

# The Baring Foundation



## CREATIVE AGEING IN NORTHERN IRELAND

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A celebration of the Arts Council of Northern Ireland's  
Arts and Older People programme 2010-present

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By Dr Una Lynch



# CREATIVE AGEING IN NORTHERN IRELAND: A CELEBRATION OF THE ARTS COUNCIL OF NORTHERN IRELAND'S ARTS AND OLDER PEOPLE PROGRAMME 2010-PRESENT

## About the Baring Foundation

The Baring Foundation is an independent foundation which protects and advances human rights and promotes inclusion. We believe in the role of a strong, independent civil society nationally and internationally. We use our resources to enable civil society to work with people facing discrimination and disadvantage and to act strategically to tackle the root causes of injustice and inequality. More can be found in *A History of the Baring Foundation in 50 Grants*. From 2010-2019, the Baring Foundation's Arts programme focused on creative opportunities for older people and for many years joint funded the Arts and Older People programme with the Arts Council of Northern Ireland and NI's Public Health Agency. It continues to give a small number of invited grants in this area as part of a legacy programme.

The Foundation has published widely on the topic of creative ageing; a selected list of resources can be found on page 73, with more on our website.

## About the author

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Una has worked in public health related academia, practice, and policy across the island of Ireland, Latin America, Africa and with the World Health Organisation. She has led several European, national and international research projects, and during the coronavirus pandemic she was senior COVID response manager with Nottinghamshire County Council. Her primary interest is ageing with dignity across the lifespan. She has collaborated closely with the Arts Council of NI to evaluate the Arts and Older People's Programme.

## Acknowledgements

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Drew from Streetwise  
Community Circus, page 52.  
Photo © Arts Council of Northern  
Ireland/Brian Morrison.

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# Foreword

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**BY LORRAINE CALDERWOOD**

**Lorraine is Programmes Officer for Arts Council of Northern Ireland.  
Lorraine has led the Arts and Older People Programme since 2013.**

The Arts Council of Northern Ireland published its 10-year strategy (2024 – 2034) in May 2024 and set out the vision of a society where all people can experience a thriving arts sector that is recognised as essential to creativity, wellbeing and social and economic prosperity. One of the values in our strategy is inclusion where we recognise the importance of diversity in the arts sector and being committed to inclusivity and accessibility to all.

The aim of our Arts & Older People Programme is to combat the rising incidence of poverty, isolation and loneliness amongst older people, using participation in the arts as a vehicle for social development change. A three-year programme was piloted in 2010 and since 2013 the Arts Council of Northern Ireland, in partnership with the Public Health Agency and the Baring Foundation, has continued the work across Northern Ireland.

This partnership approach has enabled the arts to be delivered to older people who would have had no prior contact with trained professional artists. Part of the developmental work has been to listen to the voices of the older people and use this to form the projects. Through the many projects delivered through this programme, older people have been empowered to become artists in their own right. Over the years the programme has invested circa £3 million and funded nearly 300 projects and engaged with 35,000 older people. Every year we see new organisations apply for funding and it is always good to see that they are organisations who have never engaged in arts projects before.

This report showcases some of the work that has taken place. The programme has also been evaluated over the years and these reports can be found on [ACNI's website](#).<sup>1</sup> The need for engaging older people has been demonstrated through quantitative and qualitative research. The participants of the programme have been vocal throughout the years about their experiences in taking part in the arts. The artists have spoken about their own experiences and how they have adapted their practices to deliver the arts to older people with specific needs. During Covid this was particularly difficult but the artists found creative solutions to still engage with older people in care homes. Over the last number of years the demand for the programme has been demonstrated through the application process but unfortunately we have only been able to fund half of the projects requested. This makes a good argument for the need to continue the work and hopefully we will be able to do so for many years to come.

**1** [artscouncil-ni.org](https://www.artscouncil-ni.org)



# Introduction

BY DR UNA LYNCH

Una has been involved with the Arts and Older People's programme since its inception, initially as a member of the steering group and in recent years as the programme evaluator.

