

Beyond Words: Writing for wellbeing Evaluation of the project

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Introduction

To mark World Mental Health Day in 2020, the Bupa Foundation, in partnership with Cheltenham Festivals, the National Literacy Trust and Mind, launched Beyond Words – a national creative writing project inviting all children, young people and schools to put their feelings about a year like no other into words. Children and young people were invited to write a piece on the theme of ‘My 2020’ and submit their writing with a chance to get published in a digital anthology in 2021 to celebrate outstanding contributions from children and schools. The project worked with award-winning poets and authors to produce tutorials and resources supporting children, young people and schools with writing and mental wellbeing. The Bupa Foundation donated £3 for each submission to the partner charities to support mental wellbeing projects for young people.

Evaluation of the project

As part of the project, the National Literacy Trust was commissioned by Bupa to explore teachers’ and young people’s perceptions of the project overall and the impact the project might have on young people. To this end, surveys were designed for teachers and young people to complete after submitting their work as part of the project. To incentivise teachers to share their thoughts on the project, each completed survey entered a prize draw for Amazon vouchers. Teachers were also sent reminders to complete the survey as part of the project.

The evaluation also aimed to interview teachers about their experience of the project with their students in early 2021. However, none of the participating teachers volunteered to take part in an interview, which is likely to be due to new national lockdown and school closures in January 2021.

Sample characteristics

Overall, a total of 376 young people submitted their writing as part of the project and 40 young people completed a survey about their experience of the project. 84.2% of them identified as female and 7.9% as male. 5.3% preferred to describe their gender another way and 2.6% preferred not to disclose their gender. Table 1 below presents the year groups for the young people who took part. It shows that most young people who took part were secondary school-aged, which is not surprising

as the survey was available for those young people who submitted their own work and we would expect teachers to submit the work of younger children.

Table 1: Year groups of students who took part

Year group	Percentage of students
Year 5	2.6%
Year 6	2.6%
Year 7	13.2%
Year 8	13.2%
Year 9	21.1%
Year 10	10.5%
Year 11	10.5%
Year 12	23.7%
Year 13	2.6%

In addition, 11 teachers completed the survey. Five of them teach Key Stage 2 pupils, four of them Key Stage 3 and two of them Key Stage 5. On average, teachers worked with 37 students in the project.

Young people's experience of Beyond Words

Our survey for young people explored their thoughts on the project overall and what they particularly valued as part of participating as well as the impact they felt the project had on them. The survey also included open-ended questions to gather views of young people in their own voices. This section will discuss these in detail, drawing mostly on young people's comments in the survey to provide young people's voice.

What young people thought about Beyond Words

Young people's responses show that they had an overall positive experience of the project and that they valued being part of it. Many used positive words such as "fun", "inspirational" and "enjoy" among others to describe their experience, as the following comments show:

"I found it really fascinating and fun and very inspirational to write my own story about mental health"

"I found it such a brilliant opportunity to express my opinions on issues that have been raised in 2020"

"I think it was a remarkable experience, and I think it gave me a boost of confidence in my writing. I feel very proud of myself. Now I know that it's always worth trying"

Many of the young people highlighted contributing towards the charities as an aspect of the project they found particularly valuable:

“I thought that this was a fabulous project and I was thrilled to contribute to such a worthwhile cause”

“I thought it was a great idea to raise money and awareness for mental health”

“It seemed like a fantastic opportunity for such a good cause. Mental health is such an important topic and knowing that an entry of mine would give £3 to the charity made me want to do the competition even more”

“I felt happy that I helped others out by the donation”

“It was good that everything you wrote went towards helping mental health in teens”

In line with the purpose and aims of the project, mental health emerged as an important theme for some young people as one participant highlighted:

“Participating in the Beyond Words' project was important to me. I really appreciated that the Bupa Foundation made a donation for each submission. Undoubtedly, young people are suffering mental health issues during the pandemic. I have friends who are not doing so well. It is going to be really important that young people are helped so these don't become problems that they suffer into adulthood. Focusing on writing has helped me during the pandemic. I love poetry and my creative writing teacher, [teacher's name] has encouraged us to write”

