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# The Journal of DementiaCare

## Culture Box: using multi-sensory arts and creative activities to decrease social isolation and loneliness in people with dementia during COVID-19

*Asker C (2023) Culture Box: using multi-sensory arts and creative activities to decrease social isolation and loneliness in people with dementia during COVID-19. Journal of Dementia Care 31(2) 16-18*

### Author details

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Many care homes will be interested in a new archive of online creative resources developed to address social isolation and loneliness. Chloe Asker, Hannah Zeilig and Victoria Tischler describe the Culture Box archive.

### Key Points

- Culture Box was an 18-month research project working with care homes and people with dementia to address social isolation and

loneliness during the Covid-19 pandemic.

- Now the project has concluded, it leaves behind an archive of material that can support care home activity coordinators and facilitators with their activity provision
- Culture Boxes contain a mixture of creative and arts-based resources for residents and care staff to enjoy – both physical and virtual resources
- The project was based on participatory action research, which involved consulting and co-designing so that the needs of people with dementia were met
- While the physical resources are no longer available, archived online material is available free at [cultureboxstudy.org](http://cultureboxstudy.org) and on the NAPA website.

## Summary

Culture Box was an 18-month research project working with care homes and people with dementia to address social isolation and loneliness during the Covid-19 pandemic.

Funded by the Arts and Humanities Research Council, the project ran for 18 months using a remote and digital Participatory Action Research framework to include the preferences and needs of people with dementia throughout. It resulted in Culture Box's expansive archive of materials to support activity coordinators and facilitators with high quality arts-based and creative interventions.

These interventions used physical and virtual resources during the pandemic, but the virtual resources in particular remain highly relevant now that the pandemic has passed.

All the archived materials can be found on the project website [www.cultureboxstudy.org](http://www.cultureboxstudy.org). Here, we outline the potential that the archive has for a wider audience across the health and social care sector. For the future, we aim to work with activity facilitators to support their work with arts-based and creative activity provision.

It is well known that Covid-19 took a terrible toll, in various ways, on people with dementia, family carers and care workers. Our Culture Box study responded to crisis in care homes in particular; it was an 18-month research project that aimed to both alleviate isolation and create stimulating activities for people with dementia.

Since the research project concluded, the materials from the project have been archived online via the project's website [www.cultureboxstudy.org](http://www.cultureboxstudy.org) and the NAPA website. Now we are working on a follow-on project arising from the original research in collaboration with the AKO Storytelling Institute at the University of the Arts London.

The Culture Box archive is central to our work with the institute. We believe that it is a highly valuable resource with a huge potential for increasing the engagement of people with dementia in creative practice and the arts. Although the archive was initially created for people with dementia, it could be relevant to numerous user groups across the social care and arts and health sectors. Here, we offer a summary of the research project to show how the archive was generated, then give details on how to access it and how to use the resource.

