

# Artsreach



## ARTSREACH & COMMUNITY FLOURISHING

Volunteer  
views on the  
social impact  
of Artsreach  
in Dorset



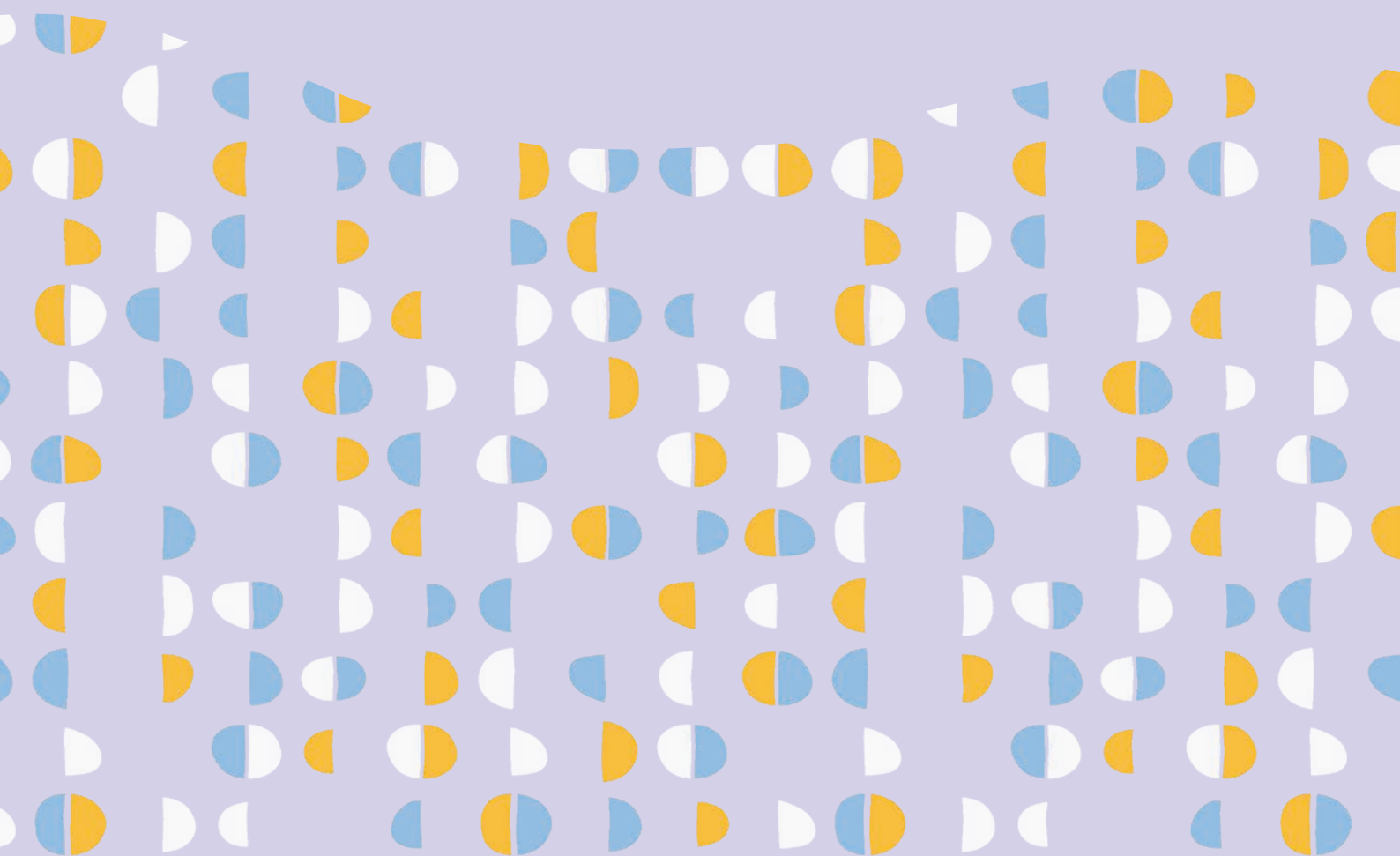
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# 1. Artsreach

**1.1** Artsreach is a cultural organisation which brings high quality cultural activity and family shows to rural communities across Dorset. Its performance programme is managed by a small staff team at their base in Dorchester supported by a network of around 40 volunteer promoting groups staging around 140 professional events annually, including live performances, streamed events and creative participatory workshops for adults and children. Events take place most often in village halls, but also within pubs as part of the 'Inn Crowd' project, at churches, libraries, outside venues such as parks and small and medium Dorset arts venues such as the Royal Manor Theatre, the Mowlem Theatre, and the Exchange.

In 2022 the Artsreach team of volunteers received Team of the Year Award from the Volunteer Centre, Dorset as a thank you for their outstanding volunteering contribution.

Artsreach events provide opportunities for local people to enjoy high quality arts on their doorstep, and its ticket sales also support the upkeep of vital community venues, which keep a proportion of the income.

Furthermore, Artsreach aims to make a positive difference to the lives of people living in rural Dorset, addressing rural and social isolation; developing skills and supporting health and wellbeing by providing the opportunity to participate in and engage with cultural activity in the heart of their own communities.

**1.2** Now over thirty years old, Artsreach is funded by Arts Council England and Dorset Council. As a registered charity and company limited by guarantee it also derives income from sponsorship and charitable donations.

In its latest mission statement (2022) Artsreach aims – among other aspirations – to:

- **Partner with a network of volunteers** and empower them to programme, promote and present cultural activities in their community venues;
- **Present a diverse range of high-quality cultural activities** which support the health and well-being of the rural community;
- **Stimulate community development** through engagement with cultural activities and support vital community resources such as village halls.

All of which obliges the organisation to explore and evaluate aspects of what is often currently termed as its 'social impact' – the subject of this report on Artsreach's 2022 online questionnaire.



