

Arts Council of Northern Ireland

Arts and Older People Programme

A summary of programme activity to date including findings from the most recent evaluation

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

December 2021



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Arts and Older People Programme: a summary of programme activity to date including findings from the most recent evaluation.

Background

The first three-year pilot programme commenced in 2010 and was funded by the Arts Council of Northern Ireland (ACNI) through its National Lottery resource, and Atlantic Philanthropies (total £700k). The programme focused on increasing opportunities for older citizens to engage in the arts, with a view to promoting positive mental health and alleviating issues known to impact particularly on this associated age group, including poverty, isolation and loneliness. There were four elements associated with the programme at this stage: a grant programme, artist training, festival and evaluation.

In 2013, based on the findings of the pilot programme, a new three-year programme was launched. The budget for this programme increased to £790,000, with contributions from ACNI (Lottery), Department for Culture, Arts and Leisure (£100k), Public Health Agency (£210k) and Baring Foundation (£180k). The programme elements remained consistent with the pilot phase.

From 2016 to date, funding has been secured on an annual, rolling basis, with support from ACNI Lottery (£100k per year), PHA (circa £75k - £80k per year) and Baring Foundation (£50k per year). Responding to evaluation evidence from the previous round, during this phase greater emphasis was placed on engaging older men and the carers of older people.

In 2019, whilst the emphasis on the health risks associated with old age relating to poverty, isolation and loneliness remained the same, the target group shifted towards older people with dementia. Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, activity in care homes was prioritized at the request of the PHA, who were concentrating support on the recovery of the care home sector. The current funding round opened in June 2021.

Evaluation contracts and key outputs

Year	Evaluation
2010 to 2013 (Phase I)	Wallace Consulting appointed to develop and deliver a three-year evaluation framework.
2013 to 2016 (Phase II)	Wallace Consulting appointed to develop and deliver a three-year evaluation framework. Work included commissioning an MLA survey as part of Bellweather evaluation approach.
2016	Case Study Contract awarded to Sonrisa Solutions, with production of 'Not so Cut Off' publication.
2017	ACNI managed evaluation using a standardised measurement framework.
2018	ACNI managed evaluation using standardised measurement framework; Case Study Contract awarded to Sonrisa Solutions, with production of 'My Blue Sandals' publication.
2018	ACNI produced 'The State of Play' publication, reflecting on the programme to date.
2019	ARK produced an evaluation report based on qualitative evidence gathered since 2013 through frameworks
2020	ACNI produced 'A Decade on' publication, reflecting on the programme over the past 10 years.
2021 to 2022	Appointment of Sonrisa Solutions to design and roll out evaluation framework.

The benefits associated with undertaking the evaluation can be summarised as follows:

- Captured data to reflect the strength of delivery
- Alignment of outcomes with other interventions using a standardised measurement framework
- Used case studies to capture the voices of the older people involved
- Helped the direction of travel and drilled down into the priority areas
- Informed the funders of the programme as to the need to continue the work
- Provided figures for numbers of participants, artists and audience involved
- Could be used to demonstrate the strength of the arts to health and wellbeing

The need to continue the evaluation work will help with the benefits outlined above.

Moving forward, the areas that should be captured are as follows:

- Grants programme – quantitative analysis to capture the numbers and statistics on health and wellbeing improvements
- Grants programme – qualitative analysis through case studies to capture the stories of those involved
- Artists' training – to capture the needs of the sector on how they can strengthen delivery
- Carers' training - on what they need to ensure arts activities are continued
- Celebration events – and how best to showcase the work

Arts and Older People Programme: evaluation findings from funding Round 5.

The Arts and Older People Programme is one of the Arts Council's core programme areas and has engaged with over 29,000 participants through over 170 artist led projects since inception as a pilot. It is supported financially by the Arts Council of Northern Ireland and the Public Health Agency (PHA) and has received over £2 million in National Lottery support since inception.

