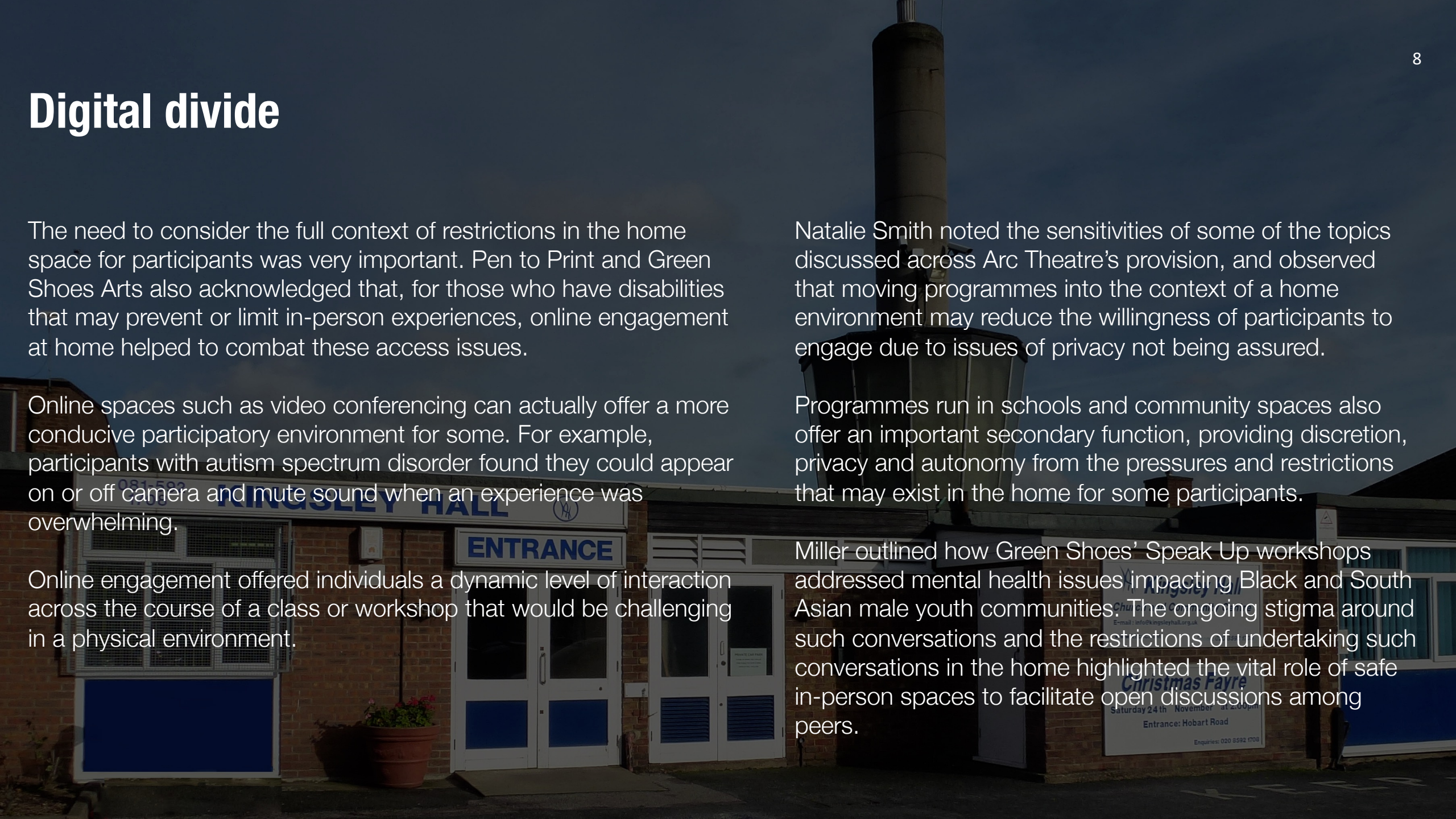
Audience demographics

All three of the interviewees referred to significant shifts in the audience demographic during the pandemic. Lena Smith and Sam Miller built on the theme of increased connectivity through extended audience reach.