Nobel prize winning economist Amartya Sen characterises a just society as one that fosters and nurtures freedom. In a fair and just society freedom is sacrosanct and is achieved by ensuring that people have agency and control over the choices that they make. The **Arts and Older People Programme (AOPP)** is the embodiment of Sen's capability theory. A radical and innovative programme, the AOPP puts the arts at the centre of public health. Launched in 2009 by the **Arts Council of Northern Ireland (ACNI)**, the AOPP is driven by a commitment to equitable access to the arts, amplifying the voices of older people and promoting their inclusion in society. From humble beginnings the AOPP has grown to become a flagship programme within the ACNI and demonstrates how the arts can enhance the quality of life and health and wellbeing of older people. Led by the ACNI, the AOPP is a partnership with the Public Health Agency of NI and the Baring Foundation. Over the past 15 years the programme has provided **£2.56 million** in funding to **270+ community arts programmes** for older people. This report celebrates the achievements of the AOPP. It presents 16 case studies to illustrate how the AOPP has impacted on older people, artists and community organisations across NI.

Artists have always appreciated the power of the arts to provide solace and enrich people's lives. For other people, especially those who have little experience of the arts world, the arts can be perceived by some as an elitist endeavour and by others as a luxury.

Challenging these perceptions of the arts and highlighting the potential of the arts to transform lives is key to the work of the ACNI and the AOPP and is the reason why the programme seeks to engage with people who have had little previous experience of the arts.

There is a growing appreciation and understanding of the power of the arts in supporting people to age with dignity. A burgeoning body of research is demonstrating the contribution of the arts in alleviating social isolation and promoting health and wellbeing of older people.<sup>2</sup> The findings from this research have translated into mainstream media. There are numerous television programmes and news stories about the benefits of music, singing and dance for older people, and people affected

## THE AOPP IN NUMBERS

The Arts and Older People Programme (AOPP)  
from the Arts Council of Northern Ireland (ACNI)

**2.56**      **274**

MILLION IN TOTAL  
GRANT-FUNDING

TOTAL NUMBER OF  
PROJECTS FUNDED

**35,000**

NUMBER OF PARTICIPANTS TAKING PART

<sup>2</sup> For example, the Centre for Cultural Value has produced two research digests: Older People: Culture, Community and Connection (2022) and (the impact of culture on) Older People's Physical Health (2022) produced with the University of Bristol's Connecting Through Culture as we Age programme. Available at: [www.culturehive.co.uk/CV/resources/older-people-culture-community-connection](http://www.culturehive.co.uk/CV/resources/older-people-culture-community-connection). New research is coming out all the time.

## Creative ageing in Northern Ireland: a potted history

Northern Ireland has a long history of community arts. The Arts Council of Northern Ireland (ACNI) was established in 1962 and for the past thirty years the ACNI has been proactive in making the arts accessible to everyone irrespective of income, education or address.

The arts have been used to support peace building initiatives, promote mental health and support integration of people with disabilities. In comparison, public health and ageing related research are relatively recent priorities and progress has been slow.

Public health emerged as the key driver for policy in the Northern Ireland Assembly in the Investing for health (IFH) strategy (2002). An internationally lauded strategy, IFH moved the focus of services from treatment of disease to the wider social, economic and environmental determinants of health.

Unfortunately, due to repeated periods of abeyance within the Assembly, the Public Health Agency was not established until 2009 by which time the IFH strategy had lost momentum. Reflective of the historical lowly

position of public health in NI, population ageing has also been a much-neglected area for policy and service development.

Ageing related policy in NI was given a major impetus in the decade 2006-2016 through investment from USA based organisation The Atlantic Philanthropies (AP). Initiatives spawned through AP grants included the establishment a dynamic programme of ageing related research across Queen's University Belfast. The research initiative was part of a wider partnership with Age NI, and the research was shared in seminars, symposiums and conferences with older people, NHS practitioners and colleagues from the community and voluntary sectors. Other initiatives included the creation of the age sector platform – a lobby organisation run by older people that campaigned for a commissioner for older people.<sup>3</sup>

In November 2008 an advocate for older people was appointed and three years later the first commissioner for older people in NI was appointed in November 2011. It was against this backdrop that the AOPP was launched.

by dementia, Parkinson's Disease and other age-related conditions. It is worth remembering that this appreciation of the arts as a public health intervention is relatively new.