Photo by Jayne Jackson

## 2. What is meant by Social Impact?

**2.1** The notion that the arts could catalyse significant social impacts was most prominently defined and explored in Matarasso's seminal paper, *Use or Ornament? The social impact of participation in the arts* (1997). He subsequently wrote reports specifically about social impact in rural touring (2004), including for Artsreach (2007). In *Use or Ornament* Matarasso lists six social impacts of such participation:

1. Personal development
2. Cohesion
3. Community empowerment and self-determination
4. Local image and identity
5. Imagination and vision
6. Health and well-being.

Clearly the Artsreach model of bringing prominent professional artists to rural venues, to be staged by teams of local volunteers in front of audiences largely from a very local radius



is well aligned to address 1-4 of these impacts. Additionally, one of the questions included in the survey is intended to match the 5<sup>th</sup> impact described by Matarasso, namely whether Artsreach events inspire local volunteers to initiate other community initiatives in their venue or locality. It has to be acknowledged, however, that a causal link between Artsreach events and 6: health and well-being, is difficult to discern unless self-reported by respondents to such questionnaires. The results analysed below outline how respondents did answer such a question, with noteworthy results.

**2.2** Subsequently, work on the social impact of the arts and culture was reviewed in Reeves' work for Arts Council England *Measuring the economic and social impact of the arts: a review* (2002). Reeves references Jermyn (2001) who categorised such impacts into personal, collective and civil impacts. Again, the Artsreach model is aligned to collective and civil impacts, although the nature of the questionnaire, analysed below, touches on the individual in so

far as it examines the benefits to the volunteers and seeks their personal opinion on collective events.

**2.3** In 2019 Arts Council England and the National Rural Touring Forum, the collective organisation supporting UK rural touring schemes such as Artsreach, commissioned Coventry University to produce a comprehensive report:

***CONCERTA: Contribution to Community Enhancement Through Rural Touring Arts.***

Its findings list some social impacts which influenced the Artsreach questionnaire: supporting the development of new social networks, building skills, reducing social isolation (p43), driving improvements in local facilities (p54), the development of venues (p77), community capacity (p81), reducing isolation (p92).



Photo by Roland Tarr

**2.4** Interest in the social impacts of community events has grown significantly. For example, Perkins et al's paper of 2021 focused on social connectedness and the arts, although this was a general survey. Kelly et al (2019) looked at social isolation and rural communities, although it was based around social enterprises

rather than the arts. And, as we will outline below, the legacy of Matarasso's work, and that of other researchers, in bringing the social impact of the arts to prominence has now been recognised by Artsreach's funders, which oblige organisations to find ways to monitor and report on the nature of their social impact.

## 3. The Principal Funders of Artsreach

**3.1** The Arts Council England (ACE) cultural strategy for the period 2020-2030, *Let's Create*, requires funded organisations such as Artsreach closely to follow four 'investment principles.' A prominent theme within the principles is that the arts and culture should positively influence both communities and individuals. So Artsreach is expected to:

'...actively listen' and 'tak[e] account of, the views of the local community, children and young people...and stakeholders.' Artsreach should: 'adapt to...

the needs of the communities [it] serve[s] and develop an understanding of the value [it] create[s] for your...community.'

ACE expects organisations to collect data regularly so as to inform decision making and to, 'listen to the views of people inside and outside your organisation and immediate circle' (ACE:2022). It is, therefore, clear from the ACE investment principles that Artsreach is expected to understand its impact on Dorset communities in more detail, by gathering various forms of local data.

**3.2** Dorset's Cultural Strategy 2021-6 lists 10 'ambition statements' including the aspiration that: 'Culture will bring communities together; breaking down social isolation and helping build happy, empowered, and connected communities (particularly targeting areas of rural isolation and older people).'

Dorset Council's aim to create a sense of belonging in rural communities aligns well with the model of working which Artsreach has adopted throughout its 30 years. Moreover, through its cultural organisations, Dorset hopes to achieve: 'An improvement in health and wellbeing and a decrease in social isolation in our communities.' (Dorset Council: 2021).

Artsreach is encouraged, by the terms of Dorset's Cultural Strategy, to measure its impact through an existing tool available to councils, the 'HACT social value calculator' which measures both social and wellbeing impacts. The Artsreach survey reported on below, therefore, uses relevant questions from HACT.

It is Artsreach's intention periodically to refine and repeat the survey so that some indicators of change over time can be perceived in the collated results.



Photo by Jayne Jackson

# 4. The Research Method

**4.1** In the autumn of 2022, two Artsreach trustees, both of whom have an expertise in research and evaluation, designed an online 'social impact' survey questionnaire.

Prior to the final version they consulted with staff at Artsreach, Dorset Council and Dorset's Arts Development Company, which has a service level agreement with Dorset Council to deliver arts development across Dorset. In November 2022 the final version of the online survey was distributed by email to the network of local volunteer 'promoters' who co-ordinate Artsreach events in Dorset venues.

The promoters were asked to complete the questionnaire and to send it on by email to their teams of volunteers who support the staging of Artsreach events; individuals who typically help with advertising and promotion for events, staffing a bar or car park or running a raffle at an event.

A reminder was sent in December 2022 with a final deadline for completing the survey. In total 77 returns were received. Whilst this certainly numbers more than the total number of Artsreach promoters, it is disappointing that more returns were not received, since each promoter is likely to draw on four or more other volunteers to help stage an Artsreach event. One explanation is that some members of the volunteer teams felt unable to express their views with authority and knowledge of Artsreach, given that they might only staff a bar or car park at an event.



Photo by Michaela Shaw



**4.2** Artsreach staff and the evaluators agreed that to achieve the best return on the survey accessibility was key: to make it easy to understand and not time-consuming to complete. So, the written introduction to the survey was very brief, as follows:

*Artsreach is trying to find out whether its shows and workshops make a positive contribution to the social life in rural Dorset communities - its 'social impact.' We are distributing this survey to our promoters and the volunteers they work with, promoting and staging shows and workshops in Dorset. We would be grateful if you could spare some time to complete this survey. It will only take 5-10 minutes. It's online so all you need to do is to press submit when you've finished.*

The disadvantage to this, however, is that volunteers might have had very different interpretations of what a 'positive impact' and 'social impact' might mean in this context. So the nature of the questions asked, it was hoped, would help to align respondents' interpretations.



