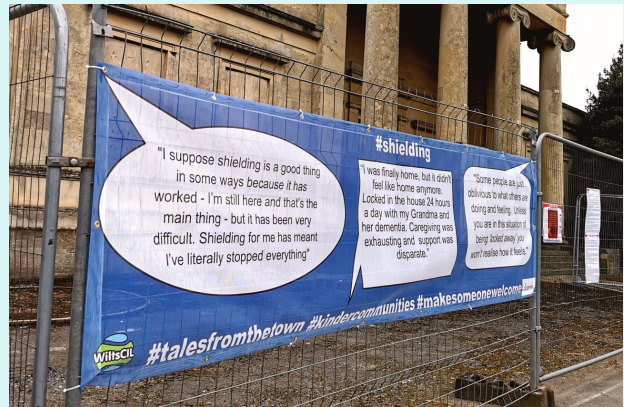


# Tales from the Town

## Celebrating Strength in the Community



# Introduction

This project began towards the end of the first lockdown. Its intentions were to explore the community response to Covid 19 through the experiences of individuals. We hoped that by sharing these stories publicly and celebrating the kind and inclusive community spirit that had emerged, it would help it to continue beyond lockdown. As with everything else, the project has taken different twists and turns to adapt to the ongoing restrictions whilst retaining its original ethos. To sum up, a quote from the project facilitator:

“How strange to be in almost the exact same stage of lockdown one year on, as we were when I first embarked on this project. On the precipice of emerging, and yet still uncertain. However, in that time, I’ve heard such tales of resilience, care and self-reflection, that I feel certain our community will keep moving forward together to support each other both on large and small scale. Now that we’ve been unable to smile at each other for so long behind our masks and our own four walls, we all realise the difference it can make to our day when someone takes a moment to say hello.”

**Full stories can be found here:**

**[www.tinyurl.com/talesfromtown](http://www.tinyurl.com/talesfromtown)**

# Project Development

## Organisations approached for sharing the opportunity.

Rowdeford School  
 Noahs Ark Nursery  
 Gazette And Herald  
 BBCRadio Wilts  
 Devizes School  
 Lavington School  
 Downland School  
 Madanu  
 Briggs House  
 Needham House  
 Love Devizes (Covid 19 support Group)  
 Canal & River Trust  
 Driving Miss Daisy  
 Richmond Fellowship  
 Victim Support  
 Devizes PHAB  
 Arts Together  
 Indie Devizes  
 Devizes Writing Group  
 Devizes Library

## Organisations approached for collaboration

Devizes Town Council  
 The Shambles  
 DOCA (local events org)  
 The Wharf Theatre  
 Bassline Circus  
 Indie Devizes  
 The Healthy Life  
 Wiltshire Museum  
 Love Devizes (Devizes Covid 19 Support Group)  
 Youth Action Wiltshire  
 Community First  
 Little Lost Robot  
 SWCTN (South West Creative Technology Network)  
 S. Jacksties (professional story teller)

# NAMING THE PROJECT

We tried to capture the main concepts of the project in the title. Finding a balance between catchiness and clarity of explanation led to some interesting ideas! The steering group of Story Guides all had clear choices that helped us settle on the final title....

**Tales From the Town; Celebrating Strength in the Community**

*Unheard Tales From the Town: Our Future Together Redefined*

**STORY TELLING**

*A Better Normal*

*The Unheard Chronicles of Lockdown*

**LOCAL COMMUNITY**

*Aspiring to Conspire: A Reciprocal Recovery*

**MUTUAL SUPPORT**

*Untold Tales*

*Learning from Lockdown for a Reciprocal Recovery*

*Redefining What is Essential: A Community Response*

**PEOPLE WHOSE VOICES ARE NOT OFTEN HEARD**

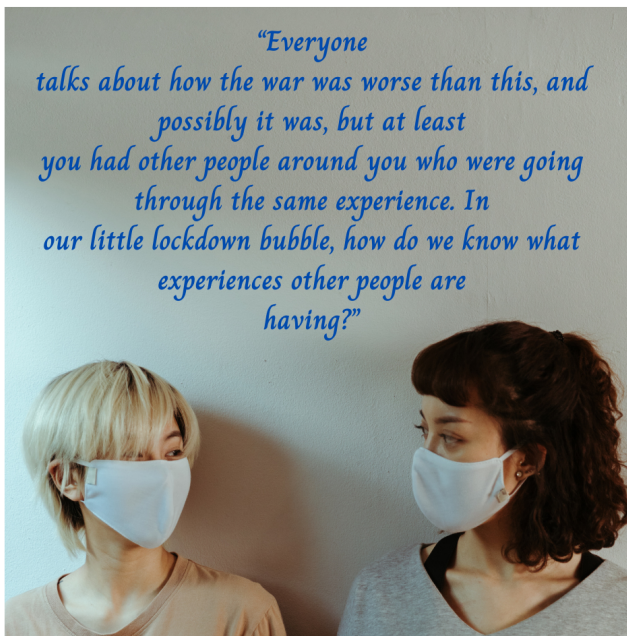
*2020 Vision: Our Future Together*

**POSITIVE LEARNING FOR OUR FUTURE**

*A Pathway to Progress Post Pandemic*

# The Story of the Story Telling Project

At the start of the project, there were two clear tasks necessary to get it going. It needed a name, and in order to fully embrace the concept of co-production this needed to be decided by members of our community who wished to have their voices heard as part of this project. Through approaching people already working with colleagues in Wilts CIL we got together a steering group of what we called Story Guides. This initial team of 4 advised on, and eventually approved, the name "Tales From the Town; Celebrating Strength In the Community" (another consideration at the time was "Untold Tales from the Town: Looking Forward to a Better Normal"). It was felt this conveyed the idea of personal story sharing as well as the positive focus on the way we people supported each other.