Perhaps unsurprisingly, a number of young people highlighted being able to express their feelings and thoughts as a key benefit of taking part in Beyond Words. As the following comments highlight, many young people enjoyed the opportunity to express themselves in written format:

“I thought it was a great opportunity for me and others to express their emotions, thoughts and creativity through this project and it helped me personally to find the courage to write what I wanted to express”

“It was therapeutic, a chance for me to put my feelings on paper”

“I enjoyed drawing and writing my feelings and sharing it with you all”

“It let me express my feelings to people and maybe even people who went through the same thing”

“Sharing thoughts is good and helps us recognise we are not alone”

“I felt surprised at how beautiful it is to put feelings into words and how amazing one can feel after finishing a piece of writing. I've realized that maybe it will help that when I'm feeling down, I can put it into poetry. When my piece was put into the gallery, I've suddenly experienced a change in confidence”

Reflecting the theme of the project, “My 2020”, many students’ responses also show that the project was successful in its aim of supporting young people to express themselves and their feelings specifically in relation to the pandemic and the extraordinary situation that has an impact on everyone’s lives:

“I thought that participating in the Beyond Words project was very special because I got to write about how I personally felt during lockdown. This meant I could share my feelings with others so that they knew they were not alone in their worries about Covid 19”

“It was eye opening and it gave me a chance to explore my imagination and recall of 2020s events”

“I really enjoyed writing a creative piece based on Coronavirus, a very relevant issue”

“I think it is a great project to pause and take stock of all that has happened this year”

“I really enjoyed participating in it and it give me an opportunity to reflect on the year I had”

It was also evident from young people’s survey responses that they valued the opportunity to be creative and have the freedom to choose what to write about. This indicates that a key to such projects is to allow young people to express their feelings and thoughts about a topic they choose for themselves and allow a high degree of autonomy in writing.

“I enjoyed having the freedom to write what I wanted”

“I think it’s a really cool project that allows you to be really creative due to its broad brief”

“I enjoyed the freedom of what we could do”

“I thoroughly enjoyed it because I love writing poems, entering competitions and getting involved with charities. I don’t usually like English but I do enjoy poems because I’m a creative person who loves art and I think writing poems is similar in a way”

What young people wrote about

The word cloud below presents a summary of what young people wrote about as part of the project. It highlights the range of topics they chose, including mental health, lockdown, the pandemic and Black Lives Matter movement. A full description of their topics can be found in Appendix 2.

Figure 1: Selected topics young people wrote about

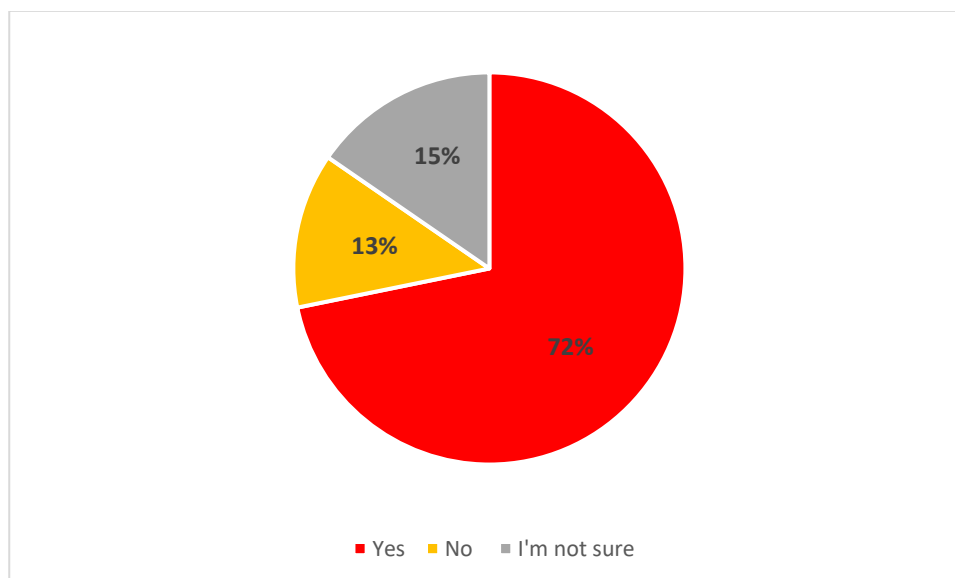


The impact of Beyond Words on young people

As Figure 2 below shows, over 7 in 10 (72%) young people felt the project made them feel different while nearly 1 in 6 (15%) were not sure. All the comments on how the project made young people feel different relate to positive feelings, as this comment highlights:

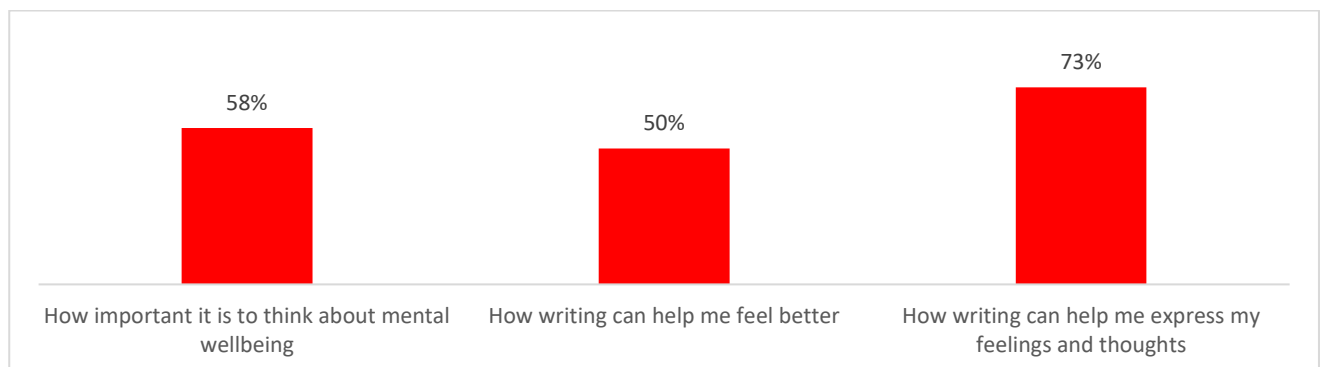
“Writing made me feel very positive and optimistic. I was geeked with hope and renewed energy for our new beginning after lockdown”

Figure 2: Percentage of students who thought writing for the Beyond Words project made them feel different



We also asked young people what the project made them think. As Figure 3 below shows, nearly 3 in 4 (73%) felt it made them think that writing can help them express their feelings and thoughts. Half of the young people (50%) thought that Beyond Words made them think about how writing can make them feel better. These findings reflect the opportunity to express themselves as a key aspect of the project valued by the young people. In addition, nearly 3 in 5 (58%) young people said the project made them think how important it is to think about mental wellbeing, suggesting that the project has been successful in achieving its aim of supporting young people's mental wellbeing by making them think of its importance.

Figure 3: What writing as part of Beyond Words made student think



As discussed in the previous section, young people particularly valued the opportunity to be able to express their feelings and thoughts. In a similar vein, many young people felt the project made them learn how to express their thoughts in written format and think and reflect on their own experiences of 2020.

“It made me reflect on the year and realise what I am grateful for”

“I learned how to express my feelings and reflect it on paper”

“Writing did help me because instead of saying your thoughts, writing is another powerful way of expressing them”

“I find the way out and put my sadness and frustration into the words/paragraphs in the project”

“It made me think about how I really felt during this year”

“It made me see all the different perspectives of others and how this year has impacted everyone however it has impacted us all so differently”

In addition to learning to express their thoughts, many of the young people's comments show that Beyond Words created a connection to others and made young people feel their writing has an audience:

“It made me feel a part of something important, and all I had to do is submit a poem I was proud of”

“It made me feel good, as there was a message throughout to tell others that they’re never alone even during a pandemic”

“I feel like finally my work has been read and appreciated”

“I want others to know how I feel and it made me happy to be creative in my drawings and writing my feelings”

“It made me feel like I could make a difference to others that may have gone through the same thing as me”

“It is also great that others may have the chance to read my work and understand how I feel. It's as if others also care”

“I thought it would be nice to enter because you say what you feel like and maybe, some people feel the same. I found it fun coming up with a poem!”