Photo by Paul Barrow

# 5. The Results

**5.1** The majority of respondents were in the 60-74 age range (N=52). This is as might be expected, since people in this age range often have more free time to volunteer. There was a relatively even split in gender identity between males (N=35) and females (N=42). Five respondents identified as disabled or having a long-term health condition whilst volunteering.

**5.2** An often-cited feature of rural touring schemes such as Artsreach is that they have a low carbon footprint insofar as audiences tend not to have long journeys to attend shows, in comparison with regional theatres, for example. In this survey, 80% (N=64) of respondents live under 2 miles from their venue, implying that Artsreach shows are truly locally organised and managed. Nonetheless, seven respondents, exceptionally, live over five miles from their venue. These may possibly be volunteers helping out on the night or providing

accommodation to performers, people who had moved further away from the venue, or this may simply reflect the scattered distribution of housing in many rural communities.

**5.3** Nearly half of respondents come from west Dorset (N=35) and a further 21 come from north of the county. East Dorset, Purbeck and Portland are less well represented. This almost certainly reflects the historical funding for Artsreach from Dorset District councils prior to their consolidation into Dorset Council in 2019. Artsreach's current priorities include trying to increase participation in Purbeck and East Dorset, which will hopefully be better represented in future research and evaluation.

**5.4** Respondents were asked how they helped with Artsreach events. Some 55 of them reported that they were involved in selecting shows for their venues from the Artsreach menus.

This suggests that promoting teams are involved in discussing the menus and choosing shows for their communities. Many respondents locally distributed publicity material for their Artsreach events (N=60), set up seating and staging (N=67) and ran a bar or refreshments at shows (N=54). A notable response to this question is that 42 of those surveyed helped by providing overnight accommodation and/or meals for performers.

The cultural exchange with professional performers which would inevitably result from this personal hospitality could have many benefits, not least the increased likelihood of a diverse menu of shows at venues. Five respondents reported that they provided lifts or assistance so that people who might otherwise be prevented by mobility or other issues could attend Artsreach shows.

**5.5** The following question also resulted in a notable finding, namely that 65% of respondents believed that they had developed one or more skills as a result of volunteering to help with Artsreach events. 38 respondents felt that they had developed a little and 19 claimed to have developed quite a lot. Given that all respondents were over 40 and the majority over 60 it is to be expected that nearly all have a well-developed skill set. So, it is remarkable that so many felt that they had developed new skills.

**5.6** All respondents felt that being part of a volunteer group helping with Artsreach events had been a worthwhile and enjoyable social activity, with 90% claiming that they had enjoyed the experience 'quite a lot.' It is fairly common for participation in civic activities – parish councils, parish hall committees, groups of trustees or governors – to involve frustrations, personality clashes, disruptive individuals and the like. So, it is unusual in this case to find that *all* respondents found this group interaction around Artsreach events enjoyable and worthwhile.







**5.7** The following question comprised 20 statements to which respondents were asked to indicate, on a five-point Likert scale, whether they strongly agreed/agreed/were neutral/disagreed or strongly disagreed.

It must first be acknowledged that this type of survey question fails fully to unpack what respondents understand by the statements, or indeed the breadth of interpretations among respondents. For example, 90% of the responses showed that individuals agreed or strongly agreed that volunteering to stage Artsreach events had contributed positively to their wellbeing. Whilst this is a notably welcome response to the statement, what those questioned interpret as 'wellbeing' is unclear. Nevertheless, the answers to other statements might throw further light on respondent understanding and opinions.

The group of statements on why people volunteer to help with Artsreach events reveal that the majority increased their sense of belonging to the community (90%), made new acquaintances (77%), enjoyed the social activity (88%), and felt that they were making a positive contribution to the quality of local life (87%). So the broad respondent sense of well-being might emanate from their feeling that individual and community flourishing is a by-product of helping with Artsreach events.

**5.8** Several of these statements are grouped around the contribution Artsreach events make to local networking and community cohesion.

Within this theme, 90% of respondents felt that volunteering with Artsreach had increased their sense of belonging to their communities, and over 75% made new acquaintances as a result. 92% agreed or strongly agreed that Artsreach events contributed to community cohesion, and over 70% asserted that such events contributed to the local community bonding together.



More particularly, 86% felt that people who live alone or are isolated benefit from socialising during Artsreach events. Only a single respondent felt that Artsreach shows made no difference to village life, although 10% of respondents answered a similar statement by agreeing or strongly agreeing that, without Artsreach, there would be no impact on local community social life.

**5.9** Three of the statements sought opinions on the effect of Artsreach on wider community provision in rural venues.

67% of respondents agreed or strongly agreed that their Artsreach shows had helped their venues to provide more facilities. Whilst it is unclear to what extent they meant economic benefits in this answer, 73% felt that hosting Artsreach events had played a part in stimulating a year-round programme of events in the venue.

By contrast only 39% believed that Artsreach stimulated the provision of other venue activities. A possible explanation for this is that village hall committees and community

groups tend to know very well the sort of activities which can be hosted regularly and reliably, be it Brownies or badminton. They don't need Artsreach to inspire such activities. However, the fact that 73% of respondents believed that Artsreach stimulated a year-round programme of activities might well imply that it prompted those same committees to be more ambitious by staging more cultural events. Moreover, this would possibly have the added benefit of generating more funds for the venue or local groups using it.

**5.10** The exposure to a culturally diverse performance programme was appreciated by 97% of respondents, who felt that Artsreach events exposed their audiences to more diverse or unusual performances, although much lower percentages felt that volunteering with Artsreach had raised their own awareness of diversity in society (43%), or given them greater understanding and acceptance of other cultures (38%). This, of course, could simply mean that they personally (as opposed to their audiences) already had a good awareness of the diversity in society.

**5.11** The final three questions are regularly asked in neighbourhood and housing surveys. Responses to them further emphasised the generally positive attitudes of the respondents towards their communities. 87% felt that their neighbourhood was a good

place to live, the remainder having mixed feelings, and 97% felt a sense of belonging in their community, with 66% having a strong sense of belonging. Stopping and talking with neighbours and acquaintances in the community was a regular activity for 99% of them.