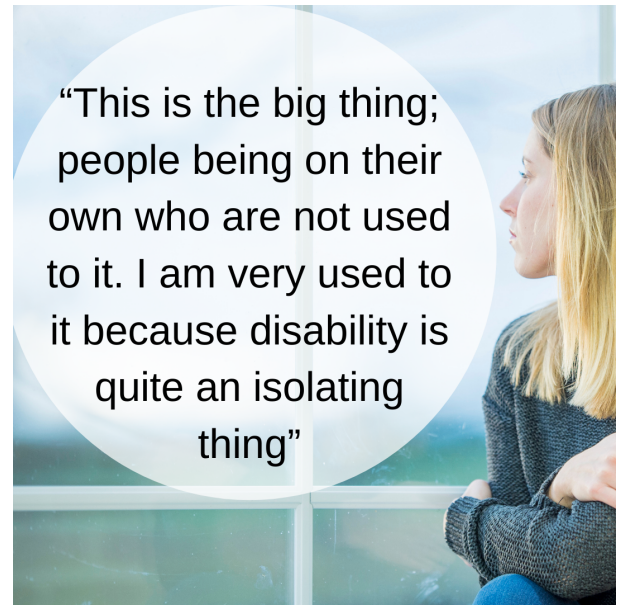
Before gathering stories, even from the story guides, as facilitator of the project I had a go at writing my own experiences so that I knew what we would be asking of people. I quickly realised that it was actually more difficult than one might imagine. The feeling of self-indulgence and wondering why anyone else would want to hear one's personal experiences became the theme of initial response, only overcome when the comfort found in shared experience was explained along with the hope for a stronger future of our community. In fact most people's first reaction when asked if they would like to contribute was "but who would want to hear my experiences?".

However, for those that did participate found that not only can it be therapeutic to talk about what we've been going through with someone else, but to hear or read someone else's story can really make you feel less alone if it resonates or gain a different perspective if not. Whilst we have some fantastic tales of resilience and hope for the future, many of them also - or even only - contain feelings of loneliness, fear or other negative experiences, and these are just as valid and important to share. It was felt that perhaps we can find strength in facing this collective grief that we are going through together.



Having discussed these reactions, the Story Guides agreed to share their own stories. Each of them opted to have me record their story then transcribe it into written words for them. The written version was then sent back to them with various edits until they were happy their voice was represented as they wished. They each also gave feedback on approach, prompts and all other aspects of story-gathering, and went on to advise on aspects such as flyers and other publications. The other key aspect we discussed amongst the Story Guide team was the best way to share these stories as an event.

The initial ideas for the event were based around not only sharing the stories but providing opportunities within the community, particularly for people who were struggling with their prospects and/or would not often get offered the chance to learn vocational skills. We settled on The Shambles (a historical indoor market building in Devizes) as a venue for a walk-through multimedia event utilizing print outs, artwork, video, audio, projection, and theatrical story telling for groups of 6 at a time. It would also incorporate the concept of a "people's living room" as a comfortable place for people to share their stories, and hopefully endure as a community space beyond the event. The town council and venue manager gave approval and we had established relations with 2 organisations regarding the training.



"This is the big thing; people being on their own who are not used to it. I am very used to it because disability is quite an isolating thing"

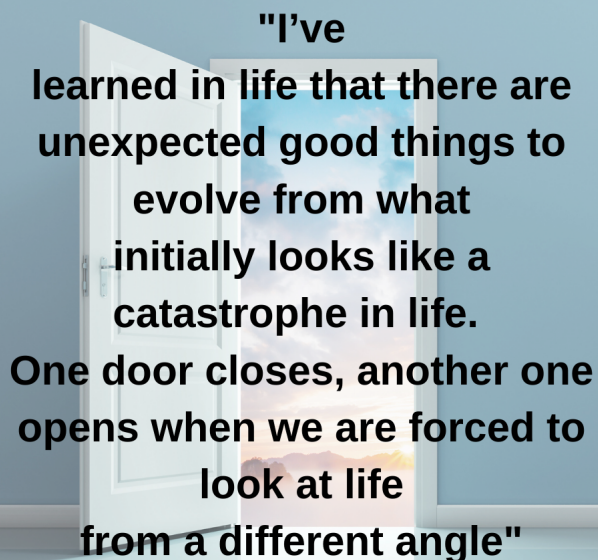
"Where I live the people are very helpful and we do things together. We have coffee mornings, exercise sessions and dinner together sometimes.

It's nice getting out and about and having soup up The Shambles."



PF Events came for a couple of site visits to come up with ideas of what would be possible in terms of lighting and exterior video mapping and provided a training proposal for people of a school leaver age to have vocational training which would be showcased in the event. The training would be suitable for, and offered to, people with learning disabilities, autism and those who are NEET, and result in the necessary experience and qualifications to gain employment in the industry.

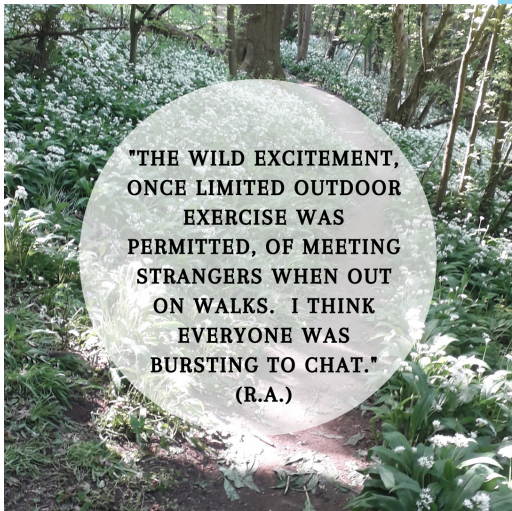
The other organisation who we spoke to about involvement was Bassline Circus, who were due to be involved in the Devizes Carnival. They signed up to our Make Someone Welcome Campaign in which their pledge was to provide inclusive theatrical workshops in Wiltshire, but we also discussed specific theatrical involvement in the story telling event. This was to guide the groups through the experience, and again would have been created to be accessible and inviting for people of all abilities and offered to young people from SEND settings and would have resulted in an Arts Award for participants.



