

# The Director of Public Health Annual Report 2020-2021\* Rochdale Borough Council





# A year of creativity.

After this extraordinary year our lives are unlikely to ever be the same again. The biggest threat to our health and, for some, our very survival, came in the form of a tiny virus that created total havoc. We have all been affected in one way or another and for many it's been an incredibly tough time.

Despite the hardship and heart-breaking losses, somehow we have found ways to push through and keep going. What's really stood out for me is that, at the heart of everything, it's creative thinking that's helped us overcome. Whether it's the development of vaccines in super-fast time, or the rollout of mass testing, or even turning our very own dinosaur exhibition into a huge vaccination site (the irony is not lost), we have all had to tap into our creative sides to solve new problems.

Of course we apply our creative skills outside the realms of traditional arts and culture. We know that creative thinking is also at the heart of engineering, architecture, science, mathematics and even commerce. Throughout this year it's been clear to me that creativity is almost instinctive – many of us don't even realise when we are being creative. It's as if creativity runs through our veins.

Despite everything almost grinding to a halt, I've been struck by the number of local people and organisations who've used creativity to keep going. Whether that's individually by baking, singing, dancing or quiz making, or the local organisations who've speedily redefined their roles in supporting our communities through imagination, flexibility, compassion and kindness.

A recent review undertaken on behalf of Rochdale Culture Board indicated that our residents are amongst the least engaged with culture, arts and heritage nationally. An unexpected benefit of the pandemic has meant we've been able to shine a spotlight on the wealth of hidden talent and enthusiasm which exists within the borough that's ready and waiting to be nurtured, developed and celebrated.

So this year's Public Health Annual Report is for, and about, everyday people and organisations. It explores how creativity has been used to get by, to survive, or even thrive and maybe also to inspire us through the process of recovery. I asked the wonderful artist Len Grant, in partnership with Link4Life, our lead organisation for culture, arts and heritage, to bring these stories together as testimony to the resilience and creativity of local people during this incredibly difficult time.

I hope the stories inspire you to go find that pencil, paintbrush, unread book, tricky recipe, or even, dare I say, that pair of clogs. As the Arts Council advocates, I hope it will inspire us all to 'Let's Create'.

Andrea Fallon

Director of Public Health  
and Wellbeing



# Pasta and pencils.

Once lockdown was announced on 23rd March 2020, the emergency response in Rochdale, like everywhere else in the country, was about supporting those in most need, writes Len Grant. A telephone hotline was quickly set up and Action Together, Link4Life and Living Well all joined with Rochdale Council to create a virtual hub of 100 responders, working remotely from kitchen tables and bedroom offices.

"People were really struggling," recalls Link4Life's Donna Livesey, whose 25-strong community development team was seconded to the hub. "Many had never been in crisis before, had never needed help from the local authority before."

"For us in the hub, the lanyards were off. It didn't matter what your normal role was, we all worked as one team to ensure every single resident that rang the helpline was supported, whatever the concern."

"A lot of the other boroughs just offered a food response but we didn't feel that was enough. We wanted to offer a more holistic approach to each individual, so we also advised on housing issues or debt problems, the root causes of the crisis. Many residents, for example, didn't have bank accounts and so were excluded from online shopping."

As the lockdown continued, the voluntary sector took on an increasingly central role. "Volunteers stepped up massively and mutual aid groups sprung up across the borough," says Donna, "shopping for neighbours, walking dogs for those shielding, picking up prescriptions for the vulnerable."

By March 2020 Action Together – the umbrella organisation for community groups – had only been active in the borough for less than a year. Their role in the response proved to be pivotal. With normal activities on hold, many local charities turned their hands to providing food:

setting up a food bank, a pantry or making meals for delivery. Action Together administered a fund to support these groups and quickly processed over 90 emergency grant applications.

"Everyone was working hard, doing their own thing," recalls Kerry Bertram, Strategic Locality Lead for Action Together in Rochdale. "So we brought all these groups together on Zoom, and asked what they needed. Interestingly, it wasn't more food supplies they needed, but more storage and, because some were receiving lots of local donations, a mechanism for redistributing what they couldn't use."

An unused community centre, owned by the Council and close to the town centre, was identified and Action Together set up a community warehouse, supported by yet more volunteers, and where 30 organisations pooled their resources.

Zahida Bashir co-ordinates three food pantries for Rochdale Boroughwide Housing and has used the community warehouse since it was established last November. "Rochdale's food response has been so good," she says, "everyone's got involved. I've met people and teams I didn't even know existed. And the sharing of food, well, it's been overwhelming, hasn't it? For us, this community warehouse has been a godsend."

With a successful effort around food provision ongoing – Rochdale is, after all, the home of co-operation – there was a recognition by the Council and its partners that residents had to be sustained creatively during what was turning out to be an extended period of isolation.

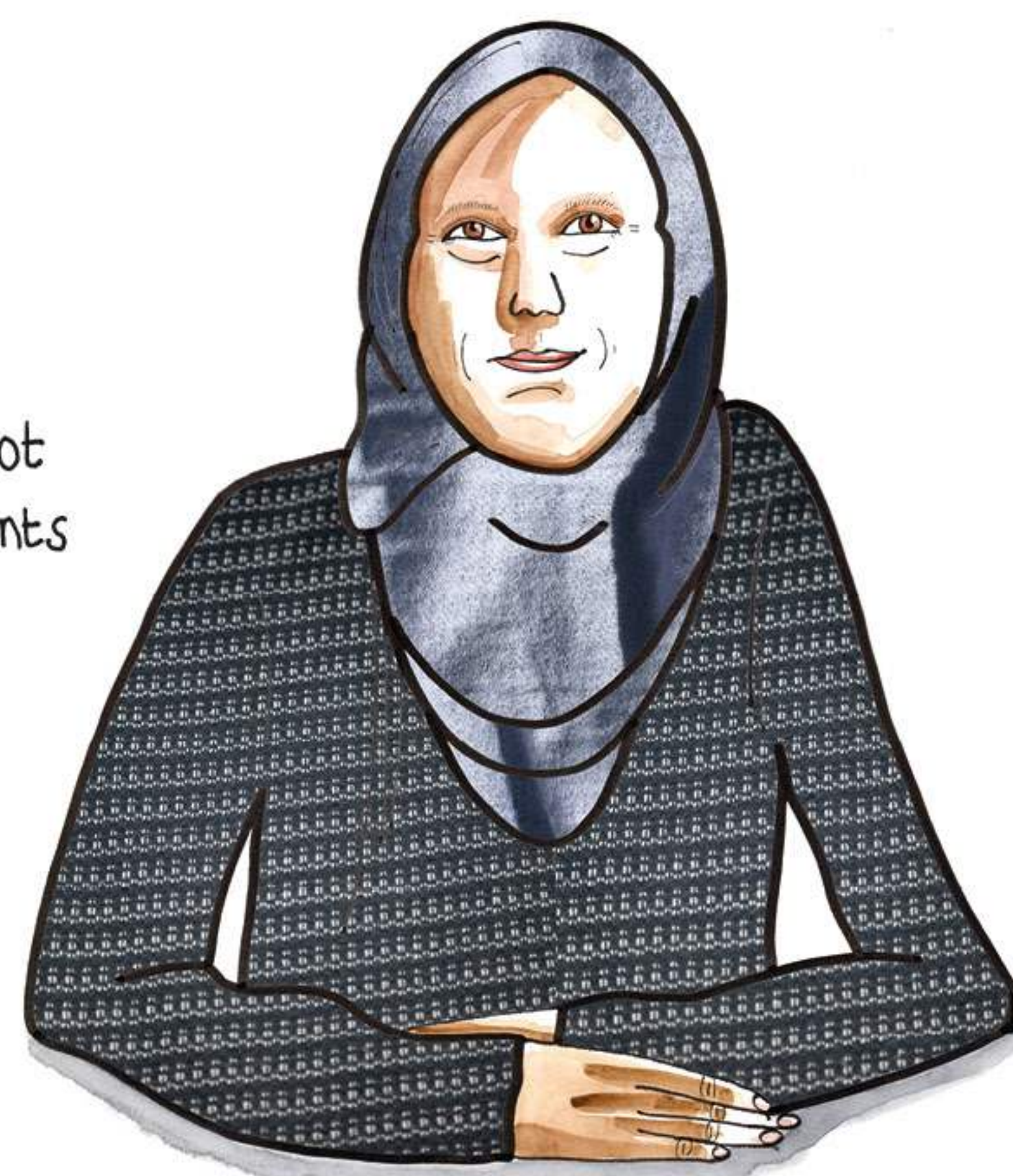
"It's a great example of how the public and voluntary sectors, residents and volunteers have all come together to solve a problem," says Kerry Bertram from Action Together.





"I'm involved a lot in my community," says Community Champion, Rosie Choudhury. "I was born and brought up in Rochdale, so I know a lot of people. I was able to advise my local residents on getting tested and then getting vaccinated."

"When masks were made mandatory, we were on the streets, giving out leaflets, letting people know. We all worked so hard during the pandemic."



Community Health Champion Andy Butterwork has volunteered for nine months at the Town Hall test centre and at other pop-up sites around town. "I'd meet and greet people," he says, "asking if they were okay, if there was anything I could do for me. Some were very scared and I would often refer them to others who could help."

"I love talking to people, working with the community. It's got my confidence back."



"It was a traumatic and frightening time," recalls Rick Walker, director of Heywood-based Cartwheel Arts, "and people needed something to occupy their time and a way of expressing themselves."

With support from Link4Life and funding drawn from disparate community and council budget pots, Cartwheel Arts coordinated the design and compilation of 6,000 family art packs. As well as sought-after art materials the bumper packs included a booklet with activities contributed by the borough's cultural community. "We're lucky in Rochdale, we have an ecology of different arts organisations providing a mosaic of cultural activity," says Rick. "We all played our part."

The borough's most vulnerable families were identified by the Council's Equalities Team and the packs were distributed via school and community groups by Sky TV engineers working voluntarily as part of the wider response. Another team effort.

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With council offices closed and all the usual decision-making structures on hold, the pandemic opened up new creative opportunities to get things done. All the obstacles that might have stopped things happening had disappeared. Now everyone had the same-sized portion of the Zoom screen.

"It felt amazing at times to be in the same virtual room where we all felt equal," recalls Kerry from Action Together. "Yes, Covid brought fear and uncertainty but out of that comes creative thinking. We had some great people in the room all pooling resources to make something new happen."

That quality of decision making and information sharing was extended further with the setting up of a WhatsApp group including council officers, religious leaders and volunteers. A physical meeting of this 150-strong group

would have been impractical but a 'chat' on their smart phones proved super beneficial.

"We were able to respond very quickly to the intelligence we were getting from our communities," say Michelle Duffy, at Living Well, the healthy communities and families service. "If the infection rates rose dangerously in one area we heard about the issues first hand and our teams were able to go out with community leaders and have conversations."

"On another occasion, when rates were going up in the town centre, it was suggested we all distribute masks by hand around town. The call went out on WhatsApp and dozens of us spread out to the tram and bus stops and shopping streets giving masks to everyone we met."