## 6. Conclusions and Recommendations

**6.1** The results of this survey reveal that a significant majority of Artsreach volunteers feel that its events have clear benefits - both for the individuals helping stage Artsreach events and for various aspects of community cohesion and flourishing. Moreover, there are stand out positive aspects within the results, notably:

- the environmental benefit: 80% of respondents live under 2 miles from their venue suggesting that the promoters and volunteers are providing a truly local and low-carbon cultural offer;
- 65% of respondents developed one or more skills as a result

of working with Artsreach, so expanding the local skill set available to support community flourishing;

- the 'wellbeing dividend' – in various ways over 90% of respondents had derived an element of personal fulfilment through volunteering with Artsreach;
- since 86% felt that people who live alone or are isolated benefit from socialising during Artsreach events, it is likely that these events make a difference to those in rural communities with minimal opportunities for social interaction;

- Nearly  $\frac{3}{4}$  of respondents felt that Artsreach events were a catalyst for year-round provision in rural venues – a key element of rural community flourishing.

**6.2** It must be acknowledged that positive results might be expected from Artsreach volunteers, both in order to validate what is often time-consuming work for them, but also because these individuals are likely to be ‘civic heroes’; capable, energetic people with a strong sense of civic responsibility, many now retired or towards the end of their careers and so with more time to contribute to their communities.

However, the prominent and noteworthy responses analysed above refine understanding of what constitutes social impact in a rural touring context and forms a good basis for refining Artsreach’s research and evaluation strategy, both to improve its work and to report to its constituency Dorset audience and funders. Recommended next steps derived from this survey are outlined below.

**6.3** Artsreach should refine and, in due course, redistribute the social impact questionnaire to explore more precisely how respondents understand such terms as ‘well being’.

Artsreach should refine existing audience questionnaires to derive more information on social impact from individuals who do not have the level of personal investment of the volunteers surveyed here.

Artsreach should use complementary qualitative research methods to investigate its social impact, such as the case study research it has recently commissioned from the ‘Creative Practice’ consultancy in Lyme Regis. This will be completed in the late spring of 2023.



Photo: aKa Dance

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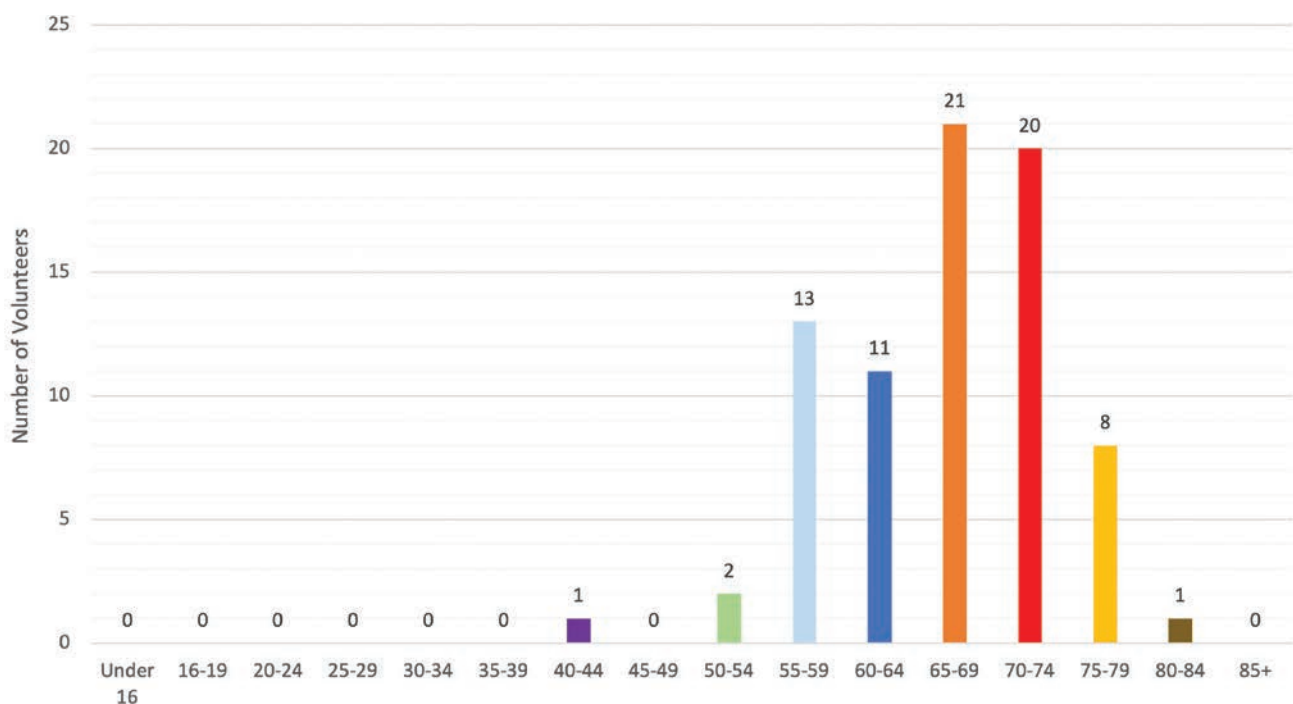