## GENESIS AND DEVELOPMENT OF THE AOPP 2010-PRESENT

Since its inception the AOPP has been driven by the public health priorities that enable people to age with dignity. The ACNI was inspired to initiate the AOPP by the pioneering 'Creativity and Aging' study by US psychiatrist and gerontologist Gene Cohen's (2005)<sup>4</sup>. Challenging established understanding of brain function, Cohen's study demonstrated that the ageing brain can continue to grow and flourish. The study highlighted the importance of learning new skills and keeping socially engaged for older people to maintain good cognitive function. His study also revealed

an increased aptitude for artistic endeavours in the 'second half of life'. When the AOPP was launched it was radical, revolutionary and courageous.

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“ When the AOPP was launched it was radical, revolutionary and courageous. ”

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Making the arts accessible to all is a key priority for AOPP. This commitment to equity is reflected in the location of projects in areas of economic and social deprivation, isolated rural areas, residential and nursing homes. In the beginning the AOPP cast its net fairly wide and focused on people aged over 60 years living in areas of social and economic deprivation. When, in 2013, the Baring Foundation became

<sup>3</sup> Wales made history in April 2008 by becoming the first country in the world to appoint a commissioner for Older People.

<sup>4</sup> Cohen, Gene, The Creativity and Aging Study: The Impact of Professionally Conducted Cultural Programs on Older Adults, Final Report. April 2007. Available at: [creativeagingresource.lifetimearts.org/resource/the-creativity-and-aging-study-the-impact-of-professionally-conducted-cultural-programs-final-report](http://creativeagingresource.lifetimearts.org/resource/the-creativity-and-aging-study-the-impact-of-professionally-conducted-cultural-programs-final-report).

a partner in the AOPP, it helped galvanise the programme and inject new ambition. Baring contributed crucial funding to the AOPP. Perhaps even more importantly, Baring also brought over 60 years of expertise of community arts, accompanied by passion and a can-do attitude. Baring challenged the partners to go further and do more. This resulted in the AOPP becoming more focused on very socially excluded and traditionally hard to reach populations, including those living in residential and nursing homes, carers, people affected by dementia, and men.

When first launched in 2009, applications to the AOPP were small in number and relatively limited in terms of ambition and innovation. Prior to the AOPP, arts initiatives focused on older people were largely passive and characterised as entertainment. During the early days of the programme a leading figure in the NI community arts sector despaired at the seemingly endless supply of Elvis impersonators and country and western singers offering their services to care homes. Involved in the design and delivery of a very successful AOPP project, the artist argued for the rights of older people to have access to quality art that reflected their interests and amplified their voices.

A major challenge for the AOPP in the beginning was that community artists had traditionally worked with children, young people and young adults and as a result there was limited capacity, skills and experience working with older people. Recognising the importance of skilled artists to the success of the programme, the ACNI worked closely with artists, community groups and key organisations to raise awareness of the programme and encourage people to apply. A steering group was established bringing together people who were in a position to raise awareness of the programme and influence the shape and direction of the work. This group reviewed and approved grant applications

and identified priorities for evaluation. From a small and cautiously slow beginning, as described by Lorraine Calderwood, the AOPP gradually gained momentum to become an established fixture within the community arts calendar. In 2023/4, for example, there were 47 applications of which 22 received funding. Grants are typically for amounts of between £3,000 and £10,000. During the coronavirus pandemic, recognising the negative consequences of enforced social isolation on the mental health of older people, the AOPP improvised and piloted delivery of arts initiatives through online platforms. This work proved vital in alleviating impact of social isolation and making the arts accessible to isolated older people. Using online platforms professional artists brought inter-alia storytelling, songwriting and music workshops to older people in their own homes and for those who were resident in care homes, The learning from work during the coronavirus pandemic has enabled the arts community to improvise and use hybrid approaches to make their craft more accessible to 'hard to reach' people and communities.