Indeed, the sharing of their writing with a real audience also made some young people feel proud, either about their own work or being able to take a stance:

“It made me more confident in my poem writing skills and it also made me feel proud that I could help people through writing poems and to speak up and stand up against racism”

“It made me feel really happy for how it made people feel, my relatives and my parents’ work colleagues loved it and said “it brought a tear to my eye” and that made me happy that I can do that. Also the praise and recognition I got made me feel proud”

Some young people’s comments in the survey also show that the project had an impact on young people’s writing, specifically on their writing enjoyment and confidence to write. Interestingly, this related particularly to writing poetry:

“It helped me with finding a new passion: poetry, which I plan on doing whenever I have spare time”

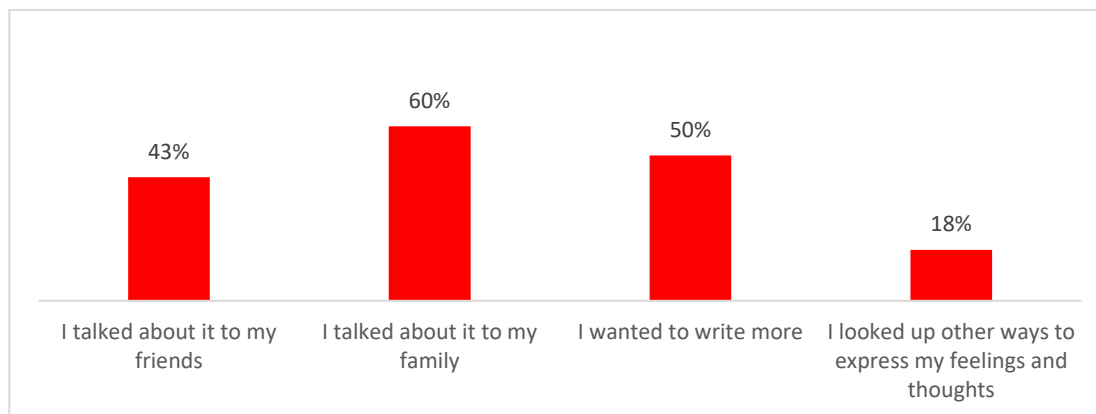
“It relit my love for poetry and I will definitely continue writing more”

“It made me feel happy for writing a poem about what I feel and it is my first ever poem that was not from the internet”

The survey also showed that half (50%) of the young people wanted to write more as a result of taking part in Beyond Words and 3 in 5 (60%) talked about the project to their family. 2 in 5 (43%) also talked about the project to their friends (see Figure 4). Less than 1 in 5 (18%) looked up other

ways to express their feelings and thoughts, potentially indicating the project might have offered a unique outlet for their views and they no longer felt they needed to find ways to express themselves immediately afterwards.

Figure 4: What did young people do after taking part in Beyond Words



However, some of the young people who had looked up other ways to express themselves provided further thoughts on how they did this after the project, showing that some were indeed inspired to engage in more creative activities and discussing what they feel with others:

“I sang songs and recorded music”

“I showed my form tutor - A few weeks ago, I talked to her about my feelings and how recently my mental wellbeing has not been at its best. In class we've always been discussing the aspect of 'connect'. The poem/story was a lot about that”

“I painted and I sang a lot more and my parents understood me a bit more”

Teachers’ perceptions of Beyond Words

In addition to young people’s views of the project, we asked teachers what changes they noticed in their students following participation in the project. We also asked teachers to share their thoughts on the project overall, as well as focusing particularly on the resources provided. This section will detail these findings from 11 teachers who completed our survey.