# Appendix: The survey

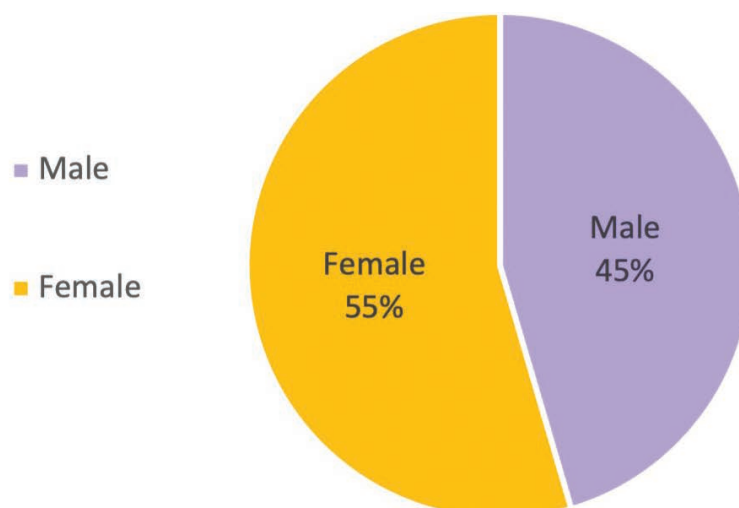
## Volunteering with Artsreach

77 Responses | 06:09 Average time to complete | Closed Status

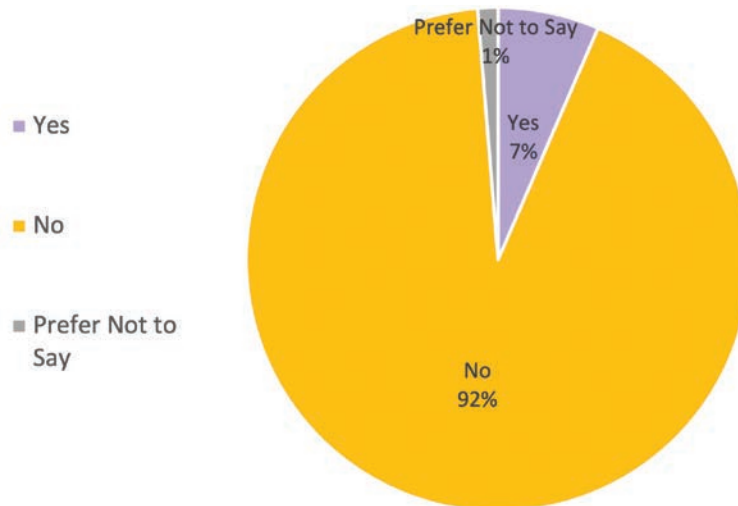
1 Please select which age group you belong to from the dropdown list:



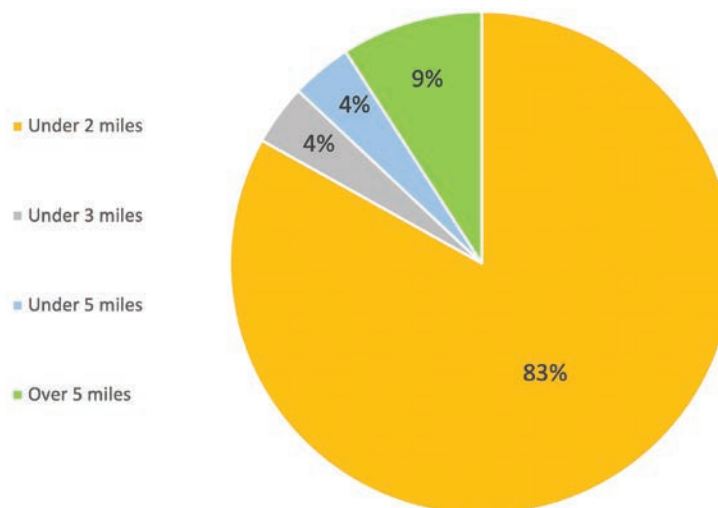
2 Which of the following best describes how you think of your gender identity:



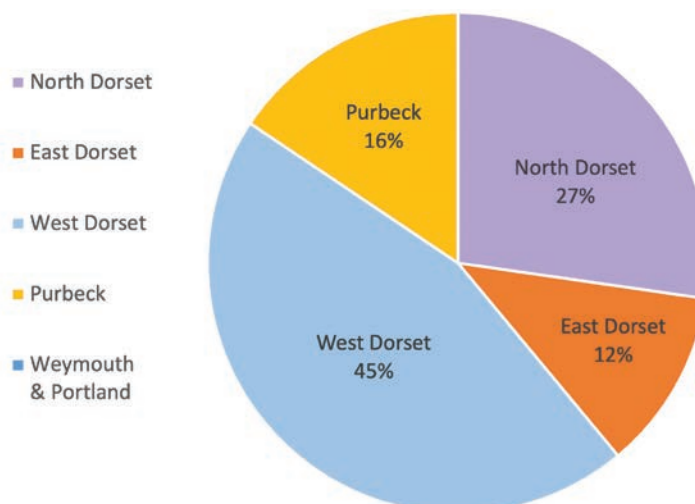
**3** Do you identify as a D/deaf or disabled person or have a long-term health condition?



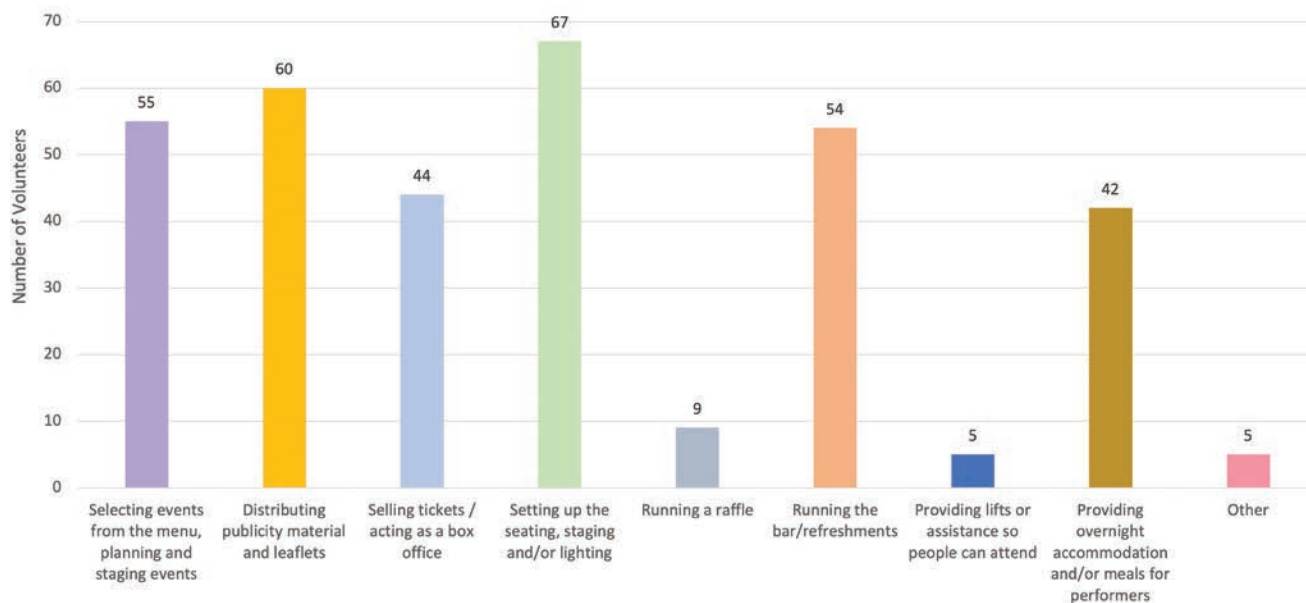
**4** How far do you have to travel to your venue for Artsreach events?