## IMPACT

Committed to capturing and disseminating learning, the AOPP has prioritised evaluation. Internal monitoring reports include information about number of sessions, participants and section-75 characteristics.<sup>5</sup> External evaluation has used a variety of qualitative and quantitative methods to capture outcomes and impacts. Research and evaluation have informed the strategic development of the programme.

## Social isolation

Social isolation is well recognised as a serious public health issue, and it is linked to higher rates of all causes of mortality.<sup>6,7</sup> People who are socially isolated have poorer outcomes for cardiovascular diseases and mental health.<sup>8</sup>

<sup>5</sup> Section 75 of the NI Act (1998) requires public authorities to have due regard for the need to promote equality of opportunity between: persons of different religious belief, political opinion, racial group, age, marital status or sexual orientation, men and women generally, persons with a disability & persons without.

<sup>6</sup> Holt-Lunstad, J. (2017) The Potential Public Health Relevance of Social Isolation and Loneliness: Prevalence, Epidemiology and Risk Factors. *Public Policy & Aging Report* Vol 27, No 4 127-130

<sup>7</sup> Holt-Lunstad, J., Smith, T.B., Baker, M., Harris, T., & Stephenson, D. (2015). Loneliness and social isolation as risk factors for mortality: a meta-analytic review. *Perspectives on Psychological Science*, 10(2), 227–237.

<sup>8</sup> Morgan, T., Wiles, J., Moeke-Maxwell, T., Black, S., Park, H., Dewes, O., Williams, L. & Gotte, M (2020) People haven't got that close connection: meanings of loneliness and social isolation to culturally diverse older people. *Aging & Mental Health* 24 (10) 1627-1635.





Photo courtesy of Jacqueline O'Hagan, see page 64.

Myriad factors result in older people being more susceptible to becoming socially isolated. These factors include physiological changes such as diminishing eyesight, hearing and physical mobility. Retirement can result in loss of social networks and older people are more likely to experience bereavement through loss of spouse, friends and siblings. The evidence base for the arts as an intervention to alleviate social isolation is growing at an exponential rate.<sup>9, 10, 11</sup> Promoting social inclusion of older people is at the core of Belfast organisation Engage with Age (EWA) (see page 39). Eamon Quinn describes how EWA developed a dementia friendly approach to visual arts and as a result people with dementia have been enabled to “create artworks based on their interests and life experiences.”

In her case study of BEAM Creative Network, Kathryn O'Neill describes how alleviation of social isolation was the primary aim of the Young at heART project. Located in the picturesque village of Donaghmore, County

Tyrone, BEAM provides a service to people in the surrounding rural hinterland. Around 20 women aged between 65 and 85 years participated in the Young at heART project. They included women who were family carers and others who had been recently bereaved. Reflective of the focus on social isolation, some of the women had “never been in a social group before” and were “nervous and initially socially awkward”. Kathryn describes how the art workshops enabled the women to gain confidence and build friendships.

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“Young at heart was a great safe hub for participants to be able to share fears, tears and laughs. Wonderful friendships and support networks were developed within the group.”

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<sup>9</sup> Bourne, P., Camic, P and Crutch, S. (2021) Psychosocial outcomes of dyadic arts interventions for people with a dementia and their informal caregivers: A systematic review. *Health Soc Care Community*. 29:1632–1649.

<sup>10</sup> Wilkinson, F., MacLeod, A., Skinner, M. W., & Reid, H. (2013). Visible voices: Expressive arts with isolated seniors using trained volunteers. *Arts and Health: An International Journal for Research, Policy and Practice*, 5 (3), 230 – 237.

<sup>11</sup> MacLeod, A., Skinner, W., Wilkinson, F. and Reid, H. (2016) Connecting Socially Isolated Older Rural Adults with Older Volunteers through Expressive Arts. *Canadian Journal on Aging* 35 (1): 14 – 27.