Yet another virtual initiative, the inclusive messaging group, was established with representatives from all backgrounds across the borough and became particularly useful for sharing and testing new policy ideas. Without a mechanism for lengthy consultations, strategy was shaped by gleaning valuable feedback from those who saw issues through different lenses. Another win win.

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If, for the general public, masks, testing and lockdowns have become synonymous with the global pandemic, then for organisations, adaptability will no doubt be the enduring characteristic. Everyone was given permission to work in different ways, to find creative solutions to whatever challenge they faced.

The Living Well service, run by The Big Life Group on behalf of Rochdale Council, found its pre-Covid delivery model pretty much redundant. "We were used to a face-to-face delivery," says Michelle, "where we'd attend events and encourage residents to change to a healthier lifestyle. Our referrals reduced during lockdown and, because we couldn't just sit at home and wait, we had to think quickly about working differently."

Within days Michelle's team were out on the streets talking to people about what they needed. "It was very different from doing blood pressure checks in supermarkets," recalls Michelle, "but we found that there were lots of people who were isolated and just wanted to talk. And so we flexed our service to accommodate that need."

'Chatters' have since been recruited and now, to support wellbeing and reduce loneliness, the Living Well service includes that most basic of human interaction: talking to each other. "Our chatters now read books with our clients over the phone or listen to the radio together. One pair discuss a shared interest in motorcycle maintenance. Certainly we are now more likely to support people by phone or video call than face to face."

"As organisations, teams and individuals we've had to think and work more creatively," says Michelle. "We've tried new approaches to supporting people – like e-cig home drop offs to 'walk and talk' appointments – and when we've found ones that work, we've run with them. It's been challenging, but it's been an amazing time to make a difference."

Early in the pandemic Rochdale became the second place in the country to host a walk-in testing site. A huge white tented-facility was constructed behind the town hall, staffed by medical personnel from outside the borough. "It was stark and sterile, and undoubtedly quite frightening for many of our already traumatised residents," recalls Helen Chicot, the Council's Head of Place, "so we set about making it more human."

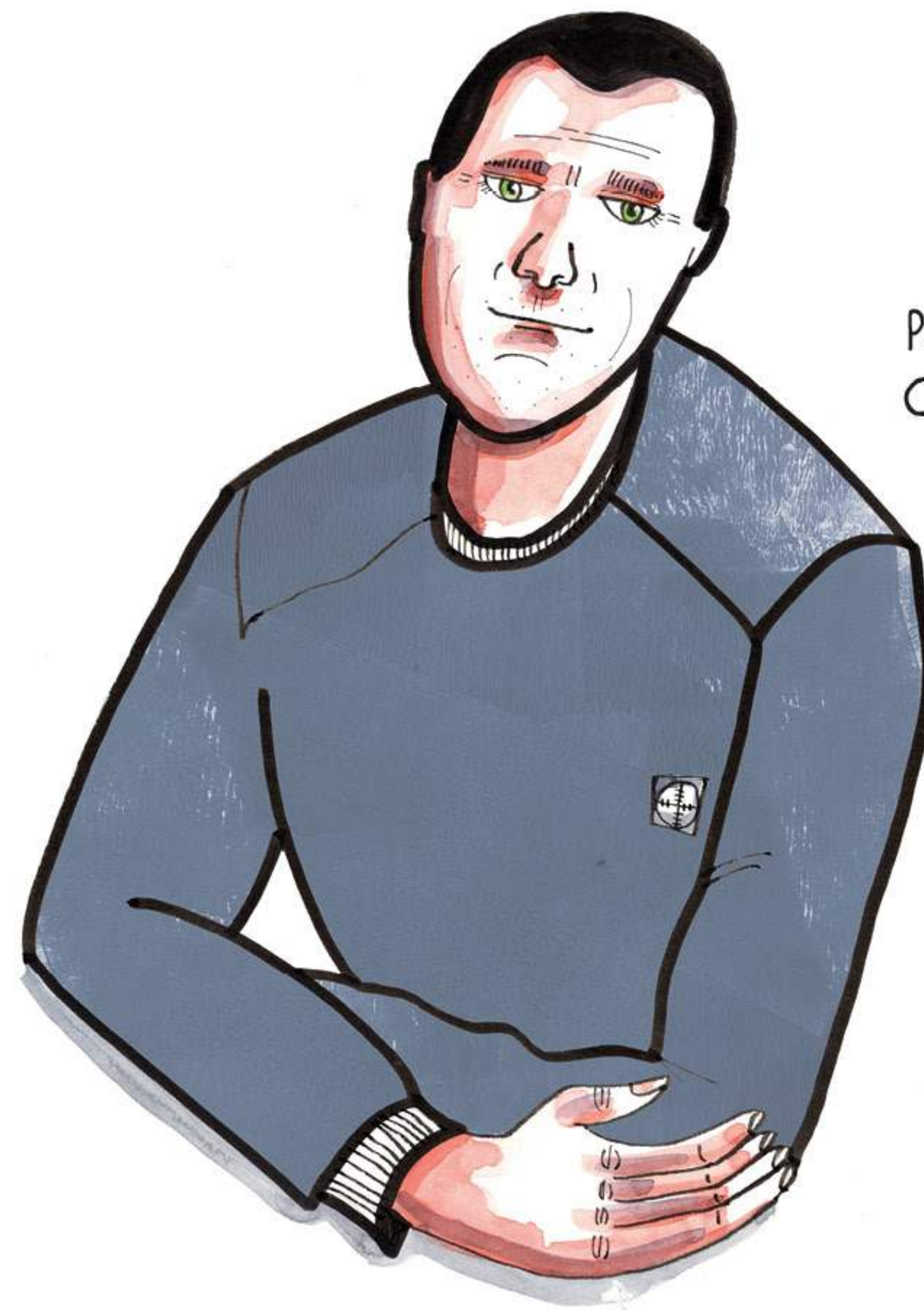
Pictures from local schoolchildren were displayed, musicians recruited and pom-poms strung up along with embroidered banners with messages of positivity and hope. "Most importantly, we Kitted out some of our Community Champions to act as hosts to welcome residents to the centre."

One of the volunteers, Andy Butterwork, had been street homeless for two years before getting involved with the Community Champions programme. "Andy was out there chatting to people in all weathers, buzzing and full of life. Because of his own experiences, he was perfectly placed to have empathy for those coming to be tested and later vaccinated. He was one of those holding it together for the borough," says Helen.

What began as a Literary Champions Programme, Rochdale's Community Champions have got involved in every aspect of the town's Covid response from delivering art packs to older people to spreading a positive message in vaccine-hesitant communities. "Creativity is very much part of the methodology of what the Community Champions do and that approach to problem solving has come to the fore over this period," reflects Helen.

Now, as we reach what we hope is the tail end of the pandemic, what has been learnt from a more democratic, creative way of working? How much of this 'lanyards off' approach will really become part of the 'new normal'?





Paddy Tierney is one of the Community Champions behind Elephants Trail, a theatre-based project that challenges existing systems and advocates for inclusive policy making.

"There's more of an opportunity for us now," says Paddy. "People are listening who weren't before. It's only a small window of opportunity because, if we're not careful, we'll go back to where we were. So we have to seize this chance."

"The idea of making things happen together is definitely something we've established and will continue," says Kerry at Action Together. "We all now understand this approach and trust it. We've shown it can work together." A steering group from within the community has now been recruited that will take over the management of the community warehouse, making decisions on how Rochdale's food response will develop post pandemic.

Even before March last year, some of the town's Community Champions were already working on ways to improve decision-making processes. Using what's known as legislative theatre, a small group, each with their own experiences of disadvantage, runs theatre-based workshops to identify and help solve systemic issues. Those involved hope their approach has further traction after this last year of joint working.

In organisations that are driven by key performance indicators and outputs, the power of creativity in supporting the individual is often discounted, its value overlooked. How can the weekly watercolour session possibly have an impact on the local GP's prescribing budget?

In this report I've set out to tell the stories of how the borough's art organisations, big and small, have adapted to delivering their activities in a chaotic year. I tell how residents' experiences of lockdown have been alleviated by joining a Zoom workshop, following a YouTube tutorial, or working through one of the many creative packs that have been distributed by volunteers.

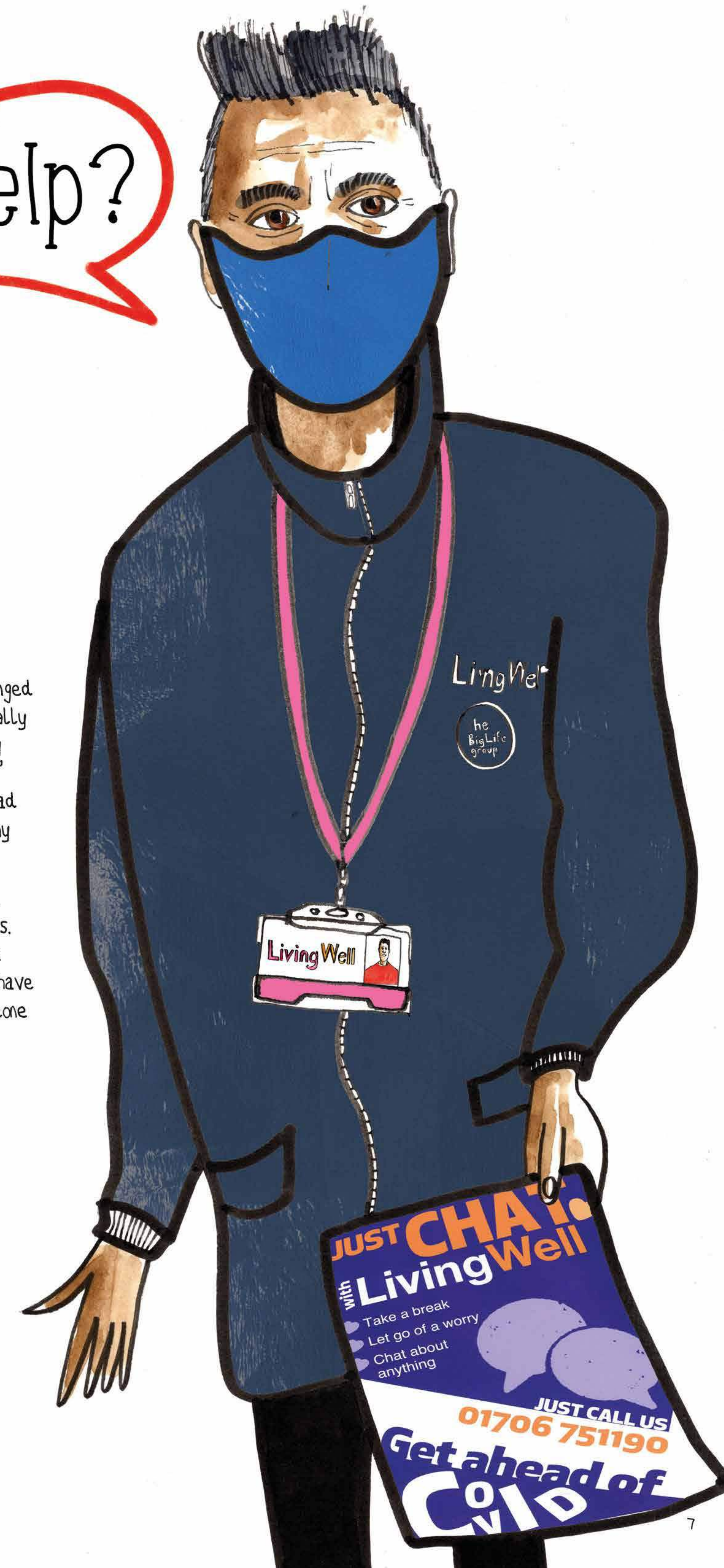
I've heard how the people of Rochdale have supported their own wellbeing by keeping their minds active and their hands busy. Most of all, I've heard how that's made them feel. No, it's not something you can put on a spreadsheet.