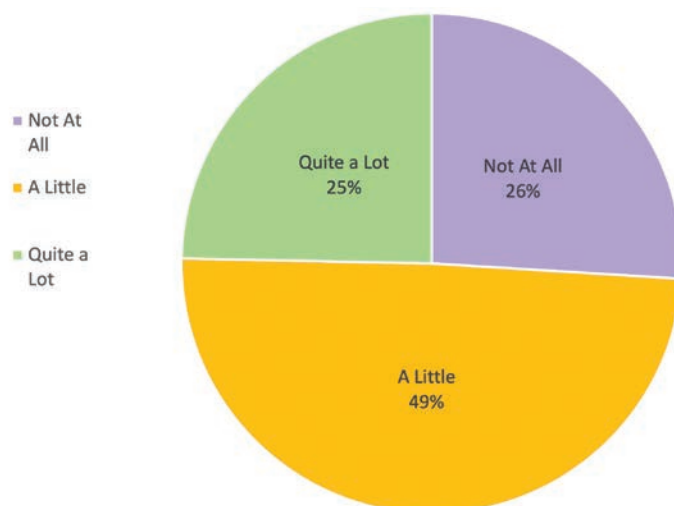
**5** Which of the former Dorset Districts does your home address lie in?



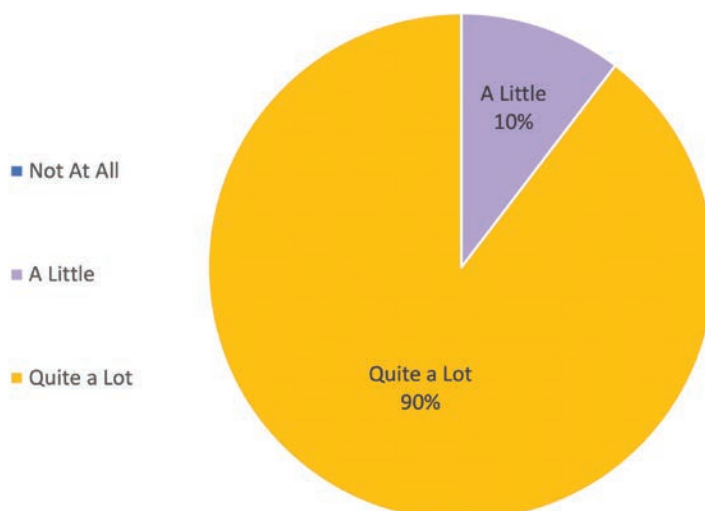
**6** As a volunteer, how do you help with Artsreach events or workshops? (click all that apply to you)



**7** For me, volunteering to help with Artsreach events has helped me develop one or more skills, eg. advertising, promoting, technical skills