Pen to Print's online sessions expanded to reach participants from as far away from LBBD as Africa, Southeast Asia and Australia. Pen to Print was a beneficiary of the broader cultural shift during lockdown whereby people were increasingly seeking educational and skills-based activities to remain creatively productive and socially connected. International interest and demand helped Pen to Print reach 3,121 individuals through the 2019-2020 programme and 3,363 between 2020 and 2021. Benchmarking against pre-pandemic in-person attendance of 3,516, Pen to Print's online and hybrid activities allowed it to retain existing participant numbers while diversifying and building engagement internationally.

This potential to reach beyond Borough lines is of particular value to arts-based educational organisations that benefit from wider cultural perspectives and also a broadening of the overall creative output.

The Arc Theatre expanded its provision to offer online diversity training programmes for adults in the workplace specifically as a response to the Black Lives Matters (BLM) movement. Offering digital provision of such services allowed the theatre to reach new audience groups within corporate organisations who might not have previously considered more theatre-based educational training.

Miller commented that there was a noticeable upturn in engagement among BAME young males with programmes themed around metal health.

Other demographic shifts and online innovations included Arc Theatre's support of children from a range of schools in the development of a film via WhatsApp. The theatre had previously been confined to individual school-based projects. This group development of an online film included the sharing of self-shot video footage via a WhatsApp group — and led to a new sense of unlimited connectivity. The resulting work is a novel film, _Raised Voices: The New Normal._

Audience demographics

Lena Smith noted that increased digital provision expanded the age range participating in Pen to Print's programmes. Pre-pandemic, there were distinct participant groups including school-age children, young adults, and adults aged 45+. The pandemic period of digital delivery saw a significant increase in numbers of 30-40-year-old participants who historically had not been as engaged.

The three organisations pointed to the somewhat counterintuitive learning that, of all age groups, children seemed to respond with the most reluctance to online delivery and engagement. Natalie Smith highlights a specific set of generational challenges, including increased exposure to unmoderated content across social media platforms. In parallel, the near-complete removal of real-world environments and interactions impeded the learning of fundamental social and emotional skills.

Miller supports these observations, stating that, to a large degree, children did not see online activities as equivalent to or a substitute for in-person participation.

Children seemed to feel that the arts activities on offer were a continuation of school, with the imaginative and fun dimension of real-world engagement stripped out. Additionally, children often found it hard to concentrate, and understand what was going on.

This points to the need for organisations to pick up a new set of digital soft skills, such as how to ensure participation from across the wider-ranging digital cohort, how to moderate conversations to reduce audience members speaking over one another, or simply having a clear narrative or conceptual structure in order to enable smooth progress from the outset of a session.

Recognising that these kinds of skills may be more difficult for younger participants to develop organically is an important takeaway for each of the three organisations when observing adaptation toward online engagement more generally.

Funding

There was a consensus that funding bodies had responded with a high degree of understanding and adaptability. Necessary project postponements and adjustments to core programme delivery timelines were, broadly speaking, supported across each of the organisations.

The three interviewees expressed similar views that, moving into a post-pandemic context, it would be beneficial to reconfigure the ways in which project successes are benchmarked and weighted, including in terms of value for money and measuring impact.

New metrics such as frequency of attendance and percentages for attendance on courses or workshops (equivalent to view-through rate or digital dwell time) were suggested. A new digital mindset and more digitally defined metrics are required, versus figures based solely around an in-person attendance model.

If online delivery is to persist beyond the pandemic, supporting the potential range of increased inclusion and participation experience to date, then there may be a benefit to engaging with funding bodies to help evolve the criteria through which project proposals are assessed, and the retrospective successes measured.

A broader set of parameters that include considerations such as 'perception of the borough as a desirable place to live' or 'increased likelihood of visiting the borough as a tourist, as a result of participating in an online programme' may need to be debated and reviewed through a very different lens.

The lasting impact on the ways in which success is defined and measured against arts organisation activities will require ongoing co-operation between funding bodies and their recipients, as part of the adjustment toward a new post-pandemic landscape.