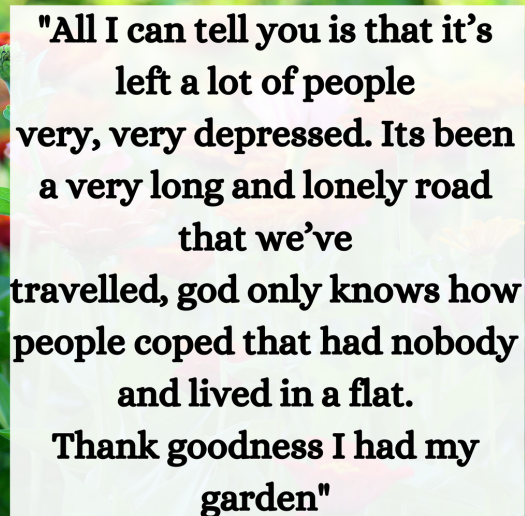
**"I've  
learned in life that there are  
unexpected good things to  
evolve from what  
initially looks like a  
catastrophe in life.  
One door closes, another one  
opens when we are forced to  
look at life  
from a different angle"**

As a result of our exploratory discussions with SWCTN we later were offered a small pot of funding from them as a pilot community outreach program. Due to tight time frames, lockdowns, and the small budget this was used to provide an online opportunity for gamers so did not tie directly into this project in its outcome but was still a well-received opportunity.

Both training opportunities were to be paid for by match funding for which we had several ideas. We were unsuccessful in the initial exploratory bid application to Learning Disabilities England, and decided not to pursue a bid from South West Creative Technology Network (SWCTN) as the deadline for applying was too soon after the start of this project. We were on the cusp of applying for a Project Grant from the Arts Council, and an application to the Local Area Board (amongst others) when it became apparent the restrictions were going to continue and scupper our plans for both the event and the training.

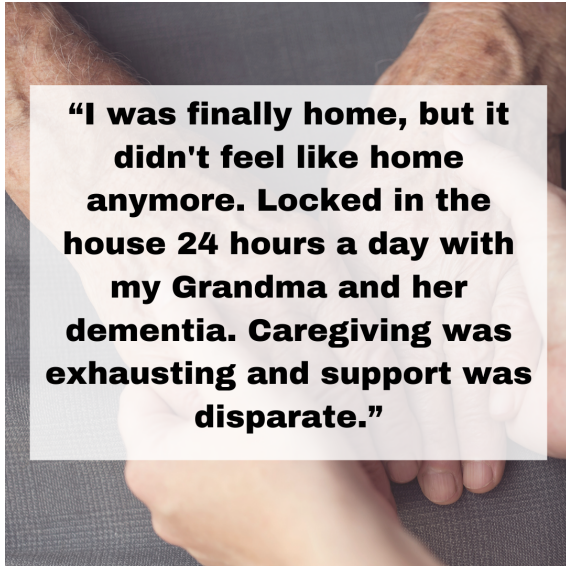


**"THE WILD EXCITEMENT,  
ONCE LIMITED OUTDOOR  
EXERCISE WAS  
PERMITTED, OF MEETING  
STRANGERS WHEN OUT  
ON WALKS. I THINK  
EVERYONE WAS  
BURSTING TO CHAT."  
(R.A.)**



**"All I can tell you is that it's  
left a lot of people  
very, very depressed. Its been  
a very long and lonely road  
that we've  
travelled, god only knows how  
people coped that had nobody  
and lived in a flat.  
Thank goodness I had my  
garden"**

Another exciting collaboration was planned with a professional story teller, called Sharon Jacksties, with whom we planned to put on some workshops to help people learn the art of story telling and help build confidence with it. Then, using either their own story or the collective story of the town, they would have the opportunity to deliver this at the event. This element was particularly inspired by one story guide for whom the idea of personally sharing stories to a group in a relaxed setting was the ideal form of sharing their experiences.



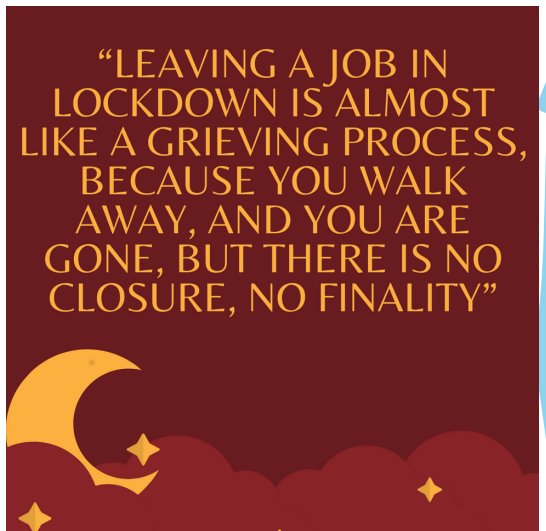
**“I was finally home, but it didn't feel like home anymore. Locked in the house 24 hours a day with my Grandma and her dementia. Caregiving was exhausting and support was disparate.”**

Whilst exploring these avenues for the event and artwork, we continued to get the word out about the project and invite people to share their experiences. This was done across social media, though word of mouth with colleagues, an article in the local paper, and a weekly stall in The Shambles on market day to speak to people who might not use the internet. We made it clear that any form of “story telling” was welcome; video, oral recording, written account, creative writing or even just a snapshot of what had been most important to the person.