The programme aims to increase opportunities for older people to engage in the arts and, by so doing, address some of the core issues facing older people in Northern Ireland today: mental health, poverty, isolation and loneliness. Recently, the programme has concentrated support on activity within care homes settings, carers and people living with dementia.

As a consequence of the COVID-19 pandemic, funded organisations have had to radically adapt their engagement strategies to guarantee the safety of participants, care workers and artists, whilst still ensuring the delivery of an engaging and stimulating range of activities.

The report describes the outcomes associated with activity delivered during Round 5, established using a mix of qualitative-based questionnaires, observations and interviews. Other methodologies tested during the round will be used as part of an evaluation framework to be rolled out during Round 6.

This summary is based on the findings of an evaluation carried out in 2021 by Dr Una Lynch & Ismail Hadjri and is the latest in a series of research insights published by the Arts Council looking at the impact of the Arts and Older People Programme.

Summary of Round 5 awards and participant profiles

- Twelve established projects were funded through this round of the Arts and Older People Programme. Collectively, they received £109,024 in Lottery funding; an average award of £8,428 per organisation. Nine organisations chose to contribute to this evaluation.
- Collectively, these organisations engaged with an estimated 900 participants. The nature and extent of engagement varied significantly and included engagement at one-off events/shows.
- Music was the primary art form element within eight of the programmes delivered, and featured exclusively within three. Remaining projects incorporated creative writing, storytelling (reminiscence), visual art and dance.

- More than half of the projects funded (55.6%) delivered all or some of their work online using virtual meeting platforms such as Zoom. A smaller number of organisations delivered activity ‘in person’ because of social distancing restrictions.
- Seven Arts and Older People Programme 5 projects worked with people aged over 80 years; eight, between 70 and 80 years; and six between 50 and 60 years.
- Observation-based evidence demonstrated impact across all domains in the Public Health Agency’s (PHA) ‘Take Five steps to Wellbeing’¹ including: connecting participants; learning new skills; sharing / giving learning with others; taking time out and taking notice.

Summary of qualitative findings

Social isolation

Project workers were cognisant that they were connecting with socially isolated people. They took great satisfaction in the knowledge that, through their work, they were alleviating loneliness and making a tangible difference in people’s lives:

“... they [the participants] described our sessions as the ‘the highlight of the week’ ... Most of the older people we were working with were living alone. Some were living with carers. For some people it was an opportunity to interact with others experiencing similar difficulties.” (Arts and Older People Programme - Project 1)

“The participants’ enthusiasm and engagement in the whole project was its biggest success.” (Arts and Older People Programme - Project 7)

The arts proved to be such a powerful vehicle for engagement that the limitations associated with online platforms proved not to be as great an issue as had been anticipated:

“It was difficult to observe body language due to the restrictions of Zoom; however, it was obvious during the sessions that the majority of participants were actively engaged and having fun – clapping along, singing, foot tapping, chatting, asking questions, leaning in when listening to each other, or sitting more upright when telling their personal stories or sharing opinions.” (Arts and Older People Programme - Project 6)

For participants, the Arts and Older People Programme workshops helped raise awareness that other people were also experiencing isolation. Meeting new people and making connections through the workshops helped alleviate personal feelings of loneliness. Broadening of social networks also afforded participants the opportunity to reach out and to help others:

“The project has provided the opportunity to engage with people who are experiencing loneliness due to COVID. I feel that I have made a contribution to my community.” (Carer 1)

¹ <https://www.publichealth.hscni.net/publications/take-5-steps-wellbeing-english-and-11-translations>

COVID-19-related findings

COVID-19 restrictions had created greater distance and boundaries between the old and young. Project workers described the power of the inter-generational work to create understanding and empathy amongst young people for the elders in their midst:

“It was so lovely to meet with young people again. I missed their energy.” (Participant E)

The Arts and Older People Programme 5 was also characterised as a powerful vehicle for promoting interculturality and connectivity with people from a wide variety of backgrounds:

“Participants gained understanding of other cultures, better mutual respect for more than 12 different participating cultures e.g. Bulgarian, Chinese, Egyptian, Irish, Latvian, Maltese, Russian and Spanish.” (Arts and Older People Programme - Project 5)