Len Grant  
Sketcher and writer



Shabaz Ahmed, Health Trainer for the Living Well service, found his role changed as the lockdown deepened. "We'd normally be organising events, visiting community centres or getting referrals from GPs," he says. "But all that stopped and we had to find other ways of encouraging healthy lifestyles.

"Instead we took to the streets, to the test facilities and vaccination centres. We'd give out masks, signpost vulnerable people to different services and just have conversations. People have needed someone to talk to."





# Our circus family.

"It felt apocalyptic. It didn't make any sense. Shutting up our workshop felt so strange. But I thought it wouldn't last long," recalls Martine Bradford, creative director of Skylight Circus Arts.

But, of course, the weeks turned into months and Martine and her colleagues had to get to grips with other ways of connecting with their members. "Digital is not my world," she admits. "I do people."

"We used Zoom to keep up our connection, to make sure they were okay. Many of our members have been with us for a long time. They say we are like family... their circus family."

Despite not having access to all their equipment, Skylight's members shared videos of themselves juggling in their Kitchens, balancing on beams in their gardens, or throwing diabolos over their washing lines. It brought them together.

"By the second lockdown we got more creative online. We weren't able to always teach the more intrepid and adventurous skills on Zoom but we knew we could still bring our Skylight family together and have a laugh."

"We Zoomed in poets, jugglers and acrobats who we might never have met in person. We collaborated with other theatre groups from across the country in ways we didn't think possible. We learnt new skills – like audio describing movement to a blind participant. And by creating sensory environments on Zoom, we've even delivered remote workshops to our regular group of adults with additional needs."

Despite the steep learning curve, Skylight know they can now offer even more to their 'family'. "Yes, we've built our confidence in what we can deliver and, even for groups who are unable to visit our workshops, we know we can offer something online that is of value to them."

"Like lots of other art organisations, the capabilities of online delivery and partnerships with other artists has been a big eye opener for us," says Martine. "But digital delivery is challenging, tiring, and not always inspiring. So we'll use it when face-to-face workshops aren't viable but mostly we're looking forward to getting everyone back on those tight wires, trapezes and unicycles in person."

I seized up during lockdown,  
I really, really need to get  
back at it.

I loved the juggling challenge,  
it was great to have some fun  
and see each other  
on YouTube!

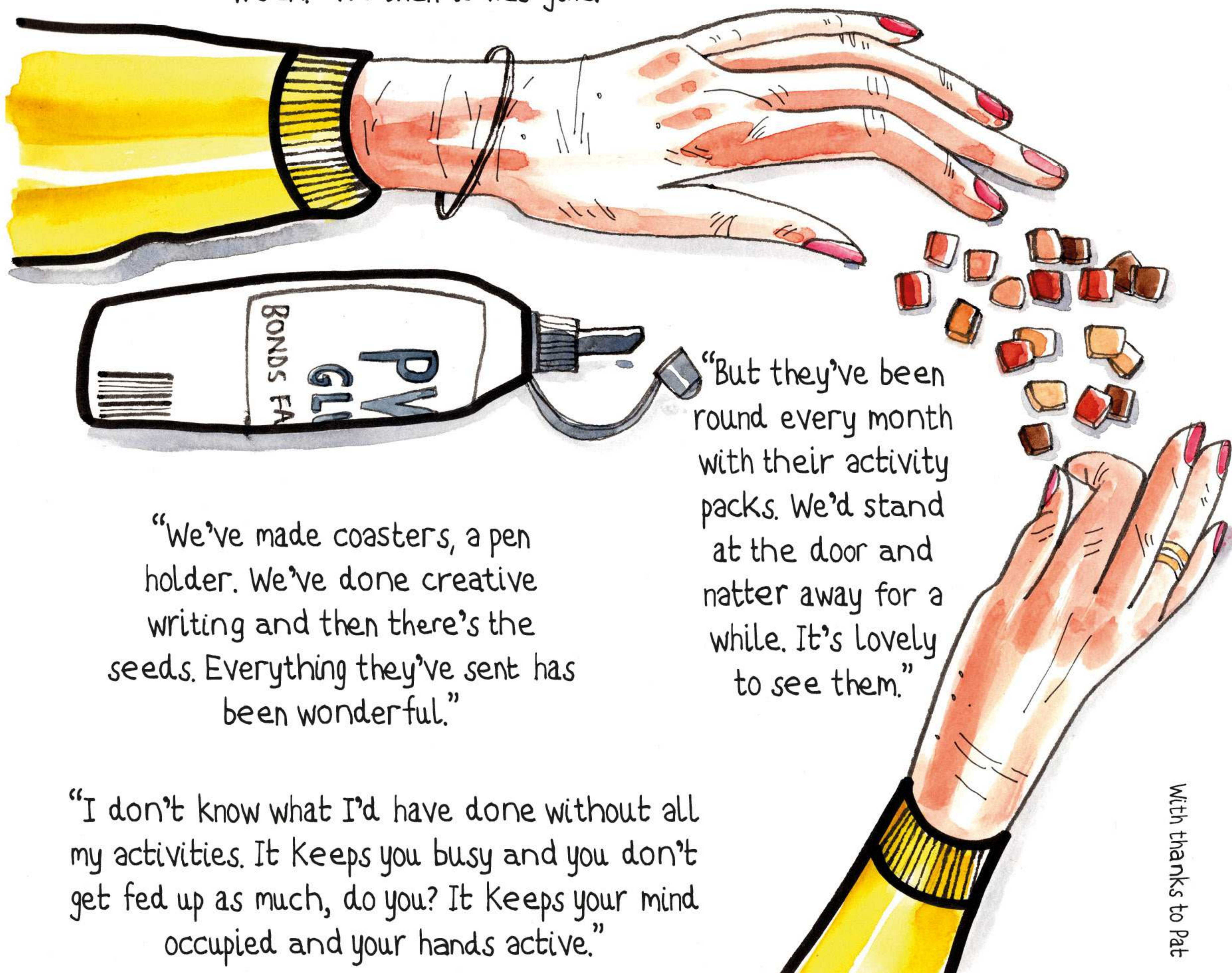
I'm able to socialise at  
Skylight, which I've missed.  
Without my regular visits I've  
found my anxiety levels have  
risen which is why I'm looking  
forward to getting back and  
being around people of the  
same mind.





# "It perks you up."

"Everyone would so look forward to our lunch each week. And then it was gone."



"We've made coasters, a pen holder. We've done creative writing and then there's the seeds. Everything they've sent has been wonderful."

"But they've been round every month with their activity packs. We'd stand at the door and natter away for a while. It's lovely to see them."

"I don't know what I'd have done without all my activities. It keeps you busy and you don't get fed up as much, do you? It keeps your mind occupied and your hands active."

"We ran a luncheon club with entertainment and a quiz," says Nick Andrews from **Hare Hill House** in Littleborough, "finished off with a game of bingo."

The weekly Meet-Up would attract about 50 older participants who, once lockdown had struck, were potentially isolated. "At first we hand delivered a weekly newsletter to keep everyone connected," explains Nick, "followed by an online quiz and Facebook post."

"With winter approaching we wanted to provide something for them all to do, something to help them through the shorter days and dark evenings."

Nick and his team applied for funding for six different activity packs and talked to local arts organisations about what they could provide.

"Our packs have included a mosaic coaster kit from Jamboree Arts; a decoupage activity from local artist Neela Jackson as well as creative writing exercises from Cartwheel Arts. And we've had quizzes and a seed-growing pack too. So lots to keep everyone busy."

With thanks to Pat

# A real demand.



For the last five years **HMR Circle** (that's Heywood, Middleton and Rochdale) has supported its older members with a calendar of meals out, theatre visits, walks and get-togethers. They even operate a volunteer driver service for those who find public transport difficult.

When normal life stopped in March 2020 they – like everyone else – had to re-think what they could offer

during lockdown. Director Mark Wynn says that creative activities were crucial for many of their members.

"Before lockdown, if we had a craft event, it might attract six or seven people," he says. "But during lockdown, we had 50 or 60 who took an active interest in our craft packs. Maybe that was because there wasn't a right lot else to do, but those who did get involved, got involved again and again. There was a real demand... they enjoyed it."



# Doing the right thing.

In any normal year Cartwheel Arts would be running dozens of high quality arts projects across the borough and beyond, giving lots of different groups of people, many of them disadvantaged, the chance to express themselves creatively.

During the pandemic Cartwheel found imaginative ways to continue their existing projects, as well as developing new ones appropriate to the crisis. The entire Cartwheel team played a central role in the borough-wide response in keeping people engaged and active.

"With everyone stuck at home, one of our first reactions was to get stuff in people's hands," says Rick Walker, Cartwheel's director. "We knew the poorest families would have difficulty accessing online resources through lack of data or devices and wouldn't have art materials around the house.

"So, with contributions and funding from partners, we made up 6,000 'Get Creative Inside!' family art boxes filled with great ideas and the materials with which to do them," he says. Working with the Council's Equalities Team the boxes were distributed via schools and community groups to families in most need. The team also contributed activities to the Creative Care Kits for both younger and older people compiled by the Greater Manchester Combined Authority.

"Later in the year we produced over 4,000 boxes with seasonal themes for schools across the borough," says Rick. "We didn't see any reason to stop – we didn't furlough any staff – we just kept going, finding ways for the people of Rochdale to be creative.

"Funders trusted us to do the right thing, although for much of the time, no one knew what the right thing was. We continued to deliver on our social objectives throughout and our funders have been very supportive of that.