Perception of impact on students

All 11 teachers felt that participating in Beyond Words was useful for their students. Their comments reflect the young people’s responses discussed above and show that teachers perceived the project useful as it allowed students to reflect on their experiences during the pandemic, express their feelings and write creatively:

“It made them reflect on the year and helped them to realise that it wasn’t all bad - this was beneficial in itself”

“It got them to reflect on what has been a time of great upheaval and difficulty. I believe this has helped them to process some of those emotions”

“Any chance for them to write creatively and outside of the usual curriculum constraints is fabulous”

“It gave them a platform to express their feelings during lockdown”

“It was a stimulus to talk about anxieties as well as being creatively freeing”

Table 2 below shows what changes teachers noticed in their students following the project. We can see that the project was perceived particularly useful for students’ confidence to express their feelings in written format, as 7 out of 11 teachers had noticed changes in this area. This reflects teachers’ comments on the impact they had noticed highlighted above but also the benefit of the project perceived by young people themselves and the impact they felt the project had.

Table 2: Changes teachers noticed in their students

Area of change in students	Number of teachers who noticed change
Awareness of writing supporting positive mental wellbeing	2
Students' confidence to express their feelings in written format	7
Awareness of the importance of positive mental wellbeing	4

One of the teachers also highlighted ability to express thoughts and emotions as a particular impact on a specific student who took part in the programme when asked if they had any students who benefited from the project:

“A girl in Year 4 who was able to express her thoughts and emotions and look at the positive aspects of lockdown, rather than the negative”

In addition to confidence to express their feelings in written format, four teachers noticed changes in students’ awareness of the importance of positive mental wellbeing and two noticed changes in their awareness of writing supporting positive mental wellbeing. This suggests that the project might be particularly useful for implicitly supporting positive mental wellbeing, in the form of ability and confidence to express one’s thoughts and feelings, but any future development could focus more on the explicit awareness on positive mental wellbeing.

Teachers’ experience of the project and thoughts on the resources

Overall, teachers also had a positive experience of the project. This was highlighted by their comments in the survey:

“It was brilliant and it would be great if there were more competitions like that for students to get involved in”

“Was a brilliant idea and easy to apply in school”

“It was a good way of stimulating discussion and encouraging time out for reflection. It was also useful in getting the children to discuss and show work to parents”

“A fabulous competition; very helpful and relevant”

“Thank you for creating such an engaging and fun competition. The students really loved it!”

Similarly, teachers also valued the resources provided. All teachers rated the resources either excellent (6/11) or good (5/11).

Teachers’ positive responses are also highlighted in one of their comments:

“The resources anticipated a range of responses to the initial stimulus, thereby inspiring and eliciting a range of responses”

We also asked teachers which resources they found useful. 5 out of 11 found the writing warm-ups useful (see Table 3). Similarly, the tutorial videos and activity sheets were perceived particularly useful by teachers. However, none of the teachers found the wellbeing booklist particularly useful, indicating that teachers’ focus has been particularly on the resources directly linked to writing.

Table 3: What resources teachers found particularly useful

The writing warm-ups	5
Wellbeing booklist	0
Tutorial videos	4
Activity sheets	4

The resources were also designed to be easily integrated into the recovery curriculum many schools implemented in autumn 2020 as a response to the school closures in spring 2020. We therefore asked teachers how easy they found integrating them into their recovery curricula. Most teachers found it either very easy (5/10) or fairly easy (4/10). Only one teacher indicated the resources could not be easily integrated into the recovery curriculum.

Teachers’ comments provided a useful insight into how they used the resources. The comments below show that teachers used resources in various ways, including integrating them into lessons and as part of wider writing workshops. Many of the teachers also told us they used the videos.

“We did it as part of our tutor time and watched the videos as an introduction for the students”

"We integrated them within our lessons. The videos provided stimuli and inspiration which engaged all children. The writing stems provided children with a scaffold which supported them in their writing”

“We used the concept as a stimulus for our writing and as a part of a wider discussion supporting positive mental health”

“Easy to use as starters in English lessons. Also used in PHSE as a discussion”

“We watched the video tutorials and completed some of the activity sheets, then students worked independently on their pieces”

"We used the writing format as scaffolds for children to create their stories. The videos provided them with inspiration"

“We introduced the resources as part of a wider writing workshop in response to the pandemic, we shared the competition with parents and families too and some responses came via our home learning platform”

Conclusion

This report shows that young people and teachers had a positive experience of participating in Beyond Words. Overall, the findings of this report indicate that the project has been successful in supporting the participating young people’s wellbeing through writing and reflecting on the year they had. In particular, the project has provided a valuable opportunity for young people to express their thoughts and feelings, which was clearly valued by many of them. The project also made many young people think that writing can help them express their feelings and thoughts and how writing can make them feel better. Many young people also learned how to express their thoughts in written format as a result of the project. Considering these findings, it is not surprising that young people also valued the opportunity to be creative and have the freedom to decide what to write. The project also allowed some young people to feel their writing has an audience and many wanted to write more as a result.