COVID-19-related public health measures, such as distancing and social isolation, caused worlds and horizons to shrink as older people took refuge within the confines of their homes. Participants described how the Arts and Older People Programme eased them gently out of their isolation. The arts workshops encouraged participants to ‘take notice’. They described how curiosity and healthy competition with their peers encouraged them to become more engaged with the world around them and with nature:

“It was great to get to see what others are doing. The first week was clouds – outdoors – it encouraged you to look at what is going on around you.” (Participant B)

The Arts and Older People Programme projects were credited with forging supportive connections and relationships between participants:

“Human resilience ... participants supported each other during rehearsals and more importantly in between times, through good and bad times.” (Arts and Older People Programme - Project 5)

Health and Wellbeing

There was a palpable sense of gratification across projects that the work was improving health and quality of life for participants. The improvements were linked to the enhanced social connections engendered by engagement with the arts:

“Improved health and wellbeing. Participants had weekly contact by phone, email, social media and outdoor visits to each other to support one another.” (Arts and Older People Programme - Project 5)

Arts and Older People Programme project leads also cited feedback from staff in residential settings about the positive impact that the programme was having. This included descriptions of the tangible impact on individual residents and ripple effects across other residents and staff:

“Staff noticed how mood was markedly improved for all residents after the session.” (Arts and Older People Programme - Project 8)

“There were lovely little reports of mood being markedly improved; lower levels of agitation, nervousness and decreased sense of loneliness.” (Arts and Older People Programme - Project 10)

Confidence, creativity and learning

An observed increase in the confidence of participants was a recurring theme in describing programme impact:

“The impact was very noticeable over the weeks, with the groups opening up, laughing, thinking creatively, problem solving and sharing emotions – both good and bad.” (Arts and Older People Programme - Project 6)

“Changes in confidence were very evident. People who began the programme silent and even reluctant to participate in discussion, over the week developed the confidence to join in.” (Arts and Older People Programme - Project 1)

The legacy of lockdown and enforced isolation was notable at the beginning of the Arts and Older People Programme. Project leaders and artists described the transformation that they witnessed in participants over the course of the programme:

“The majority of participants gained confidence and pride back again after many of them had been isolated for so long.” (Arts and Older People Programme - Project 2)

Operational challenges, the need for flexibility

Arts and Older People Programme 5 was launched during the third wave of the COVID-19 pandemic and before vaccination had been rolled out. Artists and projects were severely limited in what they were able to do. Nevertheless, they acted with speed to innovate and move entire programmes online:

“Due to COVID, directors, committee and participants showed great initiative and innovation by going immediately online, creating a music studio at an associate musician’s home.” (Arts and Older People Programme - Project 5)

The flexibility on the part of the Arts Council, which enabled artists to improvise and move online, yielded the unanticipated benefit for some projects of making their work available to a greater number of participants than would have been possible in person:

“COVID provided an opportunity to bring different generations together on a larger scale due to activities being online. In ‘real life’, it would have been difficult to fund these numbers.” (Arts and Older People Programme - Project 4)

Discussion and next steps:

A standardised evaluation framework, including universally recognised measures of loneliness, isolation and wellbeing, has been designed and rolled out amongst the 27 organisations benefiting from Round 6 funding. The findings from this evaluation will be available in the spring/summer of 2022.

Observation of online workshops on reminiscence, storytelling and song writing with carers and with people who have dementia served to highlight how the arts can promote dignity.

The high level of engagement by people with dementia in workshop settings challenges stereotypical notions about the capacity of the people affected by the condition.

The arts-based workshops were observed to give voice to people isolated and excluded from society. Erudite descriptions of poverty, racism and discrimination are evidence of the important advocacy roles that people with dementia can play in shaping society. Finding innovative ways of tapping into this resource and strengthening the voices of people with dementia is vital.

The Zoom workshops evolved in response to the limitations imposed by COVID-19. They proved to be enormously successful in making the arts accessible to people who are isolated.

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