When it came to sharing the stories, we wanted to make them accessible to all and felt that Facebook or other social media was not appropriate, particularly during the pandemic when some people's views became particularly divided. As part of my introduction to Wilts CIL and this project facilitation role, I had taken part in some online workshops on co-production being run by People's Voice Media and following some discussion about our mutual goals and similar initiatives they offered us a page on their server of nationwide personal accounts called Community Reporter Net. I was also introduced to the team at Wiltshire Museum by my colleagues. The museum was very happy to hear about this project as they were hoping to officially record the experiences of the people during this time. We agreed to collaborate so that all stories gathered as part of this project would go into accession. This means they would go into the archives of the museum as a history of the people during these extraordinary times. They also provided guidance for how to officially record “oral histories” and the permission forms needed for all types of story submissions.

We invested in a “Zoom HN1” recorder (a piece of hardware for recording, not to be confused with the zoom online video chat software!) and a memory card in order to record people's stories in a suitably professional manner.

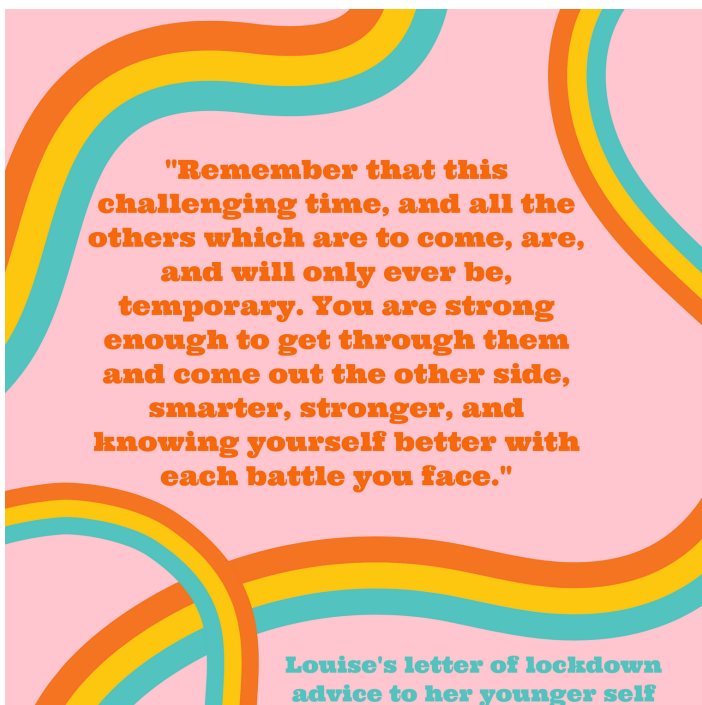
Stories started to come in. We had submissions from a variety of people from different backgrounds and age groups, and many people signed up to give their oral history whilst on the stall at The Shambles. Just before Christmas we had the opportunity to use a room at the museum as a covid-secure space that was also quiet enough to take an official recording – a combination of requirements that took a while to find. One story was recorded successfully there so we booked up several sessions for early in the new year for the people who had shown interest in sharing their experiences orally. Unfortunately, at that point we entered yet another lockdown and all were cancelled pending safer times.



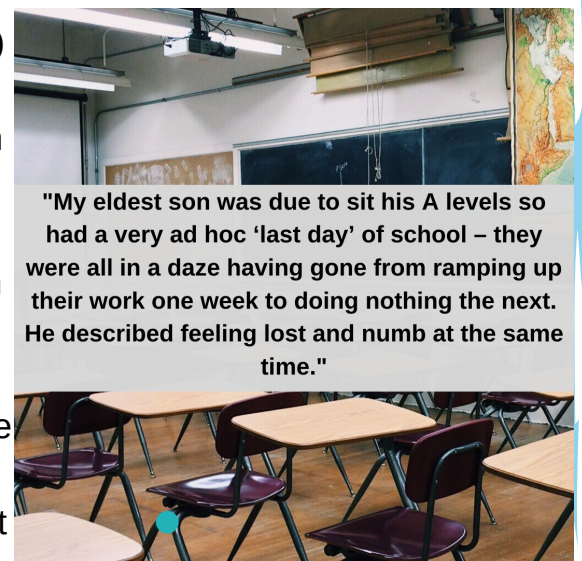
**“LEAVING A JOB IN LOCKDOWN IS ALMOST LIKE A GRIEVING PROCESS, BECAUSE YOU WALK AWAY, AND YOU ARE GONE, BUT THERE IS NO CLOSURE, NO FINALITY”**

From the Christmas period onwards, as it became clear that we were heading into stricter and longer lockdown again, we discussed how best to take the project forward. The planned recording sessions couldn't go ahead, the event and related training was looking increasingly unlikely, and many people found it difficult to think of positives that may come out of this ongoing – or even to think about such an uncertain future and what it may hold. Flyers were updated, with approval and suggestion from the story guides, and we decided to give it a bigger online push in order to provide comfort of solidarity to people who felt isolated and as a space to share emotions. We also approached many organisations who support people who have been shielding, offering different ways for them to share their stories if they didn't have an online presence. For those that did, with the help of Wiltshire Museum we produced a guide to creating and submitting a video story in case people wanted to record themselves, their other household members or friends and family over a video chat online.

We worked with an artistic organisation called Little Lost Robot to set up some online workshops with an aim to explore how people would like to have their voices heard out in the world. This was research idea was specifically developed to tell the story of discrimination towards disabilities. The artist Ruby Sant held workshops that were inclusive and accessible to all, really listening to what the participants had to say and developing some fantastic ideas on the means in which to say it publicly. The work is still ongoing, and we look forward to seeing the ideas and any art installations that may come from it.