In his case study celebrating the AOPP project, Momentos, Krishan Tanton, from ArtsEkta, describes how people from China, India, N. Ireland, Pakistan, Philippines, Sudan and Syria came together to create art. Momentos was delivered in three locations across NI.<sup>12</sup> This intercultural project was aimed explicitly at alleviating the social isolation that people were experiencing. A wide range of art media, including ceramics, collage and printing, were used to encourage reminiscence and sharing of personal stories from diverse cultures. The stories and memories were celebrated in an exhibition of light and sculpture. To illustrate the positive impact that Momentos had, Krishan quoted a participant:

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“ You get company. You meet new people, hear new voices. It is worthwhile to come and meet people because it widens your horizons. This is a multicultural group, and you meet many people from many places. ”

**Momentos participant**

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The Old Library Trust Healthy Living Centre has through the DEEDS<sup>13</sup> project been supporting and enabling people with dementia to be active participants in their local community. Sinead Devine describes how for some of the participants being involved with DEEDS enabled them to visit a museum for the first time in their life. In a beautiful example of how the AOPP helps challenge prejudice and promotes dignity of older people and those with dementia, Sinead describes how:

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“ Staff and volunteers marvelled at the conversations the members were having about more abstract reasoning around art. ”

**DEEDS participant**

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## Challenging ageism

A 2024 study of ageism in NI<sup>14</sup> revealed that 49% of respondents had experienced ageism. Combatting stereotypical images of what ageing means and creating environments where older people are enabled to be, and do, all that they are capable of, is at the heart of the AOPP. Creating environments and opportunities where people of all ages, genders and cultural backgrounds can meet is central to this work. Jim Webster and colleagues in Streetwise Community Circus have been leading a quiet rebellion against ageist attitudes. In the Streetwise case study Jim recounts the beautiful story of how 65-year-old Drew helped his surgeon understand how active he was by sharing a video of himself on a balance board raising a glass of wine to friends on his birthday.

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“ I feel the video made them take me seriously about my aspiration to recover and I was worth putting the effort into, rather than treat me as an ‘older patient’. ”

**Streetwise Community Circus participant**

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## Bringing the generations together

AOPP initiatives that are geared towards bringing very young children and older people together are described as being intergenerational. The relatively small number of projects categorised as ‘intergenerational’ belies the reality that all of the AOPP funded projects are in fact intergenerational. Artists, care givers and staff from host organisations are typically aged from mid-twenties to fifties. Older participants in the AOPP are typically aged from their 50s through to 90s, with the occasional centenarian. This collaboration across and between generations promotes a rich and fun learning experience and has served to challenge prejudices across the age spectrum.

<sup>12</sup> Belfast, Coleraine and Portadown.

<sup>13</sup> Dementia Engaged and Empowered Derry & Strabane (DEEDS)

<sup>14</sup> Commissioner for Older People for Northern Ireland (2024) Are you ageist? Older People's perception of ageism in Northern Ireland. Available at: [copni.org/assets/general/resources/are-you-ageist-copni-report-on-ageism-in-northern-ireland.pdf](https://copni.org/assets/general/resources/are-you-ageist-copni-report-on-ageism-in-northern-ireland.pdf).



Photo courtesy of Liz Weir. 'Memories are made of this' intergenerational project.

### Embodying person-centred care

Seeing the person and not the label and delivering care that promotes the dignity of each individual is the essence of quality health and social care. This approach is described in the professional literature as 'person centred care' and is the gold standard to which all practitioners are expected to aspire to. Unfortunately, all too often the 'person' can be lost behind labels like elderly, dementia, and parkinsonian. A major impact of the AOPP is putting the person at the centre and giving voice to people who have been excluded from society.

