

Colder, older and wiser

Arts and older people in Finland¹

Finland has the fastest ageing population in Europe. Fortunately it also has an exceptionally progressive attitude to the role of the arts in enhancing the lives of its older people and enriching the services which they use. This has found recent expression in Osaattori (www.osaattori.fi), an EU funded project which seeks to give new employment opportunities to artists and to improve access to the arts for older people. It has been working in four Finnish cities: Helsinki, Turku, Lahti and Jyvaskyla. Each city has distinctive strengths, for instance older people coming into some residential services in Turku will be interviewed along with family and friends to create a 'culture plan' of their tastes and interests, which the care home will then seek to meet.

The policy landscape for arts and older people in Finland is largely similar to the UK but with some important differences. With a population of five million the scale of Finland is much closer to Scotland and allows for better cooperation between professions and services. There is a tendency to lay great emphasis on education and professional qualifications including in care services (though as in the UK these



Photo: Stefan Crämer.

are not highly paid jobs). Perhaps the biggest difference is the integration of health and social care services and budgets at local authority level. There is also a clear official appreciation of the role of the arts in health by the Ministry of Education and Culture as seen in its 2010 publication Arts and Culture for Wellbeing – a proposal for an action programme 2010–2014 (www.minedu.fi). The strongest sign of this appreciation as it relates to older people, is the unique creation in Helsinki of a post for older people and the arts, jointly managed by the Culture and the Health and Social Services Departments.

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Case Study

Comprehensive Service Centres

These city-owned, local community centres in Helsinki provide services for both older people and for unemployed people. They combine residential units with nursing care, including for people with dementia, with a range of facilities for the local community. In some centres at least these are to a very high standard, modern and attractive.

Kinapori Centre is led by a manager with an arts degree and was re-launched by the Minister for Culture in 2012. It has very well equipped workshops for textiles, ceramics and metal working, as well as a gym and swimming pool and a large theatre and auditorium which is used, among other things for tea dances twice a week. The restaurant

and library are used by the local community as well as residents.

Roihuvuori Centre also has a welcoming library at its entrance and communal restaurant. All Finnish public buildings must have a bomb shelter and their's has been put to creative use with a multi-sensory room, art exhibitions on the walls and story telling sessions. An artist who is also a nurse has created an installation of beautifully woven colourful fabrics falling as ropes from high windows, alluding to a Finnish folk tale like Rapunzel and called 'I am still waiting.' Day care users can enjoy a range of arts events, for instance a classical guitar concert interwoven with relaxed conversation with the audience about the pieces.



Textile workshop in the Kinapori Centre. Photo: David Cutler

However overall there are more similarities than differences between Finland and the UK. The stated policy is for older people to 'age in place' and for older people to remain in their own homes as long as possible. Services are largely state funded (with tax also raised locally) but with the possibility of private provision. Need and expectations are rising at the same time as public funding is reducing somewhat.

An area of especially strong practice in Finland is the use of the arts to support nurses and care workers in carrying out their jobs in a more sensitive and effective way. This has been a feature of the EU Osatoori project. Here are a few examples. An art educator has trained workers to use a set of laminated reproductions of interesting works of art to stimulate conversation on a one to one basis. A dancer and choreographer has created a programme for carers called 'the stairs of dance.' This helps carers think about the way they touch, lift, support and hold older people. Singing has a number of positive aspects: it promotes temporary cognitive improvement for people with dementia, gives a sense of well-being and encourages cooperation between care givers and older people. Six 'care-singing' workshops are offered to workers which suggest ways to incorporate singing into daily routines and leads to a written plan for each care unit. A common aspect of all this training which goes beyond other techniques is that the arts are especially powerful at engaging and acknowledging the emotional aspect of working with older people.

There are many examples of artists working with older people in the community and in care settings as well as groups of older artists themselves (a hit

Case Study Community Arts: The Saari Sirens

Artist Pia Bartsch worked with thirteen 'baby boomer' generation women in a rural area of Finland in the vicinity of an artists' residency; Saari (<http://www.koneensaatio.fi/en/manor/presentation/>). They had worked hard all their lives and she said 'they are my idols.' She created a Flower Festival where the women wore silk evening dresses each of which had sewn at the heart something precious to them. The finishing touches were embroidered in appliqué. Bartsch wrote down the life story of each woman which were presented at the Festival while each walked down a red carpet. An accordionist played while a champagne toast was raised. Finally, someone close to each woman joined her with a bag and a flower to be planted. These flowering bags were then hung on a laundry room wall to brighten the summer days for passers by.



Photo: Stefan Crämer.

of the 2012 Luminare festival in Scotland was a female pensioners' rock band from Finland – Riskiryhma). These span all art forms and some times make use of traditional Finnish art forms such as 'cry-singing' from the North or 'ear poetry'. Choreographer Ninni Perko has recently created a piece for the Dance Theatre 'Sivuun Ensemble' called 'Only for Love' about two sisters, one of whom begins to experience dementia. In association with the Alzheimer's Society for Finland it has been performed to care givers all over the country.

Finland, while in many ways very similar to the UK, is developing an enviable lead in arts and older people. Such leadership will always owe much to charismatic and far sighted individuals, artists, officials and practitioners. But it is also a result of policies and structures which both value the role of the arts for older people and integrate arts, health and social care: an approach that the UK would be wise to follow.

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The Saari Sirens. Photo: Stefan Crämer.

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