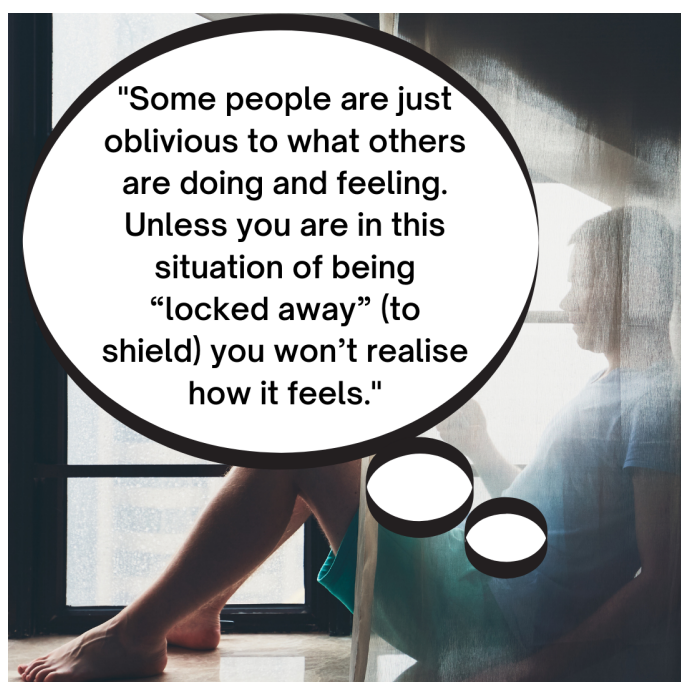
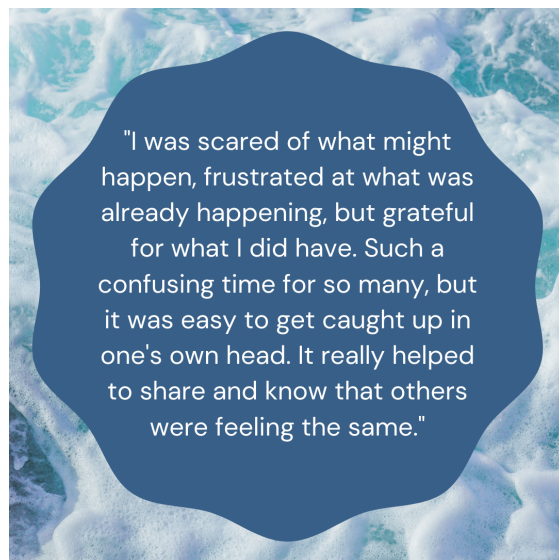


We had always wanted to do something as part of the project to tie in with National Story Telling Week at the start of February, so a video was made (Clip Video A) to generate interest as part of a "launch" of the website. The next date we wanted to mark was 23rd March, which was not only the anniversary of the start of the first lockdown, but also coincided with World Storytelling Day on 20th March. The combination of the two made it seem the ideal date for our large event to help people share experiences and use them to help collective recovery of our community. Although we could no longer bring people together, we still wanted to provide the chance to reflect on what we'd been through and think about how we might move forward together. The idea we came up with was based on some of the initial discussions at the beginning of the project: a story trail around town.



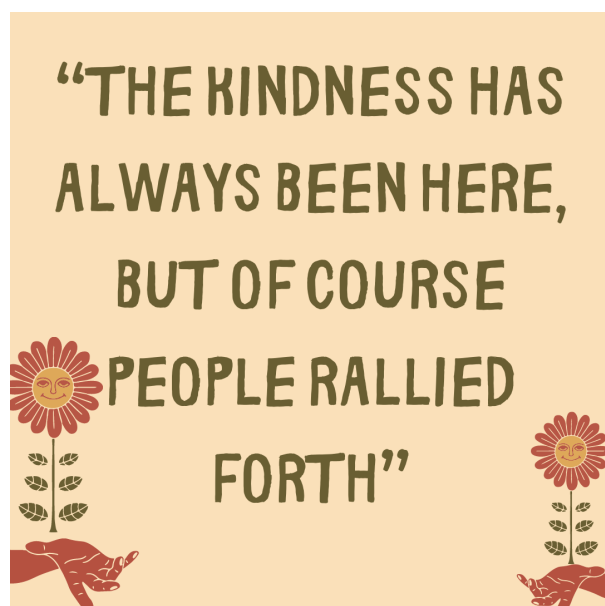


In Devizes we are fortunate enough to have a lot of independent shops and businesses, and as we came out of the first lockdown, they came together to form Indie Devizes so they could support each other as we emerged. This is a fantastic example of the community spirit on which the whole project is focused so they were ideal partners to collaborate with on the Devizes Story Trail. After a couple of online meetings, it was agreed that they would offer all retailers the opportunity to display a poster showing a quote from a collected story, and on the poster there would be 2 QR codes, one of which would take the reader to that specific story and the main page of stories.



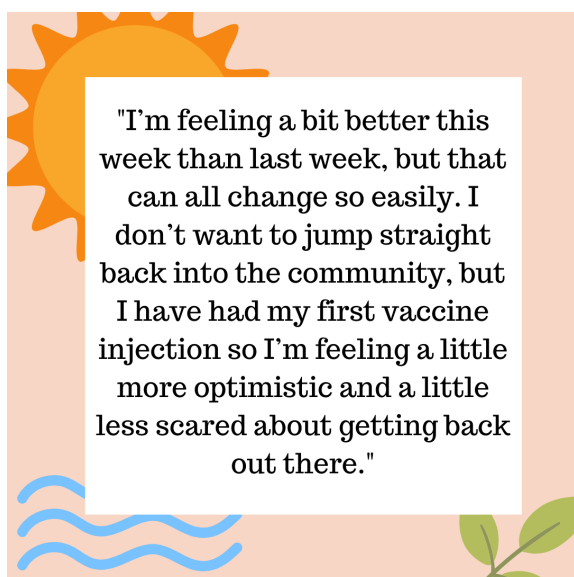
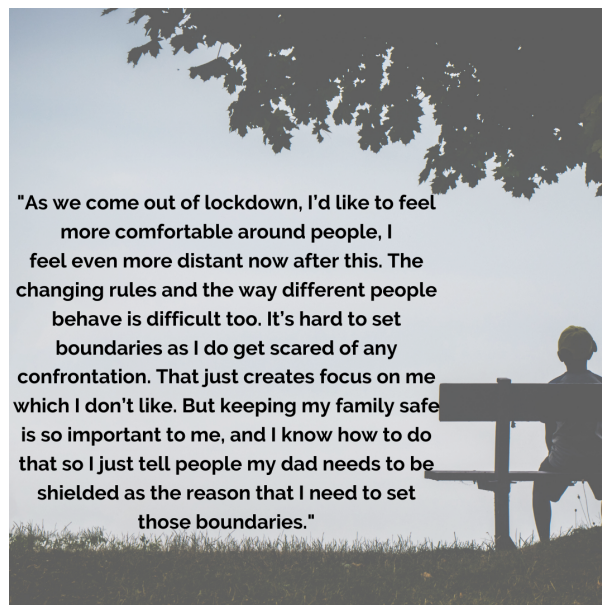
Alongside this we would offer the chance to either contribute a full story to the project, or just a snapshot of feelings on what had happened or hopes for the future. These were to be written into the image of a brick, the idea being that these bricks would go on to build the future of our community. We also successfully sought permission to use the large frontage of fencing outside a key historical building in town, called the Assize Court. For this we produced 4 large banners displaying quotes from different stories.