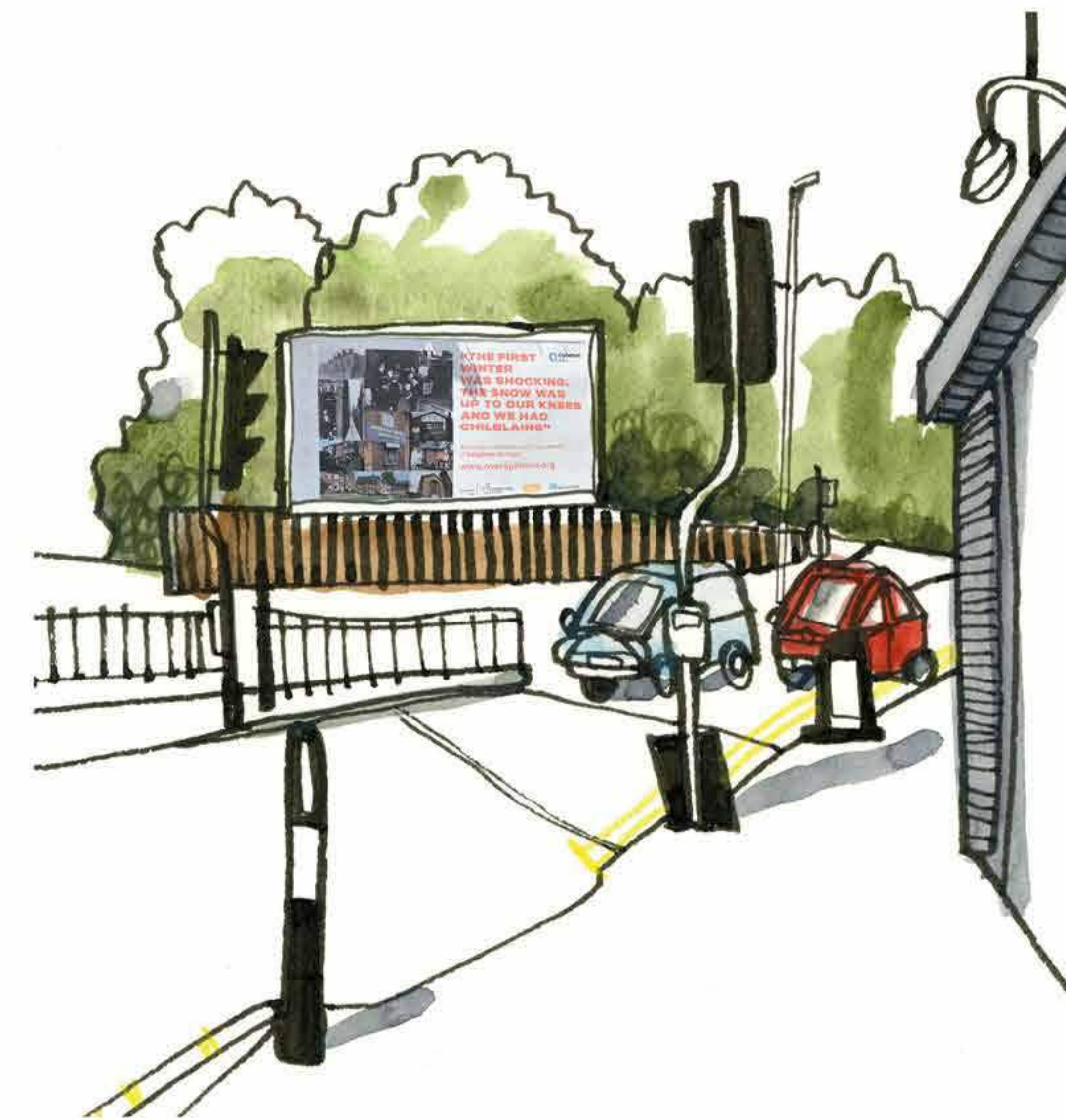
"I'm not tempted to look on the bright side. It's been an awful time," Rick continues. "The workload has been ridiculous and our staff have worked tirelessly. But I'm pleased with the variety of things we've done and that we reached 15,000 people in their own homes.

"It's hard to know whether you have improved someone's mental health by sending a pack. But we got overwhelming feedback that getting a 'gift' through the door made people feel thought of, cared for and less alone, so I'm confident we made an impact in that respect."

Draw the Day is an online project Cartwheel Arts devised during lockdown and is still going strong. A growing resource of 'how to' videos presented by professional artists is complemented by activity cards for kids to encourage outdoor activity, and art activity ideas for adults. The website is fronted by an online gallery for participants to upload their work.



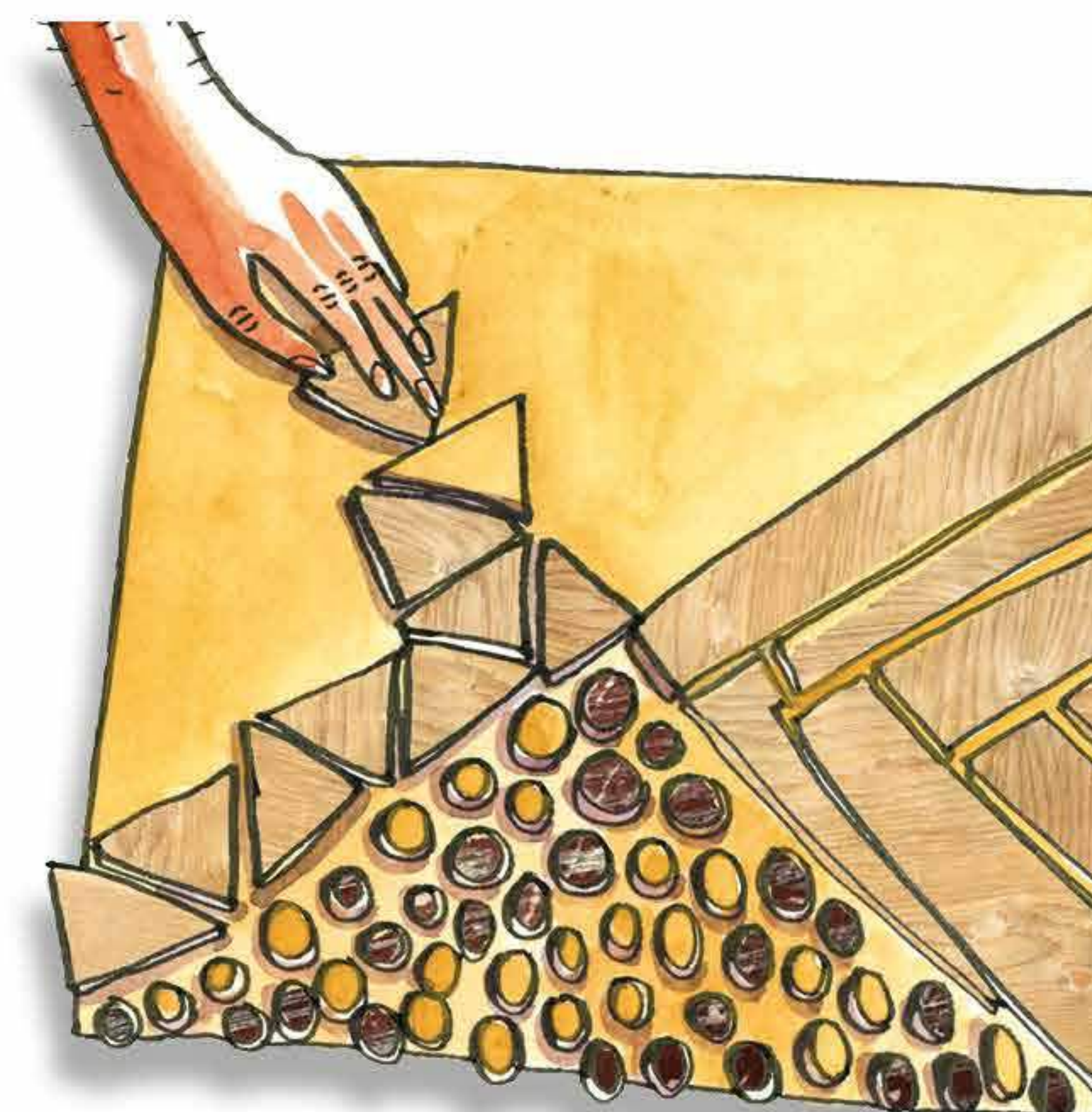
"My daughter, who has severe learning difficulties and autism, is loving all the activities. I think what you are doing is brilliant... I can't thank you enough."



As a way of supporting creative freelancers, Arts Council England supported Cartwheel Arts to deliver Collaborate, where ten local artists paired up to create new, climate change-themed artworks. One of the pairs was percussionist Mitch Oldham and visual artist, Sumit Sarkar, who together made a 'portable, up-cycled percussion device'.

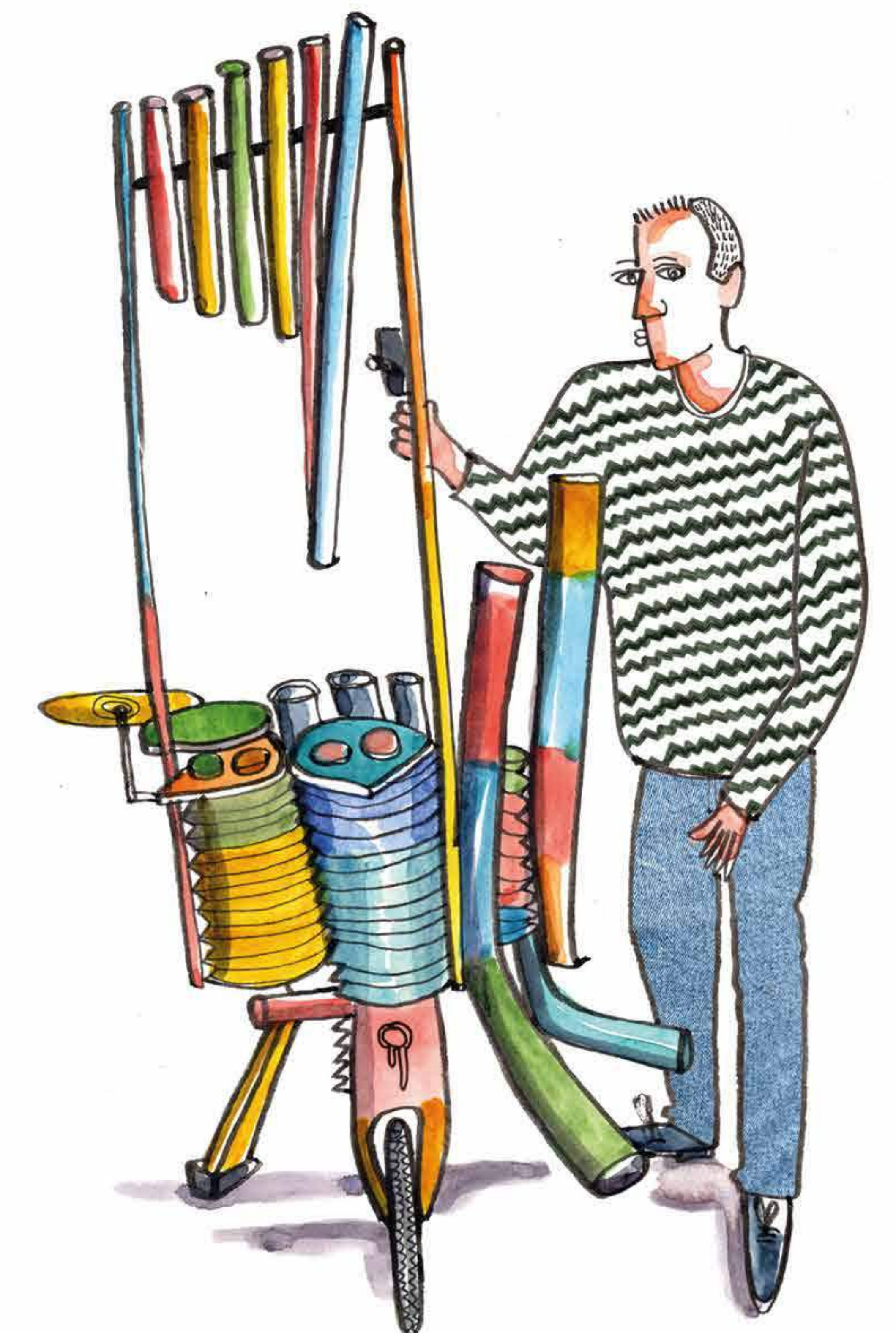
Each idea was printed onto postcards and shared with 100 of Cartwheel's regular participants. Collaborate was runner-up in the Climate category at the Culture, Health and Wellbeing Alliance Awards, 2021.