## Culture Box study

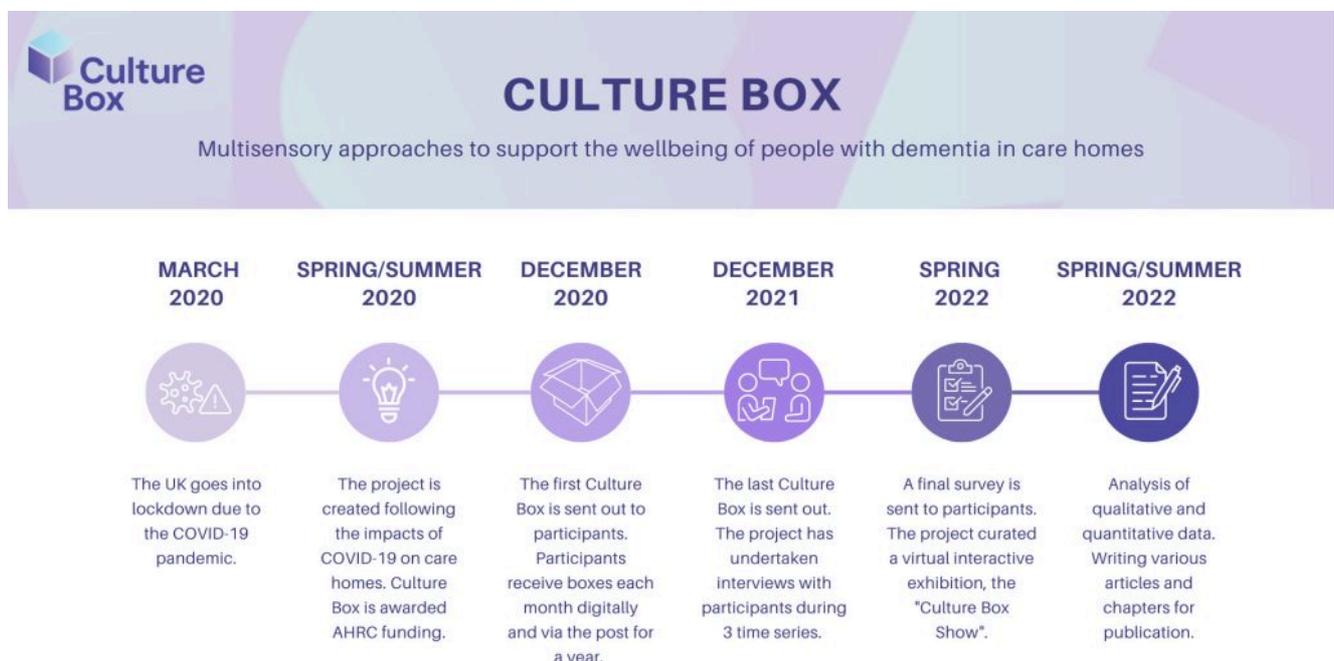


Figure 1 project timeline

Working with residents with dementia and care staff, Culture Box curated an archive of arts-based and creative materials to support the work of activity

coordinators in care homes across the UK. Over 18 months during 2020 and 2021, the project sent out monthly boxes to participating care homes.

Materials inside the boxes contained a mixture of online and physical resources, including colouring sheets, recorded music performances, soundscapes, nature videos and craft activities. These activities were all created by professional visual artists and musicians and in consultation with people with dementia.

Culture Box used a participatory research approach, involving care staff and people with dementia from the initial planning stage giving their views on the production and curation of the materials in the boxes. The research component of the project consisted of three sets of interviews at different stages throughout the project.

These interviews were informal and conversational in nature, seeking to involve the interviewee and interviewer as active participants in the process of meaning-making. Alongside the interviews, we carried out surveys to assess whether there had been a change in wellbeing from the beginning to the end of the project.

Our study found that the boxes greatly improved wellbeing and quality of life for people with dementia. Many interviewees said that the project had been essential during the pandemic, telling us that the creative activities were enormously beneficial by facilitating social interaction, relationships, and community building in care homes and between residents and care staff.

Care staff reflected on the value of working closely in one-to-one relationships with residents. One mentioned that "(for me) as a wellbeing lead this has been an enjoyable project to take part in and has been invaluable working consistently 1/1 with the same resident whilst giving me ideas to use in future activities."

The boxes brought fun, laughter, and excitement into the care homes. Each month boxes were eagerly awaited; one care worker told us that it was "a brilliant project, our residents loved it and are still benefitting from the activities within the box. It was great to look forward to each box arriving, something our residents would get very excited about."

For care staff, having regular deliveries of materials and resources greatly supported the work of activity coordinators, taking away some of the pressure and burden felt by an overstretched workforce. This was echoed by a member of staff who reflected that (during the pandemic) the project was "a lifeline to our residents and to me as an activity coordinator."

Although our project has concluded, we want to carry on sharing the benefits of arts-based activities. The project ended with a wealth of materials from 13 culture boxes, 12 from the project and the thirteenth from the Culture Box Show, a virtual interactive exhibition we organised with four new artist commissions ([www.cultureboxstudy.org/cbshow](http://www.cultureboxstudy.org/cbshow)).



### Culture Box archive

The project team are now focusing on impact and dissemination of the virtual archive from the project (the physical culture boxes are no longer available). Part of this work, alongside creative dissemination, is to develop the project archive into a useful tool for activity facilitators in different institutions, organisations, and sectors. Although the project was originally for people with dementia, the resources are applicable in a diverse array of user groups, including people with intellectual disabilities or mental health conditions.

So our aim with the Culture Box archive is to share the benefits of creative activity, reach wider audiences and work with activity coordinators and facilitators to assist the delivery of arts-based and creative activities. As already mentioned, it can be found both on the Culture Box and NAPA websites. The NAPA website contains an archive of activities from each box, with links to the activities contained in PDF files, while the Culture Box archive hosts the original boxes sent out to care homes and contains a catalogue.

### Using the archive

Webinars can be viewed on both websites showing how to use the archive. Culture Boxes offer a mix of multi-sensory activities, including colouring, painting, drawing and craft; audio and visual clips such as YouTube videos, nature sounds, soundscapes, worksheets and prompts for discussion. Each was designed to fill an activity session lasting between one and two hours while also providing activities for a range of interests, preferences and capacities.

Using the catalogue allows you to mix and match different activities from different boxes or use activities independently of each other. For example, someone could run a colouring session by downloading all the colouring pages from all the boxes so participants can choose which tree to colour, and similarly for other colouring activities.

## Doing the activities

Different activities will require different resources, which might include a printer, a device with a speaker and screen, colouring pens, paints, and craft materials. Activities can be facilitated on a one-to-one basis or can be carried out in groups. It might be useful to think of the kind of space that you want to create when selecting the activities.