The posters and banners went up around town and along the canal path, along with a full window display in one shop which included a rolling video of subtitled audio/video clips from stories. This window at "The Healthy Life" even had some home-made bunting on show that had been contributed to the project alongside a story, which had the letters "Welcome to Lockdown Camp". There was a lot of interest, even as we put them up conversations were had with passers by who loved the idea of being able to reflect on what we had collectively been through and find either solidarity or a new perspective on the common issue. People began to tell us their own stories of lockdown, albeit informally and without record.



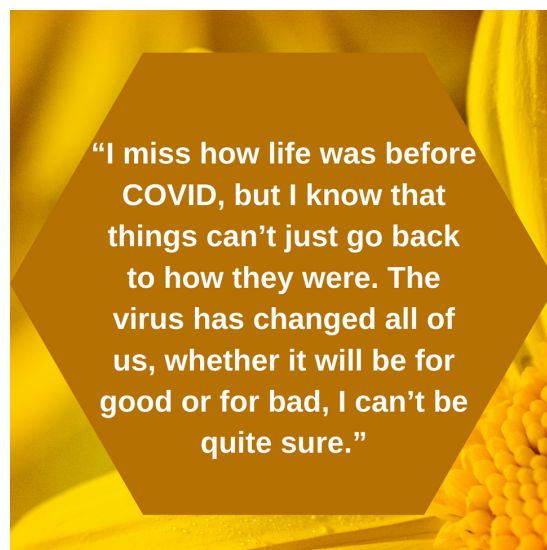
Unfortunately, the “brick” idea did not take off, but given the verbal, social media and anecdotal feedback, the Devizes Story Trail felt like a great success. We had a lovely article in the local paper and were invited to speak on BBC Wiltshire Radio about it, and we even extended the dates due to the level of interest. The number of views on the website really rocketed during this time too.

As we neared the end of the project, we have been working with an artist called Sam Church. He is creating a storyboard that not only represents all the voices, experiences, stories and hopes that we gathered, but encourages us to keep acknowledging our feelings as we move forward from this.



Beyond initiating the artwork, since the event, the project has focused on ensuring all ideas initiated were revisited and either followed through, handed over or rounded off. The User Engagement team are developing ideas using giant bubbles that were bought to help reintegrate following the first lockdown, to help people emerge now. The Community Connector team are following up on ideas such as the People's Living Room.

The posters and banners from the Story Trail will be on display once again at the Devizes Street Festival once that is allowed to proceed, alongside the artwork currently in production. The idea of providing vocational training in an event setting is one that holds its hope in the future for another project... And of course, all the stories will be in the archives of Wiltshire Museum forevermore as a representation of the people of this town during these most difficult of times, where they really showed a community spirit that helped them pull through, together.