Some of the improvisation will continue post pandemic. Postal Projects were developed as a way of engaging participants with mental health issues remotely. The Art for Wellbeing team devised courses and sourced and posted materials to dozens of new participants with personalised notes. Weekly activity postcards and phone calls followed from Emotional Support Workers. It turns out that for many people with severe anxiety or chaotic lifestyles this flexible home-based activity is easier to manage than face-to-face sessions.



Cartwheel Arts' 20-month Overspill Project collected stories of those who moved from Manchester slums to 'overspill' estates in Darnhill and Langley in the 50s and 60s. In the final months of the project, a socially-distanced photography project captured residents' experiences of lockdown and the project's final exhibitions were displayed unconventionally, but to great effect.

"Instead of planned local shows" says Rick, "we hired billboards. It's not the intimate experience we were hoping for but it was seen by many more people."



"2020 was all about being adaptable," says Rick. "One of our first attempts to get back to face-to-face workshops was our Stepping Stones project, left, with adults with mental health support needs. We pitched a marquee in the grounds of their accommodation and set about delivering woodworking workshops, building confidence and skills and the participants benefited as their wellbeing assessments show. It was a great start on our journey to 'the new normal.'"



# Around the borough.

Creativity has played such a big part for Rochdale residents over the last twelve months. Whether it's been singing along in a Zoom choir or delving into an activity pack distributed by local arts organisations, it seems lots of people have benefitted from getting creative. Here Mary, Fehmina and Mohamood share their experiences.

As a champion of African culture, Mary was invited to take part in 'The 19' project curated by Parvez Qadir (see page 24). "I love music and I love to dance," she says. "So I wrote a song about Covid and about survival. I was really happy to participate in that project. It was an opportunity and we must grab opportunities when they come."



"I founded the Nigerian Community Association in 2018," says Mary Bukola, "to strengthen our community by promoting culture and identity." The Association's projects, normally delivered face to face, were soon being delivered online. "We have had more than 40 people on our Zoom meetings, discussing topics like mental health or hate crime. That platform has been such a great asset during the pandemic. So we thank God for Zoom."

Although an intergenerational group, Mary and her team have concentrated much of their efforts on their young people over the last twelve months. "We were hearing, again and again, from parents telling us how their children were suffering. So we tried to engage them the best we could."

Before lockdown the group's young people were coming together at the Youth Service in Milnrow, working on a project that highlighted their creative skills. "We carried that forward online with everyone making short films about their passions," says Mary. "Some did graphic design, some braiding, others shared sketches they'd made. We gathered them all together in a compilation video to celebrate their creativity."

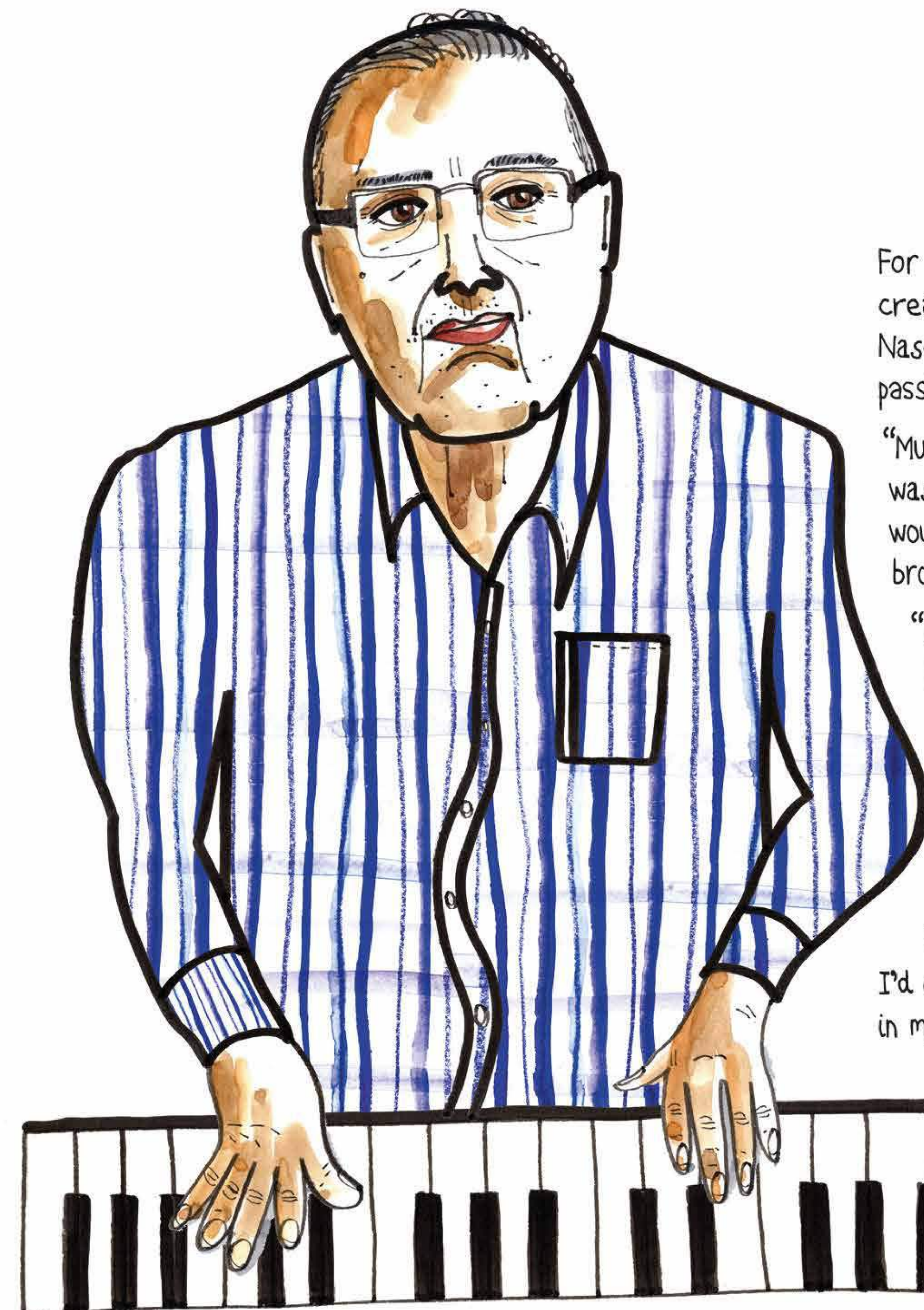
Like many community groups, The Nigerian Community Association played their part in Rochdale's Covid response. "We distributed food parcels, with essential ingredients for our community, and then we delivered the different creative packs. It's been a busy, challenging time, but we've come through it. We've survived."

"Within our community mental health isn't seen as important, despite our deep-rooted, often silent psychological traumas," says Fehmina Parveen. "Before the pandemic I was a service receiver and, during my postnatal depression, was regularly supported by Awakening Minds. For me, there was no tunnel, let alone any light at the end of it!"

As lockdown progressed, a weekly Zoom 'safe space' was created by the mental health charity and Fehmina got more involved. "We have guest speakers, play games – bingo is popular – and it always ends with a bhangra dance. It's a lot of fun and a huge support."

Fehmina was soon invited to host the meetings. "I've now become one of the service providers, listening, supporting and empowering from my own reflections, journey and experiences," she says.

"Even after the restrictions are lifted we will continue the online group. It's so convenient for everyone. One Auntie Ji told us she spent the entire week in the house isolated with her children and that this one hour, on a Friday evening, was her only 'me time'."



For many lockdown has been an opportunity to try a new creative hobby. For others, like 84-year-old Mohamood Naseem Haqqani, it's been a time to re-Kindle old passions.

"Music is my first love... there was no television when I was growing up, only radio... and I remember every house would tune in when our favourite Bollywood songs were broadcast.

"I was given an electronic keyboard some years ago but never used it. Only during the lockdown have I rediscovered it and taught myself how to play from YouTube videos. I've been very much inspired by the music I heard in my youth... I can play the Cobra dance now.

"Yes, it's been a difficult time. Sometimes I'd listen to music, sometimes practice the piano, sometimes I'd open my art materials. Time can fly by with a pencil in my hand and I get a real sense of achievement from drawing. I've learnt new techniques online... YouTube really has been my tutor."



# Gardening has it all.

Creativity isn't just about pencils and paints. Or even theatre and dance. We spoke to a couple of community groups for this report that use gardening as a way of positivity affecting their participants' wellbeing and ultimately their life chances.

The Petrus Incredible Edible Rochdale (PIER) project started eight years ago by putting hanging baskets up in a community garden. Now part of the Incredible Edible network, it's a full scale horticultural therapy project that creates connected communities through the power of food.

Rachael Bennion is PIER's service manager: "You can be creative outside: you can do physical exercise... you can be mindful. And, with your hands in the soil, you are actively engaging with nature, completely focussed in that moment.

"In a community garden, you're part of a team, contributing. You're no longer a service user, you have an identity and a role and you take pride in that role.

"Taking a tablet can't give you that."



With thanks to Ken

This Middleton charity has shown time and again that working with young people on their allotment brings benefits beyond a box of home-grown veg.

"These kids have got talents," says co-ordinator Sue Smith, "they just don't fit into a school environment." Status4All (in partnership with BowLee Community Association) is run by volunteers that support local young people to get back into school.

"We're the first youth allotment in the borough," says Sue, "and this is where our young people learn, but in a different way."

Kieren and his mates have designed the allotment; put up a shed and greenhouse and made raised beds. "They're about to plant the vegetables they've grown from seed – onions, carrots, courgettes – and when it's harvested they'll make their own soup.

"People can see what they've achieved and it's flipped the young people's reputation in the community."



It keeps me on track.





"The arts cut across language barriers and is great at bringing people together," says Mohammed. "Our Qawwali Fusion Music Concert – planned to be held live – featured South Asian and Western musicians and has been a huge YouTube hit."