Teachers also perceived the project as useful for their students, in particular as an opportunity to reflect on their experiences during the pandemic, express their feelings and write creatively. Teachers also noticed changes in their students’ confidence to express their feelings in written format, reflecting the benefit of the project perceived by young people themselves and the impact they felt the project had.

Appendix 1: Young people's comments from the survey not included in the report

"Over lockdown I realised how much mental wellbeing meant to me and it should never be overlooked. You need to make sure you are happy mentally before anything else, that is what is most important"

"Can encourage youth to express their feelings and share point of view via this project. I know myself even after written them up and so can walk with these frustrations to build back positive mindset for my future further"

"I found it really fun and gave me a thing to do"

"I wanted to take part to try and make a difference"

"It made me feel inspirational"

"Empowered"

"It made me feel extremely happy to be able to share my views in the form of a poem as I enjoy writing poetry"

"It helped me know that it's good to write a poem about your feelings"

"It helped me understand more how others felt and it also helped me understand that my wellbeing has been massively impacted as a cause of this pandemic"

"It kind of made me feel important?..... I'm not really sure. I just liked writing a song about something really big!"

"It was a good way to talk about issues that were close to me"

"Writing in the project did make me feel different because I felt that Covid 19 will not be here forever and that one day we will look back at this year and remember everything that happened"

"Writing is a form where I express my feelings. As I cannot say it, I write it"

"It was a poem I was reluctant to share, but this made me feel relieved"

"It helped me really understand how I was feeling"

"It was interesting and a new concept"

"It was a challenge and a distraction and made me just think back to all that had happened in this space of time"

"Fulfilled, because I got to write for a universal cause"

"The writing was a chance for me to get ideas out"

“It made me think that I can write down my feelings”

“I was excited to do it honestly. I’d dropped out of my creative writing class at school due to the stress of my other subjects, but having the opportunity to write for a good cause was what really pushed me to participate”

“I couldn’t believe how happy it made me feel and how it moved so many others and how I could simply express what I thought went on this year”

“I felt pleased that my writing had resulted in a donation to a worthwhile charity. Writing helps me organize my thoughts and I knew my grandma would be pleased!”

“I thought of school and all the things I had learned about how to write better”

“It was fun, and I particularly enjoyed reading my friends' project and of course, everyone else's on the gallery”

“I hope to get enter more Bupa Foundation competitions in future, please continue to use my work, and that of others, to do amazing things like the current project you are running”

“Just made it feel like Christmas”

“My aunt and my grandma were so happy they made it in to print! Thank you for launching such a great competition. It has been fun to read the entries”

“It was really interesting especially when it was for such a good cause”

“I learned that I can write a good piece when asked to”

“It was very insightful and had a great cause behind it”

“Yes it made me appreciate the year I had”

“I absolutely loved it”

“I really enjoyed participating in Beyond Words, it was a great time to reflect on the year we had”

“I've been thinking a lot recently about my future and how I can impact it now. My head is always turning. I think too much. I know that I always plan everything (playing on our piano, doing exercise, meditating) but I just end up on my phone. A couple of weeks ago I started writing a story but then I decided that I was terrible at writing. But when I wrote for Beyond Words, it made me feel somehow quite giddy and interested. Maybe I should write more things like that to improve help my wellbeing and keep me occupied!”

“I think it is a fun, awesome and nice thing to do!!!”