# Legacies

Giant Bubble Skills  
for helping people  
rejoin their  
community

Personal Story  
telling  
techniques  
learnt

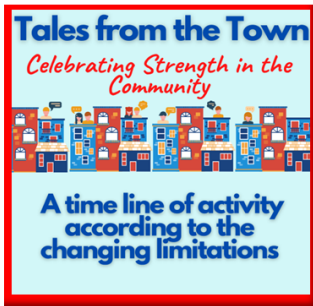
Community  
living room

Story Trail banners  
to be used at future  
community events

Immersive art piece to be  
explored to tell stories of  
disability

Accession into  
museum archive of  
stories and  
experiences

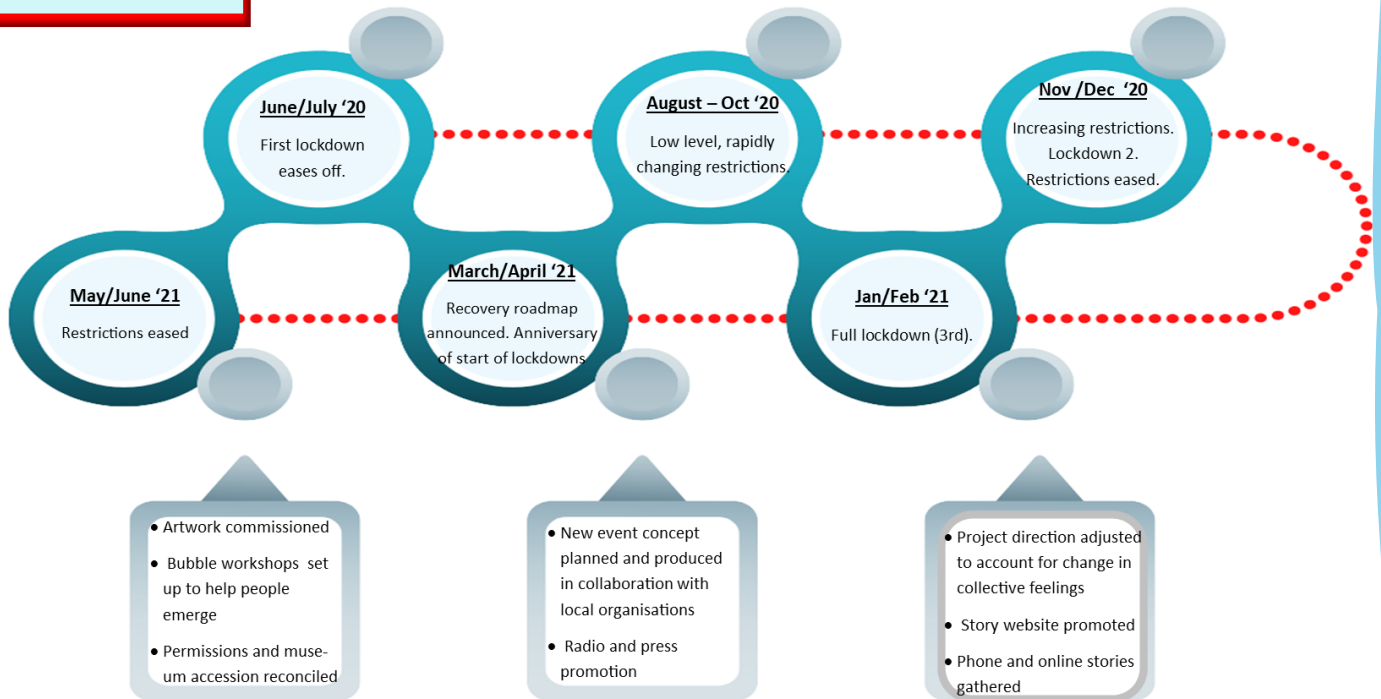
# Project Timeline & Weblinks



- Project funding received
- Community Partnership Facilitator engaged
- Steering group of "Story Guides" formed

- Project title & methods agreed with group
- Public engagement via social media, in person at the market & local press
- Stories gathered

- Event planning and collaborations
- Stories uploaded onto website
- Test of Oral History recordings in museum

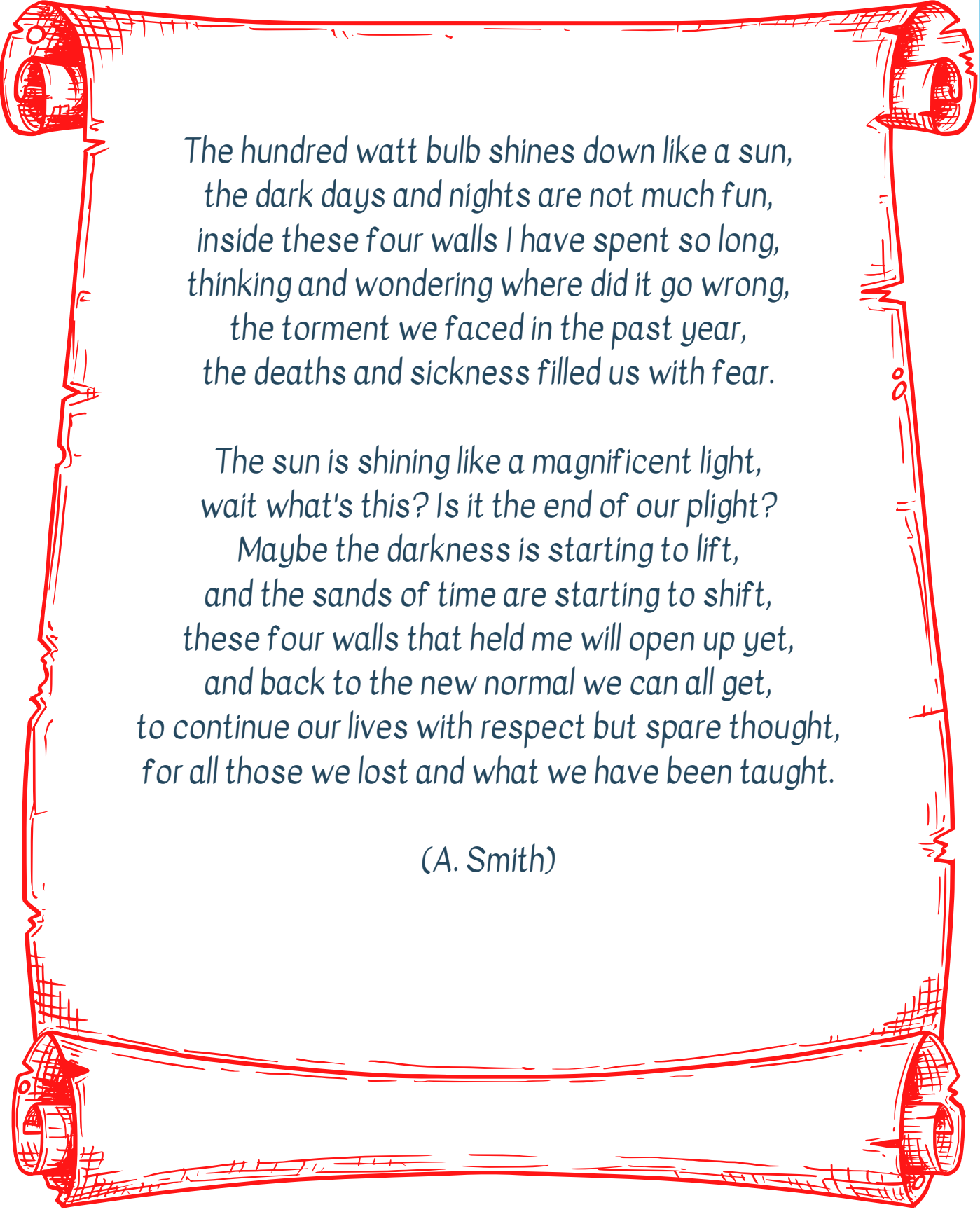


**[Article in local paper is here:](https://www.gazetteandherald.co.uk/news/19190231.project-captures-memories/)**

**<https://www.gazetteandherald.co.uk/news/19190231.project-captures-memories/>**

**[Photo album from Devizes Story Trail event is here:](https://www.facebook.com/media/set/?vanity=WiltshireCIL&set=a.5660482403976931)**