## Accelerating aspirations.



"Our response during the pandemic has justified what we've been saying for years: with the right resources we can provide high quality, relevant content to our communities," says Mohammed Sarwar, CEO of the Centre of Wellbeing, Training & Culture (CWTC).

With a remit to support people living with dementia, mental illness and to promote active lifestyles, CWTC's programme was very much face to face. "We'd have a wellbeing cafe, organise lots of activities, cultural visits," recalls Mohammed. "Then, like everyone else, we had to find a Plan B based on digital delivery."

"Many in the BAME community are not IT literate," he says, "so we needed a creative approach to producing content that was engaging, bilingual and locally based. With flexibility from our funders we had a great opportunity."

With a skeleton staff, Mohammed and his colleagues brought in professional broadcast kit and learnt new content creation skills. "We've made online courses; launched a YouTube interview series and even broadcast live music events. In that respect, Covid has accelerated the aspirations we've had for some time."

## Lily's lockdown story.

"During the first lockdown, I did food deliveries every day for those who couldn't get out," says Lily. "I'd see lots of appreciative faces and that kept me up for a bit. But it's been hard."

"I've suffered with anxiety and depression before all this but because I was seeing friends and busy with my music – I'd gig all over the country and busk whenever I could – I was able to push that to one side."

"During the second lockdown I started to feel low. My nan had been in hospital. It seemed my friends became distant. I'd started college too which I found overwhelming."

"By the third one, I was really struggling to motivate myself to do any online performing. That's been really upsetting because I've sang my whole life since I was seven. And now, as things have started to lift and I can go out and busk, it's felt like a real task, a real struggle."

Phil Reynolds is a music tutor and organiser of several community choirs. Working closely with a variety of age groups before and during lockdown, he's witnessed how the pandemic has adversely affected young people's mental health: "There's no doubt they've had the roughest time of all," he says.

Last summer Phil convened the Manchester Virtual Youth Choir as a way of connecting some of his young students... and raise money for charity in the process.

"Lily was central to that video – she performed the solo rap – and I've always thought she was bulletproof," recalls Phil, "but, as it turns out, she's been struggling like so many others."

"These young people have missed out on so many experiences that they're never going to get back."





# Constant change.

Recognised as creators of locally-grown, world-class theatre for, and by, children and young people, M6 Theatre Company is rooted firmly in its Rochdale community.

"To begin with we felt a great sense of responsibility, not just to our participants but also to all the artists we work with," recalls artistic director, Gilly Baskeyfield. "That propelled us into so many new projects, and new ways of working."

"Back in March, as we were racked with uncertainty, one funder encouraged us to do whatever we could for our communities. That spurred us to re-imagine our programme to ensure that children, young people and their families still felt connected through whatever creative intervention we could provide."

With theatre tours and in-person workshops cancelled M6, like everyone else, began to make connections through digital channels. "There were some silver linings," says MD and CEO, Debs Palmer, "we learnt lots of new skills last year as we became professional filmmakers."

Productions that would normally have toured schools nationally with actors, technical crew, sets and props, became short film adaptations, like *When We Started Singing* (opposite) and *The Storm*.

"Our weekly drama workshops were transferred to Zoom – although not everyone felt comfortable taking part – and our youth theatre groups made films and radio plays instead of live performances."

"It was tough, there was constant change," says Debs, "but working more closely with our voluntary sector partners and our sister arts companies taught us more about our community than ever before."

Despite reduced hours and remote working – and losing much of their regular income – M6 Theatre Company reached more young people and collaborated with more artists during the pandemic than they had ever done.

"Yes, there are positives in a hybrid way of working as we move forward but we need to be mindful of the extra work that brings. So we are reflecting – listening and observing – and we're confident our upcoming programmes can build on this year's achievements despite a challenging funding landscape."

"Thank you M6 for keeping all our children focused and entertained during lockdown. It really has made a difference."

"Your team has put the days in to make the production come to life."

"The wellbeing of our children during this period has been a real concern but you've been brilliant in addressing this."



The 8-11s youth theatre group made a fun video called *What's Bugging You?* about the things bugs and creepy crawlies get up to when humans aren't looking.

"The wind that blew on 23rd March swept us right the way through the year... we just clung on for dear life."

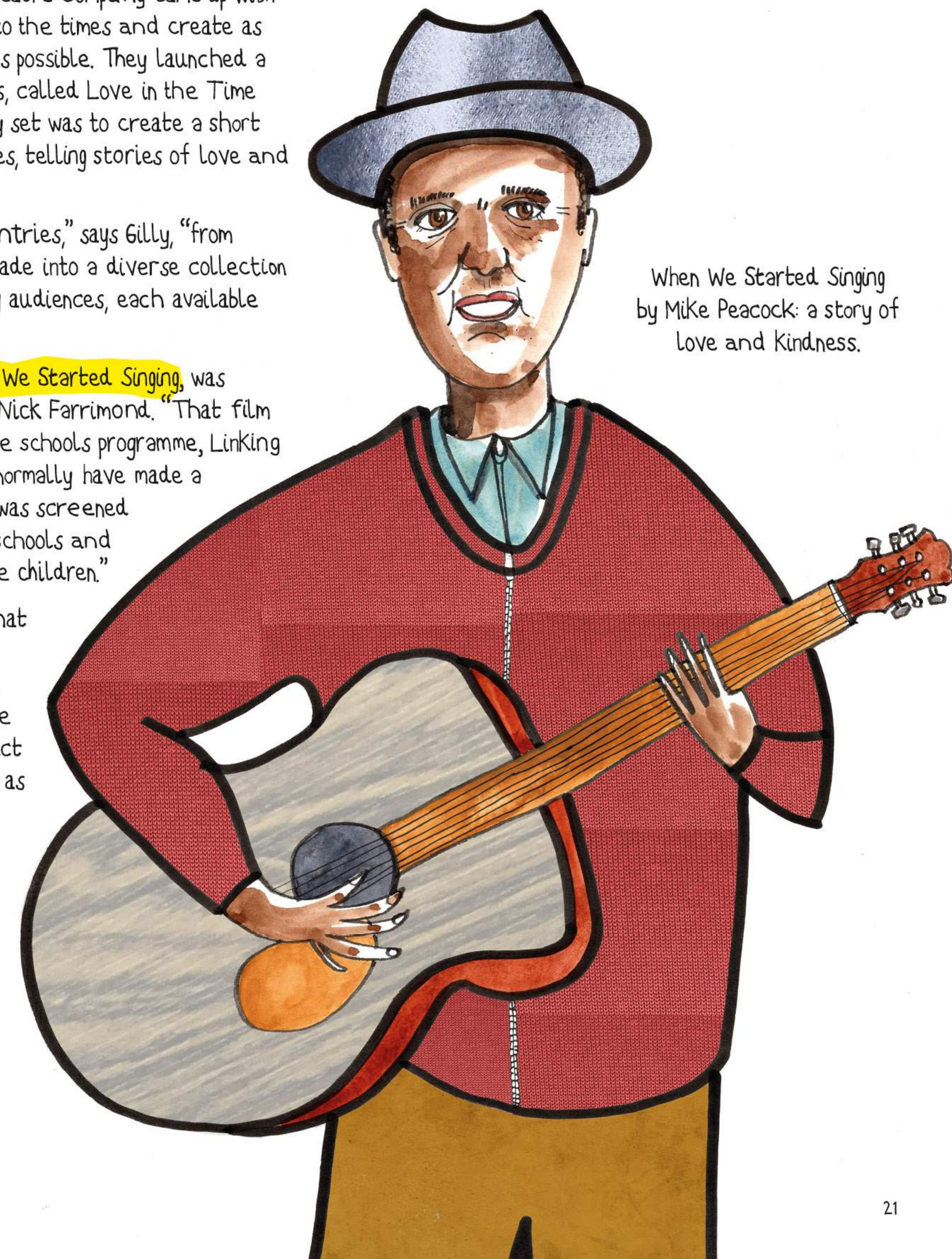
Gilly Baskeyfield, M6 Theatre Company

As lockdown deepened M6 Theatre Company came up with an idea that would respond to the times and create as many creative opportunities as possible. They launched a competition, open to all writers, called *Love in the Time of Corona*. The challenge they set was to create a short piece of drama, up to 10 minutes, telling stories of love and life in lockdown.

"We had an astounding 460 entries," says Gilly, "from which we selected ten to be made into a diverse collection of single voice plays for young audiences, each available online."

One of the ten winners, *When We Started Singing*, was made into a 15-minute film by Nick Farrimond. "That film became our contribution to the schools programme, Linking Network, for which we would normally have made a touring theatre production. It was screened simultaneously in different schools and followed by workshops with the children."

"We're particularly proud of that project. We involved so many people and the film was used with school children across the country. That Rochdale product reached children as far away as the Orkneys."



*When We Started Singing* by Mike Peacock: a story of love and kindness.



# "That counts!"

## What counts as creativity?

Before lockdown Gulseren enjoyed attending her art classes as much for the socialising than for the drawing and painting exercises set by her Link4Life tutor, Will.

Once the world stopped and the classes went online, Gulseren was less keen to attend, instead taking up her crochet hooks to pass the time.

"Back home," – Gulseren is a Turkish Kurd – "I'd often sit with my mother and aunts as they knitted or crocheted, so I knew the basics. At first I watched YouTube tutorials or followed other people's patterns before I realised it was more satisfying to make my own designs, often from photographs of flowers I'd grown myself." Now Gulseren sells her intricate creations online to an expanding fan base.

"The second lockdown was hardest, but the crocheting was really good for me," she says. "You just have your hooks and your counting, you forget what's going on in the world. It's something to do for yourself."

As restrictions lifted, Gulseren bumped into Will in town. "I was feeling guilty. I hadn't kept up with his art classes. But Will had seen the crocheted pieces I'd been posting. 'That counts!' he'd said. That made me happy."



Ebor Studios in Littleborough is a collective of 17 professional artists and designers, all with their own work spaces. Their old mill on William Street has a gallery and, until last year, a disused garden. Here Kara Lyons and Maryanne Royle reflect on how the pandemic has affected their creative community.

Because our external networks have reduced we've focused exclusively on what our artists and designers do here.

It's made for a more collaborative, communicative and supportive atmosphere.