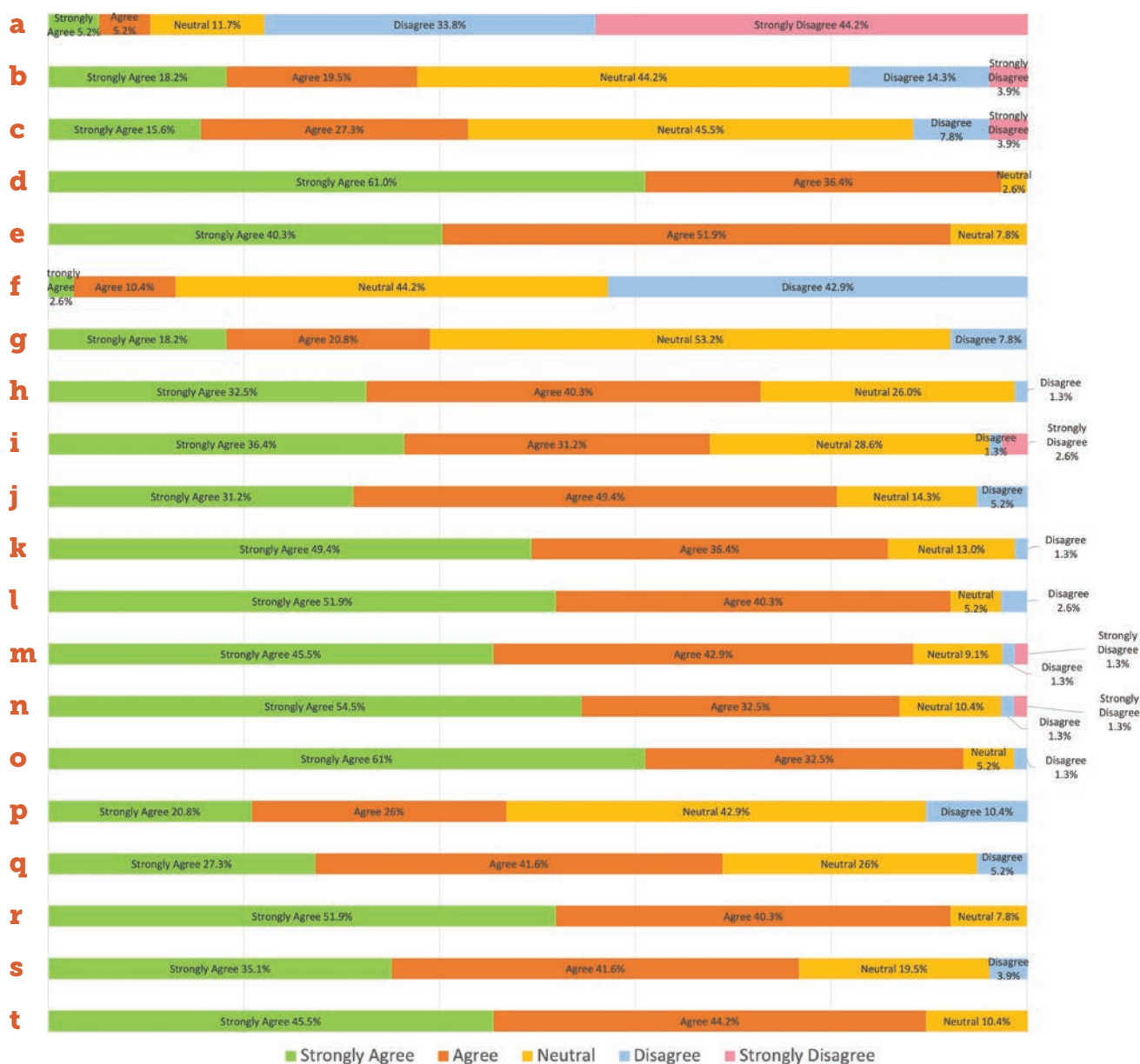


**8** Being part of a volunteer group helping with Artsreach events has been a worthwhile and enjoyable social activity



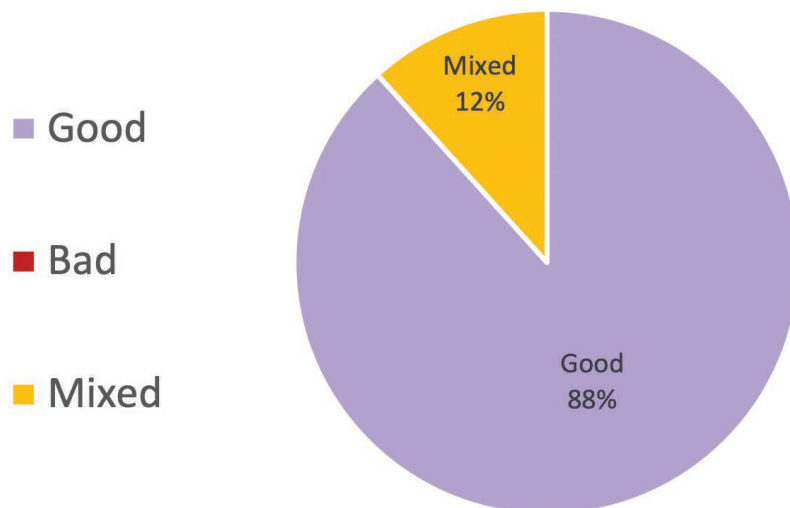
## 9 What do you think about the following statements?

- a** If there were no Artsreach events, this would have no impact on our local community's social life
- b** I have a greater understanding and acceptance of other cultures because of volunteering with Artsreach
- c** Being a volunteer with Artsreach has raised my awareness of diversity in society
- d** Artsreach events introduce our audience to more diverse or unusual performances
- e** Artsreach events offer a good opportunity for audiences to meet and catch up with local acquaintances
- f** Artsreach events make no difference to village social life
- g** Staging Artsreach events has stimulated the provision of other activities in our venue
- h** Hosting Artsreach events has played a part in stimulating a year-round programme of activities in our venue
- i** Staging Artsreach events has helped our venue to provide more facilities
- j** The local community seems to bond together at Artsreach events
- k** People who live alone, or are isolated, benefit from socialising during our Artsreach events
- l** Artsreach events in our venue contribute to our community cohesion
- m** I volunteered to help with Artsreach events because it was a good social activity
- n** I volunteered to help with Artsreach events to help improve the quality of life in my community
- o** I volunteered to help with Artsreach events because I want to contribute to my local community
- p** My confidence to try new things has been improved because of my work as a volunteer with Artsreach
- q** Volunteering with Artsreach has increased my sense of wellbeing
- r** I enjoy the feeling of participation when I volunteer with Artsreach
- s** I've made new acquaintances as a result of helping with Artsreach event
- t** Volunteering to help with our Artsreach events has increased my sense of belonging to our community