**<https://www.facebook.com/media/set/?vanity=WiltshireCIL&set=a.5660482403976931>  
(Wilts CIL Facebook page under "photo albums")**



The hundred watt bulb shines down like a sun,  
the dark days and nights are not much fun,  
inside these four walls I have spent so long,  
thinking and wondering where did it go wrong,  
the torment we faced in the past year,  
the deaths and sickness filled us with fear.

The sun is shining like a magnificent light,  
wait what's this? Is it the end of our plight?  
Maybe the darkness is starting to lift,  
and the sands of time are starting to shift,  
these four walls that held me will open up yet,  
and back to the new normal we can all get,  
to continue our lives with respect but spare thought,  
for all those we lost and what we have been taught.

(A. Smith)



A virus has come from China they say,  
You must wash your hands, keep two meters away!  
Life as we knew it had instantly vanished.  
With new rules and guidelines to be established.  
Queuing for shops, schools closing down,  
and sadly businesses shutting all over the town.  
"Stay at home!", "One walk a day!"  
(Though some didn't have a garden to play)

To keep our friends and family safe is now our one goal.  
"Stay away from loved ones!" is what we were told.  
Unsure of when again we will be allowed to meet,  
I'm now grateful for phones, computers and I.T.

Though through all of the mayhem there is something that's  
different...

All around people are starting to listen,  
as if something before had blocked our vision.  
We see the local beauty within our restrictions,  
now eager to protect it in all it's brilliance.  
The NHS that many took for granted,  
was now our protector, no doubt about it.  
Key workers got the credit they so rightly deserved,  
a new found gratitude had now emerged.  
Communities had gathered to help each soul  
(albeit some did hoard all the toilet roll).  
Neighbours reached out and even made friendships,  
helping each other was truly commended.

Although the future is unclear, we know life is precious, we  
are lucky to be here.

So many deaths, how cruel this virus can be.  
We must all do our best to protect our friends and family.

D.Toogood

'Do remember, dear reader, that there are a lot of lonely people out there. People who, like me, may only have one or two conversations a week, some less than that.

Yes, social distancing is important, but you would be surprised what a sunny hello from 2 meters away, or over the garden wall can do. A five minute chat can lift someone's day, brighten outlook, you might make a friend, you may even save a life.

We might all be in masks right now, but we are still smiling people behind them.'



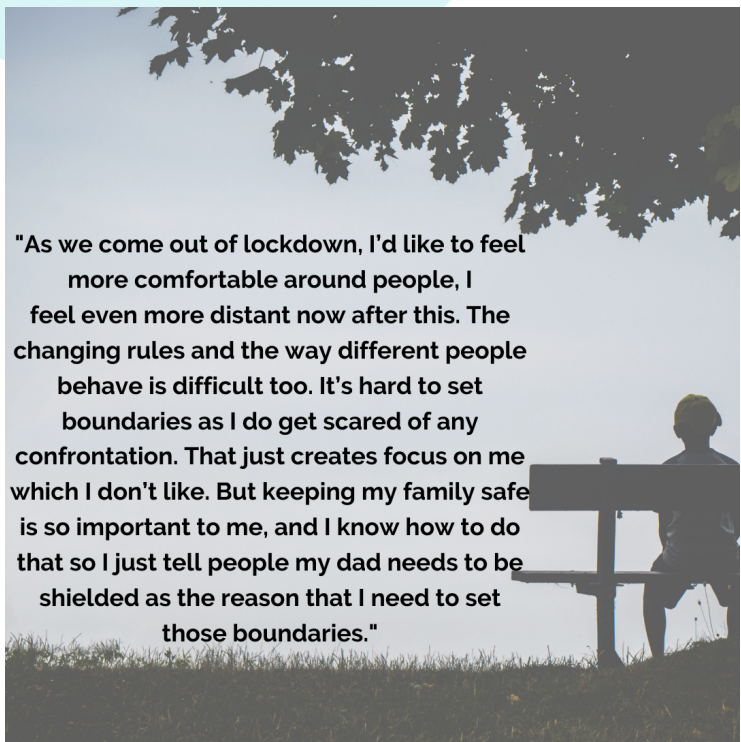
**N.Gadd**



*"Listening to the news about the vaccine and a financial commentator says, we could all be back to normal with normal consumer levels of spending by next year, and a part of me felt feelings of regret even though I obviously want this pandemic to be over.*

*I had to question this regret as it felt odd; I think its this; the pandemic and its effects are bad, terrible and devastating. BUT our reactions as humans has been beyond beautiful at times, our kindness and consideration to others in our community, from getting someone's shopping in to footballers campaigning against poverty.*

*In other ways the pandemic has also shown us the inequalities that we are happy to turn away from when life is busy, and pretend aren't there; its shown that we need to reset our society so that it works for all and not just for few. So the regret comes from a feeling of missed opportunity if we just blindly go back to life before"*



"As we come out of lockdown, I'd like to feel more comfortable around people, I feel even more distant now after this. The changing rules and the way different people behave is difficult too. It's hard to set boundaries as I do get scared of any confrontation. That just creates focus on me which I don't like. But keeping my family safe is so important to me, and I know how to do that so I just tell people my dad needs to be shielded as the reason that I need to set those boundaries."



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June 2020 - June 2021

**With particular thanks to all the story tellers of Devizes and surrounding area**