“I enjoyed my experience putting my thoughts down on paper and being able to relate them to my own experience”

“Writing is a wonderful tool to dispel negative feelings and appreciate the positives in life”

Appendix 2: What young people wrote about – full description of topics

I wrote about the world waking up after lockdown and people appreciating one another and the beautiful planet so much more.

I wrote about my experience about depression because many people may think depression is just a phase of sadness that eventually goes away but not about how it can almost end with your death.

I wrote my grieving starting from losing my grandfather living w me in January 2020 and my pet passed away suddenly in 3 hours and all of the living schedules have been changed because of Covid-19

I wrote about Black Lives Matter because I believe everyone should know about it and it is not something that should be kept quiet.

I did a poem about lockdown in Covid-19 because a lot of people that I know felt sad about not seeing their friends and families and I felt the same way, so I decided to write a poem about lockdown and how I feel.

I wrote a song about COVID 19 and about how people couldn't see each other, but how we got round the problems, and used zoom, etc. I wrote about it because it is a big thing that is on my mind right now.

I wrote about BLM and what the movement and how it represents life as someone who isn't white and what racism looks like and how it effects the people of the race.

I wrote about the stigma around mental health as this is something that affects me daily.

I wrote about my own experiences. I lost my grandma in May during lockdown and her last few weeks of her life was described by her as being in prison, also it was some of my own personal feelings.

For my poem, I wrote about 2020 and how it has been different to how we thought it would be. I wrote about Corona virus and how much damage it caused the world.

I wrote about the change of emotions I have experienced this year and how it has affected my thoughts. I was not prepared for all that was yet to come. I wrote about this because I wanted to share my feelings and put them into words.

I did a drawing on my 2020 and it was all things to do with 2020 and i did it because i thought it was a fun and nice thing to do and to look at it and it is not so full on or sad as 2020 has been for many

I wrote a poem on blm a big movement because it was relevant and touching I wrote about the pandemic because it was the biggest thing in my 2020.

I wrote about 2020 and how that effected my mental health because I thought it had the opportunity to tell others that they aren't alone with what they are felling in this strange year

I wrote about how lockdown affect me and what it made me feel like I wrote a song about being a teenager during lockdown.

I wrote about 2020 as a year and what went on, I specifically talked about COVID-19 and how it affected people because people are a bit confused at the moment and to sum up the year in one poem just opens your eyes a bit to what has truly happened and why we should celebrate it.

I wrote about my one year old baby sister being my lockdown hero.

I wrote about racism. The black lives matter movement has become particularly prominent in 2020 due to the death of George Floyd. It is also a topic which links close to home especially because I am a person of colour.

My poem 'For you' was about me trying to write the poem whilst having so many negative thoughts of my own 2020 in my head. However, towards the end of the poem, i decide to write for my reader rather than myself, and give them something heartwarming to read and remember.

I made this choice because I really did want to use my writing to invoke happiness in whoever reads it, which I think is what everyone in 2020 needs right now, especially young people like myself.

It's about bullying as I have been getting bullied for a long time and I have a page on Instagram called There is Light Always

I wrote about hands. It occurred to me that our hands have very much been a focus of the pandemic. What and who we touch have become very important.

We have been asked to avoid doing things with our hands which in normal times are second nature. I am really missing my Grandma and I can't wait to hold her hands again and hug her.

I am really proud of my aunt who works at the Manchester Royal Infirmary - she taught me to wash my hands 'like a nurse' when I was little.

I wrote about a girl who is studying abroad during a pandemic. I chose to write about this as my sister was starting university this year and was faced with many challenges because of coronavirus which gave me inspiration to write this piece.

I wrote a poem about a Dolphin swimming through the sea and spreading joy because during these tough times we all need some joy and happiness

My 2020 because we have been living through very unknown times I wrote a poem about an anxious pigeon as I took inspiration from tasks in class.

I wrote a poem and a creative writing piece on 2020. my poem represented my feelings during quarantine and my creative writing showed a doctor during this pandemic

The global pandemic, I was passionate about it and how it had affected me I wrote about a sloth because I felt it embodied the emotion tired

I wrote about how lockdown effected me because other people could of been going through the same stuff as me

I write about my own personal 2020 A poem about a deer. It reflected social anxiety