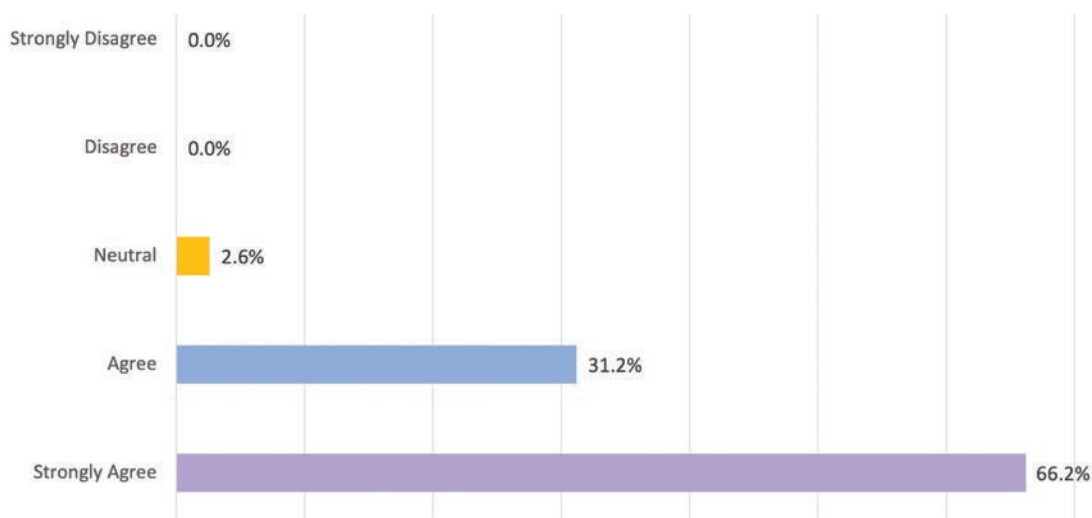


**10** Overall do you think your neighbourhood is a good or bad place to live?

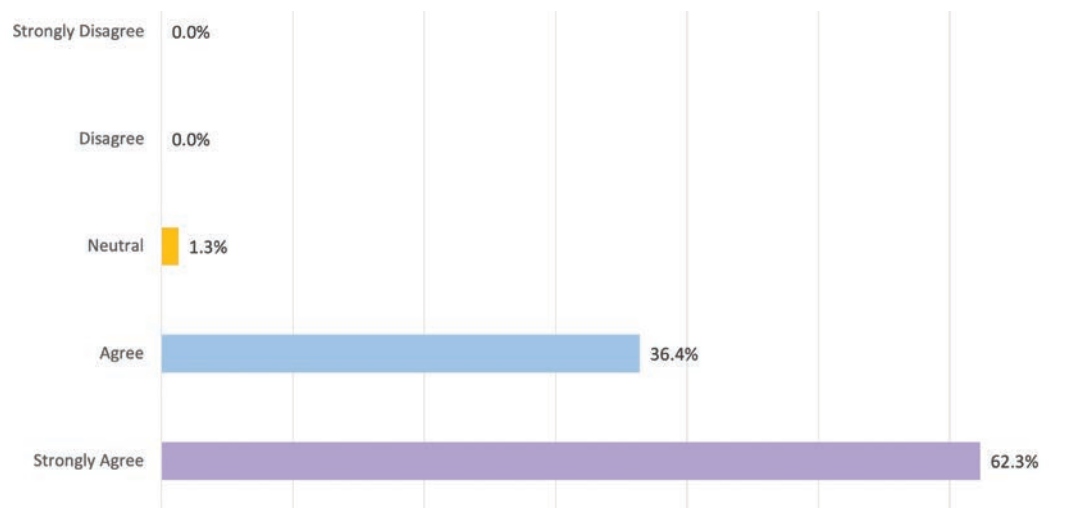


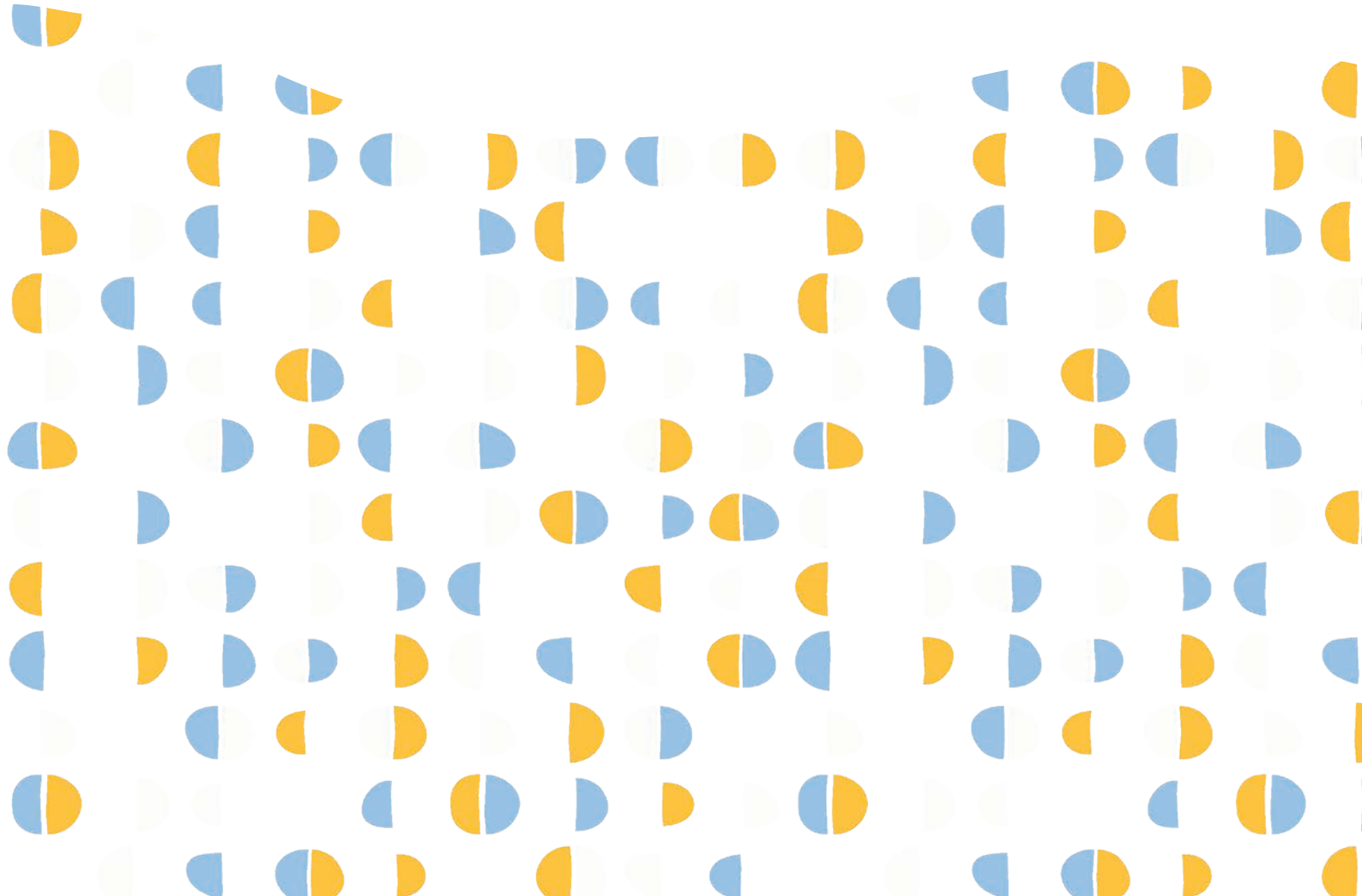
**11** How do you feel about the following statements?

*"I feel like I belong to my neighbourhood"*



*"I regularly stop and talk with people in my neighbourhood"*







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