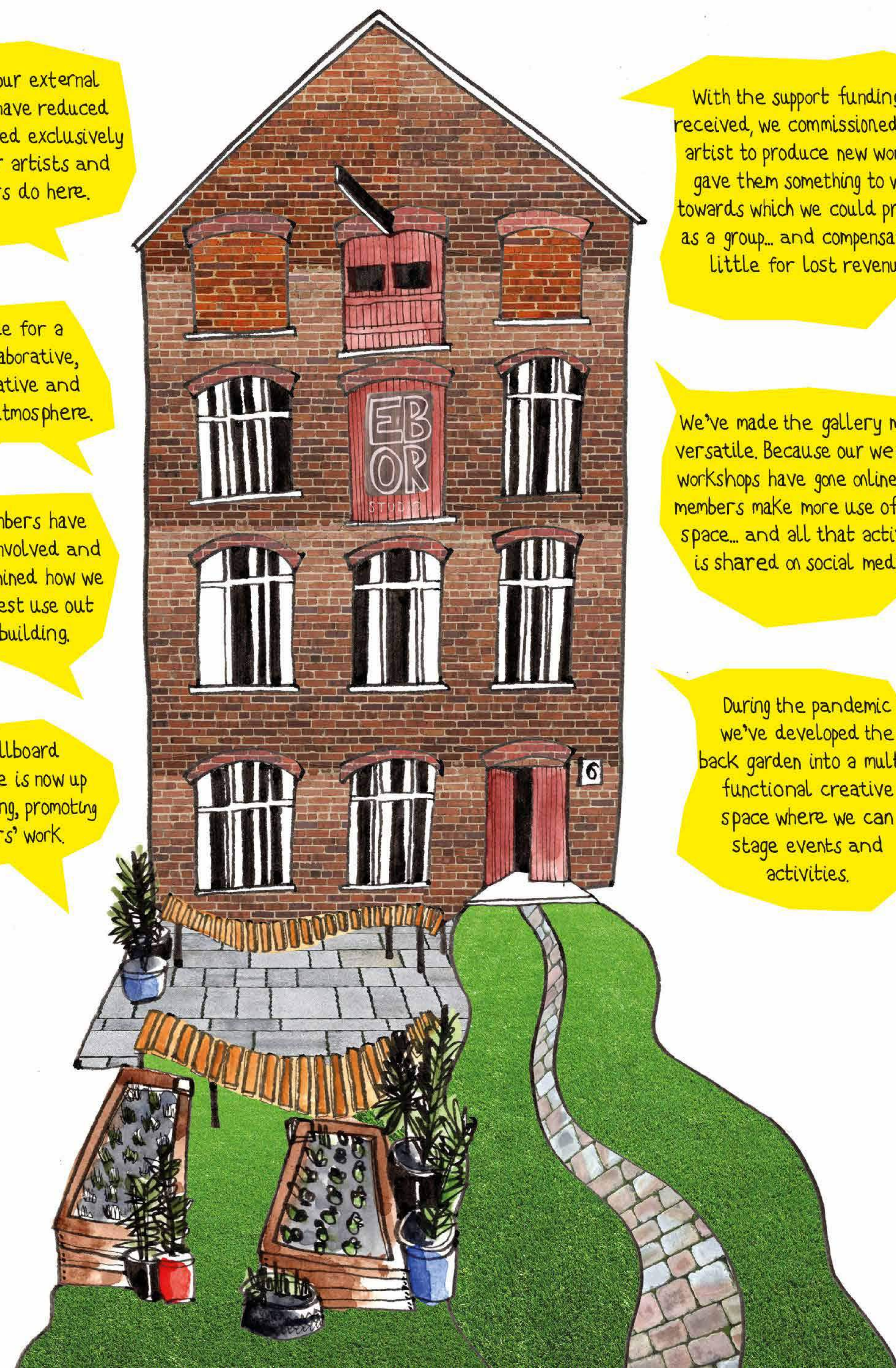
More members have got more involved and we've examined how we can get best use out of our building.

Our billboard programme is now up and running, promoting members' work.

With the support funding we received, we commissioned each artist to produce new work. It gave them something to work towards which we could promote as a group... and compensated a little for lost revenue.

We've made the gallery more versatile. Because our weekly workshops have gone online our members make more use of the space... and all that activity is shared on social media.

During the pandemic we've developed the back garden into a multi-functional creative space where we can stage events and activities.





# A tapestry of creativity.



Parvez Qadir began his creative career as an actor before becoming a teacher and then an outreach worker for theatres. But, he says, his Rochdale childhood inspired a leap into the freelance world to focus on his first love, community-led drama.

"As a kid I remember our neighbours were Ukrainian, Italian, Afro-Caribbean and Polish. We knew each others worlds, each other languages... and naughty words. I loved that sense of community and thought it was the norm.

"There wasn't much creativity back then but I loved the occasional touring show that came to our school. No one in the family was into that but I knew it spoke to me, it became my passion.

"I tell young people that they too can follow a creative path. I've done it. They can too."

Before lockdown Parvez made films with young people about issues that affect the most vulnerable. "These are difficult subjects and I feel challenged – scared even – when I do them but I feel energised when young people see the films and can discuss them in a safe environment."



As a recent freelancer Parvez fell through the gaps in the Government's income support schemes and, for fear of leaving the profession, looked around for emergency funding opportunities.

"Cartwheel Arts were offering grants for new work that reflected our Covid-19 times," recalls Parvez, "and, with that number stuck in my head, I put a call out for 19 local people who would respond creatively to our state of lockdown.

"I wanted to include an eclectic mix of people, all ages, all cultures and all types of creativity. I was blown away by, and really proud of, how much creativity is in our town, on our doorstep."

Parvez curated a website that showcased local people – from professional artists to those with no previous experience – and included art created from toilet rolls, a poem about mental health, lockdown-inspired music and photography, creative writing and even a series of Tik Tok posts from a mum with a Down's Syndrome son. "It was great to see how Jannah (above) used tech to tell her story and put her message across," says Parvez.

Jannah Hayah: "I got involved with 'The 19' to raise awareness of the mental health side of being a carer during the pandemic. Using Tik Tok posts I was able to show how I found light at the end of the tunnel."



Another of the 19, local illustrator, Vic Whitaker, aka Doodlher, below, contributed a socially-distanced re-imaging of Rochdale's Unity statue. She's illustrated these pages too.

"Together 'The 19' was a lovely tapestry of different approaches," says Parvez, "a celebration of Rochdale's talent."

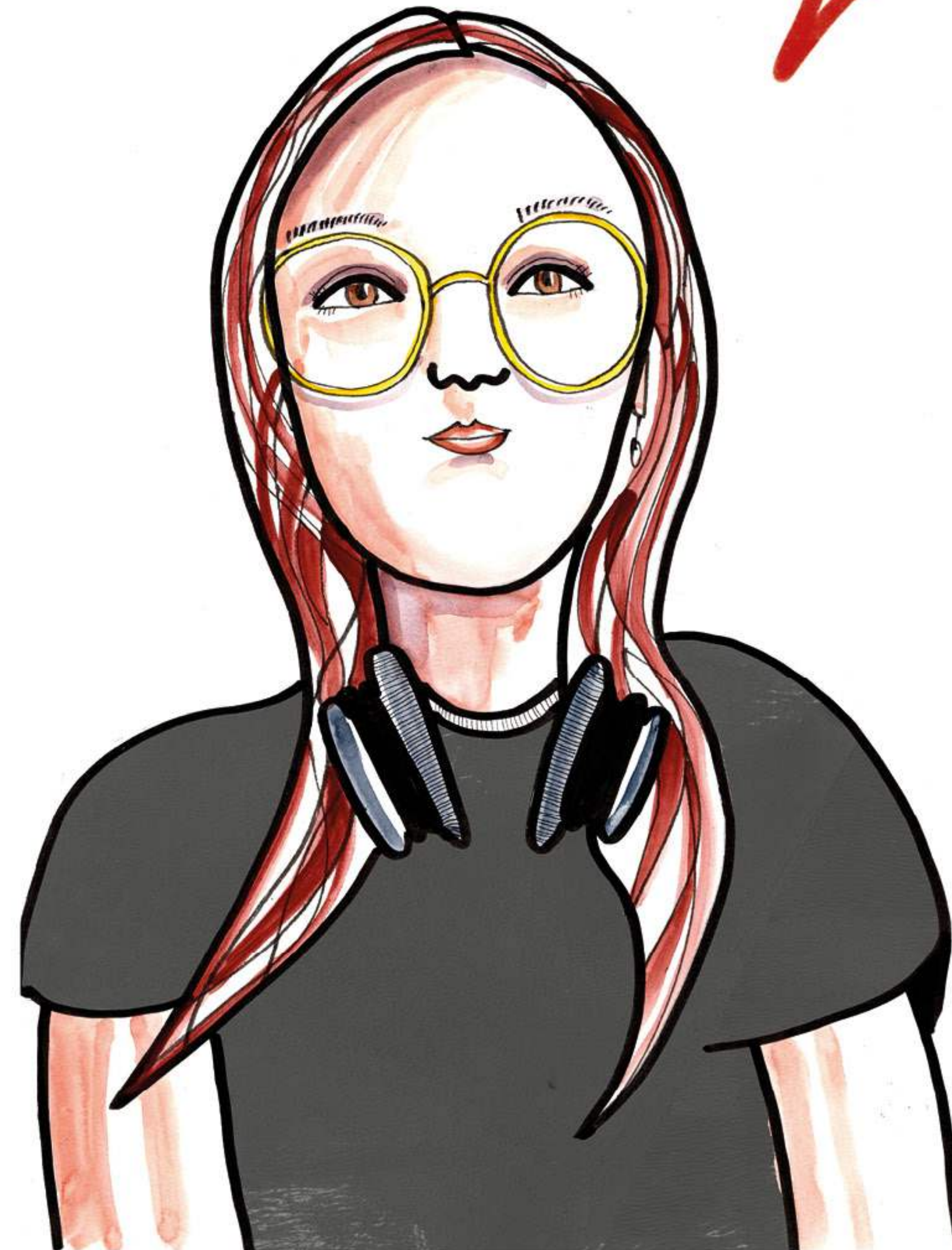




# Small steps to 'normal'.

I come to youth club because I don't want to miss out on seeing my friends. I'm not that bothered about the creative stuff. I spent lockdown walking the dog.

I made acrylic paintings during lockdown. Most times I find it difficult to focus. But painting is so calming. I can sit for a couple of hours and nothing bothers me. It's a way to let my mind run free.



With thanks to Kevan and Sarah at Darhill Youth Club

"It's been a challenging year for young people," says Diane Higgins who heads up Rochdale's Youth Service. "Those who don't particularly like school or large groups have thrived during lockdown, but are finding the return to 'normal' difficult. Others have missed socialising, felt isolated and have really struggled these last twelve months."

After the borough's youth clubs closed last March Diane's team spent more time out and about. "We checked on our young people at home which meant we also got to meet their families which was useful and something we'll carry on doing."

"Once the first lockdown was over we had to coax some young people back to our sessions. We visited one young man several times. He hadn't left his house at all and at first would only peep through the door. Eventually his dad brought him down and stayed with him for the first session."

Diane says the Youth Service has upped its social media presence with daily motivational quotes, self-care tips, recipes and challenges. (Check out the 'taking your hoodie off with one foot' challenge on their feeds). "Creativity was a big part of that too with a photography competition and activities to keep our young people occupied."

"We did much more one-to-one work – and received more referrals – with those who weren't happy sitting in the house. We've worked with young people we wouldn't naturally see in our youth centres which has been a good thing. And we'll keep doing that... encouraging small steps to attending our groups and getting more involved."

# "It made me smile."

Set up over ten years ago, Tracing Steps in Middleton provides dance and theatre sessions for toddlers to centenarians. The partnership – friends Martina Coggins and Joanne Cochrane – normally works in schools, care homes and out in their community for those who can't afford a regular dance school.