Working in partnership with care homes, sheltered housing providers and dementia care settings, Benjamin Gould and his colleagues at Commedia of Errors have developed a series of dementia friendly performances in a project called 'Plays Aloud'. The Plays Aloud team works with staff and residents in the various settings to develop bespoke programmes that include music, drama and poetry. It is testimony to the skill of the artist that some residents who were previously described by staff as being 'non-verbal' started smiling, became animated during performances and actively engaged with the artist. Benjamin recounts a beautiful moment:

“ A resident who was almost non-verbal lit up and began reciting The Lake Isle of Innisfree word for word along with our performers. Her daughter (who was visiting) was brought to tears as she hadn't seen her mother so positive or expressive in some time. ”

**Benjamin, Commedia of Errors Facilitator**

### Innovative partnerships

AOPP grantees have included local councils. Derry City and Strabane District (DCSD) Council is an excellent example of how the AOPP grant has enabled councils to take risks and innovate.

In her case study Jean Smyth, recently retired arts development officer with DCSD, highlights the reach of the AOPP into some of the most remote and rurally isolated areas in NI (see page 32). The project was developed in partnership between the Council and museum services. Reflective of the AOPP commitment to equity, Jean describes the actions that were taken to ensure that older carers, people with



dementia, and older adults with additional learning needs were included. The actions included working in partnership with local Health and Social Care (H&SC) providers to identify day centres, dementia units, carers groups and community organisations. Working through a team of eight artists, the Heart of the Sperrins project brought a rich and diverse mix of art forms including music, singing, storytelling, and visual arts to some of the most isolated older people in NI. Jean recounts how host organisations, unused to having such skilled artists facilitating workshops, were impressed by the innovative methods and quality of the work produced.

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“The facilitators were highly praised for their ingenuity in how they encouraged participation by all. Everyone was amazed by the quality and outcomes from the workshops. One non-verbal client at the outreach centre who normally doesn't engage with group activities never missed a session and his finished lantern was exquisite.”

**Jean Smyth, DCSD Council**

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DCSD Council also used their AOPP grant to initiate a dynamic music-based programme with older men in Derry City and Strabane. The Music to Your Ears project started in Strabane in 2014 as a music-based programme for people aged over 55. Striking a chord with older men, it quickly evolved into a men-only programme and extended to also include men in Derry City. Explored in-depth in the 2018 AOPP evaluation, the impacts included positive effects on physical and mental health, alleviating social isolation, providing a sense of purpose and boosting confidence. It brought up to 80 men together every week, to play music, compose songs and write theatrical sketches. Reflecting the AOPP's commitment to advocacy and amplifying voice of older people, many of the songs and stories created by the men deal with subjects like unemployment, mental health and poverty.<sup>15</sup>

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“Everybody needs a pat on the back from time to time – every single person under the sun needs that – and when you do the song for the boys – it feels like your life means something.”

**Participant aged 62 years**

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### **Amplifying the voices of older people**

Amplifying the voices of older people and promoting social inclusion are key to the AOPP. Paulo Freire<sup>16</sup> argued that the excluded speak through their actions but are not heard and that education works best when teacher and student learn from each other. The case study of Echo Echo Dance Theatre Company provides an example of Freire's philosophy (see page 36). Echo Echo has been running dance and movement classes with older people for over a decade and their case study illustrates the communicative power of movement and how participatory methodology enables the teacher to learn and grow. Through the AOPP the company has delivered Body Wisdom, a poetic movement practice, to a core group of 15 older men and women from across NI. In her case study, Kelly Quigley reflects on how the project has “been instrumental in shaping who I am as a person and an artist.” Elaborating, she explained:

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“Throughout the process I watched in awe as their confidence, self-esteem and understanding as performers blossomed, their connections as human beings and collaborating artists deepened, as they relished in challenging social norms in both dance and live performance, with great success I might add.”

**Kelly Quigley, Echo Echo**

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With a background in theatre and stage production, moving to work on a community arts project in East Belfast was a revelatory

<sup>15</sup> Watch a film about Derry and Strabane's Music to Your Ears men's project: [www.youtube.com/watch?v=t9uvZ7-HyM4](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=t9uvZ7-HyM4).

<sup>16</sup> Paulo Freire was a Brazilian Educationalist whose book *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (1970) is regarded as de rigueur for anyone interested in community development.