We advise that consideration be given to the following factors:

- How can the activity be responsive to people who are feeling quiet, reflective, or more energetic?
- Bringing nature sounds into a room can support people who require a more passive activity, allowing them to sit back and enjoy the sounds.
- More responsive and active activities such as painting, craft, or conversation-based games will require participants who are more energetic and willing to get actively involved.
- Adapting and changing in response to the situation and the feelings, emotions, and atmospheres in the room.

Suggestions from care staff themselves include:

- Creating excitement and incentives based on the activities. One care home set up a colouring-in competition to motivate residents, and another hung the work in a wall display.
- Having multiple options and variations. Depending on people's preferences, interests, capacities and capabilities, activities might need to be altered or changed.

Overall, we encourage everyone involved in creative facilitation to browse the archive and download activities that are suitable to their clients or user groups. Feedback on the archive is also welcome as we continue to think about and create arts-based activities that are based on Culture Box resources.

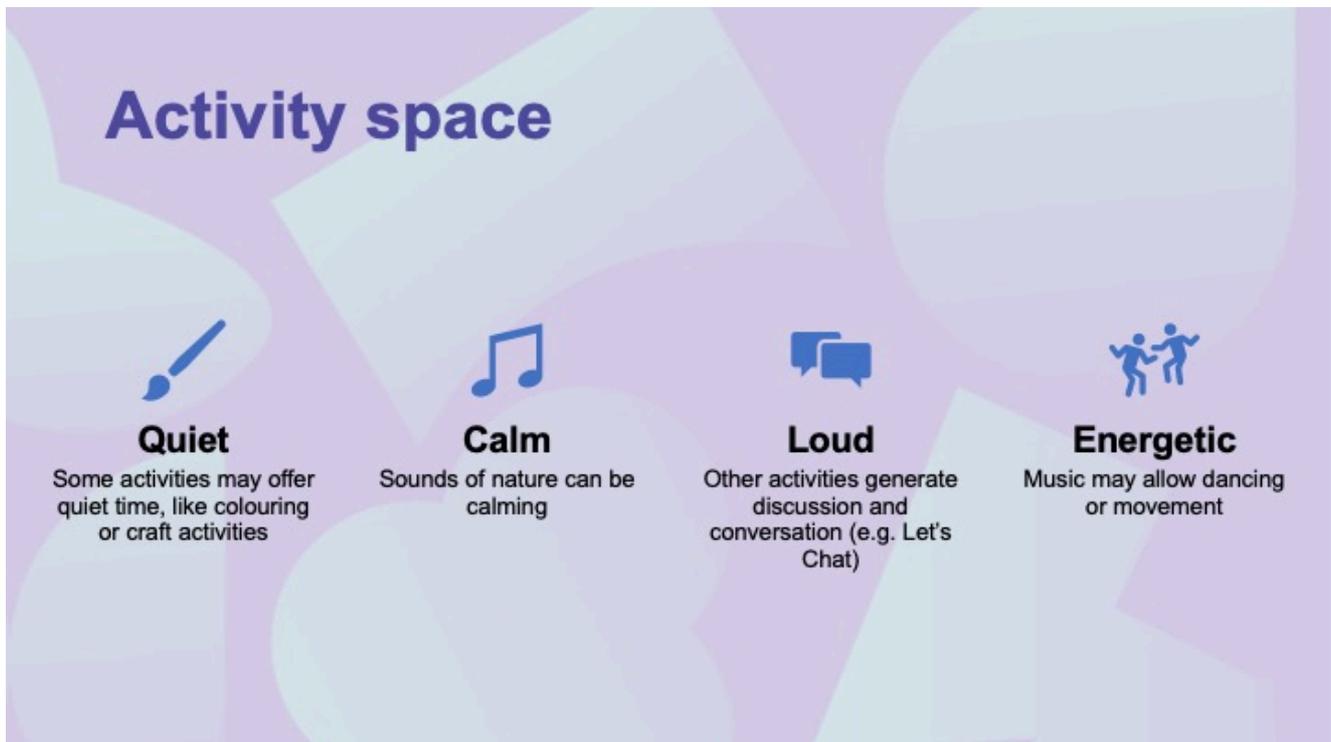


Figure 3 using creative spaces

## Conclusion

Culture Box was our response to a pandemic that produced social isolation and a decline in mental health among people with dementia. It was a research-based and artist-led intervention that set out to improve mental wellbeing and ensure that people had access to creative and arts-based activities.

The project was incredibly successful, providing a creative lifeline for activity coordinators and residents during a difficult period. Creative and arts-based activities were a catalyst for more social interaction among residents and care staff, as the activities brought people together to socialise and share stories.

To extend the impact of the work, the project now hosts a free online archive of the material from the original project. The Culture Box archive aims to work with activity facilitators to support the delivery of creative and arts-based activities for communities across the social care, arts, and health sectors.

## Acknowledgements

We would like to thank all those who were involved with the Culture Box study, including the care homes, their staff and residents, the artists, and NAPA for their support with the project, along with arts organisation Culture& who played a significant role in assisting the commission and production of the boxes.

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Current Issue

March/April 2023



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