"We went from delivering 60 classes a week to nothing," recalls Martina. "We were mostly concerned for our older participants. For many, our sessions would have been the only contact they'd have all week. So we stayed in touch by phone, just to keep that link going."

Martina and Joanne recorded weekly videos to post on social media. "For those who couldn't access the technology, we'd send out DVDs with 15-minute bursts of armchair exercises."

For their younger participants Zoom lessons were quickly set up although not everyone got involved. "For the really young ones we set a series of little challenges and made videos with them: one supporting Key workers and another for VE Day."

For this publication we invited parents to send feedback to Martina about how the Tracing Steps sessions have supported their children. This is what they said:

It was great to hear the laughter coming from my eldest daughter's room as she enjoyed connecting with her dance teachers and friends.

The girls felt part of something... it was the highlight of their week. And it also helped my wellbeing, giving me time to get jobs done...



Heidi says, "It made me smile. I just love dance and drama." Thank you.

Your sessions have helped my son's confidence, friendships and exercise, so thank you.

I was impressed with how quickly the Zoom lessons were set up and no payment was ever asked for, as you realised families were experiencing their own financial difficulties.

The familiarity of the lovely teachers and the other children was invaluable to their wellbeing whilst everything else was on hold.

The Zooms have helped reduce the anxiety about starting back in a class in these strange times... they've both bounced back happily.



# Supporting the need.

With venues closed and participants stuck at home, the creative industries has been one of the sectors particularly hard hit this last year. Freelancers and smaller organisations have been further challenged because, for different reasons, they haven't always been able to benefit from government support.

Community artist Erica Matthews of **Creative Health** delivered art classes at the cancer support centre, Maggie's, as well as free weekly sessions for older people in Rochdale town centre. "I saw how problematic isolation is for older people," she says, "and I wanted to do something about it."

"When lockdown hit, I still had the business bills to pay so I applied for funding to help with the borough-wide creative effort," she says. Erica got to grips with new software and made a Rochdale landmarks colouring book that proved super popular across all ages.



From there she (and her nine-year-old son) made up craft packs for distribution. "His bedroom became a little factory," laughs Erica as she recalls compiling paints, pencils, pastels, coloured paper, 'blingy things', PVA glue and lots more. "I also included postcards to decorate... that went down really well."

Encouraged by enterprise support group, Community Catalysts, Erica developed online art classes as a way of making ends meet. "It was amazing. I had people Zooming in from around the world, so that has helped. I've also delivered online sessions for Rochdale Council and Rochdale Carers Hub and supported HMR Circle (see page 11).

"Financially it's been very challenging... now restrictions have lifted the online classes have levelled off... but I'm hopeful the regular sessions will start back again soon."

Neela Jackson: "Children don't often consciously realise creativity is good for their mental health, they just enjoy the sensory experience, getting messy and having pride in what they've created."



Set up in 2013, **The Star Tree Studio CIC** in Littleborough was host to lots of creative and educational sessions for local families before lockdown struck. "It felt as if the carpet had been pulled from under us," recalls founder Neela Jackson. "We had plans for expanding our community interest company that, like everything else, were put on hold."

Once school closures were announced there was a run on materials and creativity packs from Neela's small shop. "Parents panicked, wondering how they were going to occupy their children. But we fulfilled all those requests and delivered them personally."

"We made a conscious decision, early on, that we weren't going to run online workshops. There was already a lot out there and we are a face-to-face organisation. Our aim is always to encourage parents and kids to do things away from a screen."

Posting daily prompts to inspire making artwork at home, parents responded by sharing their kids' efforts online. "It was amazing how many families took part," recalls Neela, "and that worked for longer than we'd expected."

"As we've been able, we've welcomed families back to our Covid-safe studio. Although not always profitable, it's been great to have customers here, making art together. We're just looking forward to getting back on track."

I've loved these craft packs.

Rochdale freelance artists **Vicky Lomax** and **Leonie Greenhalgh** have worked together, on and off, for over 20 years. And during Covid they got together again to pool their skills.

"Normally I'd be working part-time coordinating in-person creative activities for a string of Methodist churches in Rochdale," Leonie says. "But during the pandemic I found myself standing outside people's front doors, explaining how to use Zoom."

"It's been heart-breaking that so much that our participants looked forward to, that was the highlight of their weeks, has been lost. Some of the dancers, crocheters, crafters and bingo players, we just won't see again. Lockdown has reduced older people's mobility and shattered their confidence. They're afraid to leave the house."

After all of Vicky's pre-Covid community puppetry classes dried up she secured some funding to transfer to online delivery. "With help from Community Catalysts, I made some videos for adults with learning disabilities and ran Zoom workshops. That worked well. We developed stories together, the staff collected materials and we ended up with a live performance."

"I've also tried to respond to this massive need for creative activities," says Vicky, "and have made mosaic packs (see page 10) and picture frame kits. With Leonie, we've made (and delivered) a gardening kit that includes everything you need to decorate the pots and all the soil and seeds besides."

"We included sunflower and cress seeds," explains Leonie, "and have had some wonderful photographs from ladies who were so proud to have grown and tended the cress... and then made egg and cress sandwiches!"





# The isolation pandemic.

“Even before Covid isolation amongst older people was a big issue,” says Tracie Powers from Vintage Worx Community Development Trust. “We were doing sweet-making classes, gardening, art classes, knitting, upcycling, healthy cooking, anything that people had an interest in.”

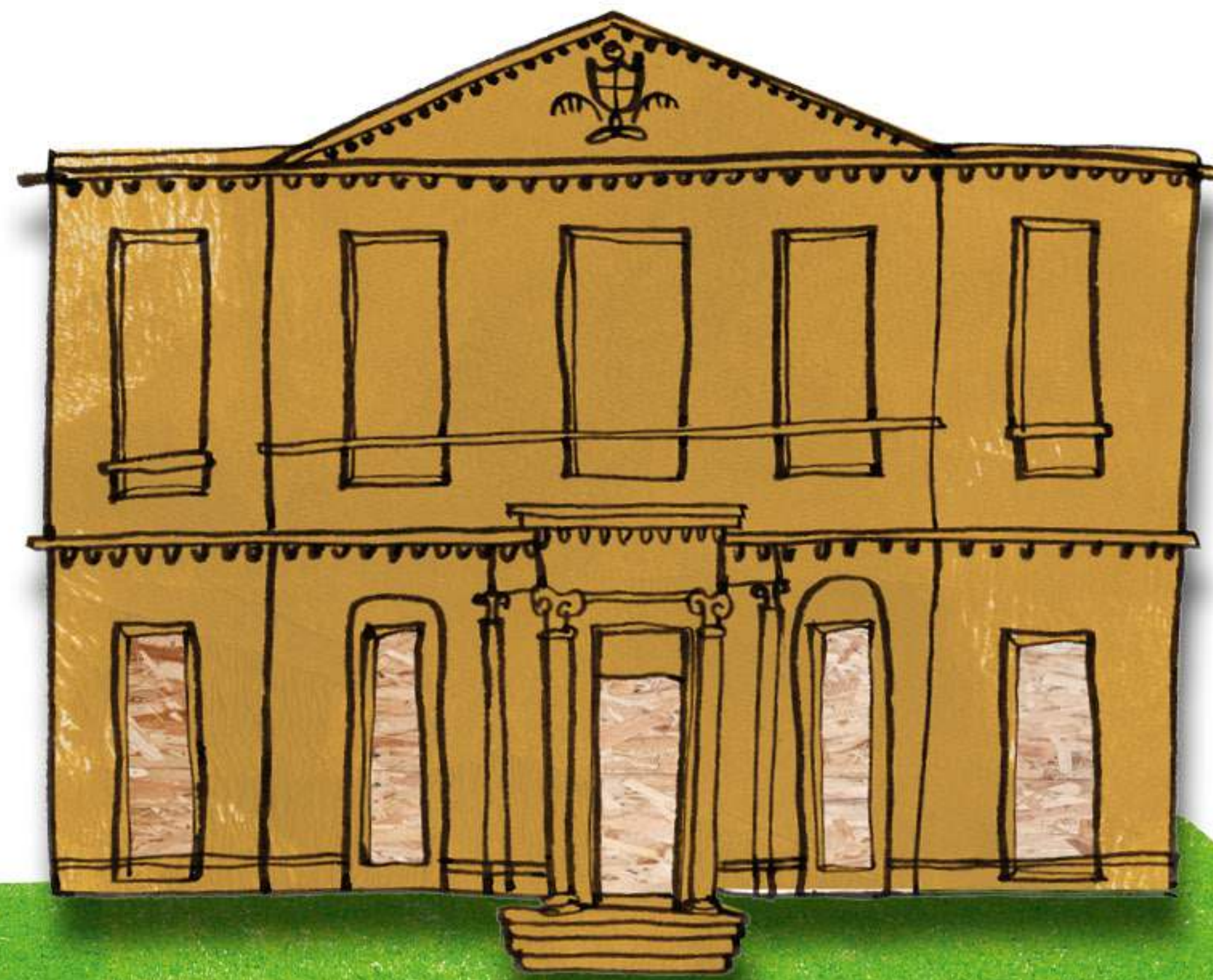
That was all soon replaced with distributing tablets and training people on Zoom. “There were lots of doorstep demonstrations,” recalls Tracie, “and our online sessions – knitting, quizzes, crafts – have been well attended. But, to be fair, for those who’ve lived most of their lives without technology, face-to-face contact is the only way to have a meaningful conversation.”

Throughout lockdown Tracie and the team delivered a series of ‘afternoon tea and cake’ boxes that provided an opportunity to talk to their older residents. “You’d drop off the cakes and be chatting for up to an hour. We didn’t mind but it was heart-breaking to see how many people were lonely.

“We knew it was a problem but the pandemic has highlighted it. I am frightened that the lonely people, when all our lives get back to normal, will be forgotten again. That isolation affects health. It has to be addressed.

“We’d like to do a pilot project from which others can learn, but I don’t know what that might be yet.”

As they work to restore the dilapidated Falinge Park, the Trust runs a social programme to support local people. “We have a reputation for making things happen,” says Tracie. “If people want something, and it’s good for everyone, we’ll find some way of delivering it.”



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This year’s report has been coordinated by Link4Life, the cultural trust that inspires Rochdale’s residents to live more active, creative and healthy lives. It has been written, drawn and compiled by sketcher and writer Len Grant.

Len hasn’t always drawn. For three decades, as a photographer, he has documented much of Manchester and Salford’s regeneration. Along the way he’s turned his lens to different social issues, creating award-winning stories about undocumented migrant families; addiction and social deprivation. Now he uses his pen and paints as his storytelling tools.

“For me, it’s been humbling to hear of the incredible effort made by so many in Rochdale’s creative community to support those in need over this last year. I hope these pages go some way to acknowledge and celebrate that effort.”





**“We didn’t see any reason to stop.  
We just kept going, finding ways for  
the people of Rochdale to be creative.”  
Rick Walker, Cartwheel Arts**