Photo courtesy of ArtsEkta, see page 22.

experience for Jacqueline O'Hagan (see page 64). East Belfast has some of the most socially and economically deprived areas of the city. Famed for the Harland and Wolf shipyard, East Belfast was traditionally an area of plentiful employment and as a result education was not typically prioritised in working class communities. In her case study of the EastSide Partnership, Jacqueline captures the challenges of developing a programme responsive to the needs of older people living in an area of endemic deprivation; an area where the arts were perceived as something for the elite. Working with local older people's organisations, care homes and dementia advocacy groups enabled Jacqueline to build strong relationships with key stakeholders in the area. These relationships led to introductions to older people and ultimately to the creation of a "community of participants" including people living in care homes, family carers and people with dementia. Jacqueline describes how the AOPP-funded Artful Ageing programme evolved in response to needs of participants

and as a result included provision of day-care for people who have dementia, to enable their carer to participate.

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“ I also realised that we should not assume what people are or are not capable of. We included creative activity such as linocut, ceramics, creative writing, music, watercolour and more to challenge our participants creatively. ”

**Jacqueline O'Hagan**

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The people with whom she was working had no prior experience of the 'arts' and Jacqueline describes having to build trust and demystify the arts and break down the barriers in people's mind, overcoming perceptions that the arts are only for rich and educated people.



Photo © Arts Council of Northern Ireland/Brian Morrison, see page 52.

“ I realised for the first time just how challenging it can be for some people within our communities to engage and take part, how isolating it can be for them and how impactful it is when projects are designed to break down these barriers. ”

**Jacqueline O’Hagan**

The building blocks of social inclusion are trust, respect and understanding. The LinkAGE and Art project run by Linking Generations (see page 45) was a direct response to the loneliness and isolation experienced by people living in care homes during the pandemic. LinkAGE and Art brought children aged between eight and 14 years into care homes where they worked on arts projects with residents aged from 63 to 102 years, all of whom had dementia. In preparation for the project the children participated in dementia

awareness training. Providing a flavour of the positive impact of the project, Vicki quotes a resident:

“ Each time the school kids came it was a real boost and it gave us something to look forward and brightened our days. ”

**Resident**

### **Physical health**

Ageing results in biological changes such as muscle wastage (sarcopenia) and bone thinning (osteoporosis). These conditions can in turn lead to frailty and premature death through increased risk of falls and fractures. By keeping physically active people can reduce and even reverse the impact of biological ageing. There is an increasing body of evidence of the positive impact of dance as an intervention to combat



frailty,<sup>17,18</sup> enhance social inclusion<sup>19</sup> and protect cognitive function of older people.<sup>20</sup> Dance has featured strongly throughout the history of the AOPP. In her case study of Starlite Stories, Una NicEoin from theatre company Prime Cut Productions (see page 49) describes how dance, music and reminiscence of the ballrooms and dancehalls of yesteryear were employed with older people's groups and people living in sheltered accommodation across Belfast. In addition to help get people active, coming just after the pandemic, Starlite Stories was judged to be a powerful antidote to the social isolation and loneliness that people endured.

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“ I found the project very enjoyable and therapeutic. I also like the dance routine with the music, and it was good exercise. Will be missed as it brought us all together. ”

**Starlite Stories participant**

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### High-quality arts and the artistic workforce

A recurring theme every year in the AOPP evaluations has been the quality of the work produced. It is clear in the way that participants talk about their achievements, the things that they have created and skills that they have learnt, that quality is the source of the sense of pride and empowerment that people feel. The artists involved with the AOPP are motivated by passion, enthusiasm and belief in the importance of what they do. The artists' case studies (see page 55-67) provide an insight into the wealth of experience within the AOPP programme. These people are motivated by their love of art and the knowledge that what they are doing is having a transformative impact on lives of older people.

With a career spanning four decades, Carol Moore is a highly respected member of the arts community in NI. An actor, writer, theatre and film director, she is also co-founder of the Charabanc theatre company. By anyone's standard Carol has nothing left to prove. Her involvement with AOPP is a personal story, motivated from her experience as a carer for her mother and watching a friend succumb to dementia.

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“ It is a brutal disease, watching the essence and vitality of someone slowly disappear. ”

**Carol Moore, Practitioner**

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Carol's case study provides a powerful insight into how as an artist she was able to develop a number of beautiful interventions that amplified the voice and personhood of the people affected by dementia. She describes the importance of adopting an individualised approach appropriate to the capabilities of each person.

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“ Being with other residents helps with the social isolation and loneliness that is unfortunately prevalent in homes. The tasks always encourage cognitive function and motor skills, even if they require assistance. It is important participants are treated as the unique individuals they are, so they are always given a choice of materials, whether it's paints, pens or plants. ”

**Carol Moore, Practitioner**

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**17** Granacher, U., Muehlbauer, T., Bridenbaugh, S., Wolf, M., Roth, R., Gschwind, Y., Wolf, I., Mata, R., & Kressig, R. (2012) Effects of a Salsa Dance Training on Balance and Strength Performance in Older Adults. *Gerontology* 58: 305-312.

**18** Pukart, B., Bertonecelj, B., Podlogar, A., Pavletic, S. (2023) Improving postural stability in active older adults: Argentine Tango Dance as an alternative Fall-Prevention strategy. *Alternative Therapies*, JUL/AUG 2023 VOL. 29 NO. 5 201.

**19** Baert V, Goris E, Mets T., Geerts, C., Bautmans, I. (2011) Motivators and barriers for physical activity in the oldest old: A systematic Review. *Ageing Research Reviews* 10 (2011) 464-474

**20** Sáez de Asteasu ML, Martínez-Velilla N, Zambom-Ferraresi F, Casas-Herrero A, Cadore EL, Galbete A, et al. (2019) Assessing the impact of physical exercise on cognitive function in older medical patients during acute hospitalization: Secondary analysis of a randomized trial. *PLoS Med* 16(7): e1002852. [journals.plos.org/plosmedicine/article?id=10.1371/journal.pmed.1002852](https://journals.plos.org/plosmedicine/article?id=10.1371/journal.pmed.1002852).

Carol describes the projects beautifully but omits the little detail of the challenges that she faced in persuading some care home managers and staff to give the project a go. Initial resistance was based on a belief that the residents would not have sufficient capacity to be able to participate. Once the projects got up and going, staff began to see residents in a new light. Happy, engaged and proud of what they were achieving.

A professional visual artist and arts facilitator Claire McComish has worked in arts administration for 24 years and has been involved with the AOPP since its inception. Her case study draws on experience working as artist in residence with the NI hospice, Men's Sheds and older people's groups in some of the most socially deprived areas of Belfast. The recurring motif in Claire's case study is her observations about how the arts helped combat the social isolation and loneliness that people were experiencing. She paints a powerful image of a "quiet, fragile lady of Thai heritage" in her eighties who was living alone in Belfast. Claire described how over the weeks of the course the lady gained confidence and at the end of the project expressed thanks for "allowing her to try painting for the first time in her eighties."

Internationally renowned artist Liz Weir has been telling stories for over half a century. Story telling is part of who she is. Through the AOPP Liz has been channelling her love for and skill in storytelling to provide reminiscence sessions for people who have dementia and their carers. In her case study Liz highlights work with children and older people and emphasises the powerful dividend to be gained from developing a shared understanding of each other. Generous with her time and passionate about the power of storytelling as a therapeutic intervention, Liz has been mentoring other storytellers to help expand reach through the Armstrong Storytelling Trust.

A musician for 45 years Paul Kane has been at the heart of initiatives aimed at making quality music accessible to older people across NI. Paul's motivation is grounded in his belief in equity, social justice and people's right to be heard. Through his music workshops Paul has enabled people to tell their stories through song. In his case study Paul provides

a powerful insight into the power of music and musicians to give voice to people who are not being heard. Describing a "one-off session in a dementia ward", Paul recounts how staff had advised that one of the patients, a woman, screamed a lot and that he should be aware of that:

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“A few songs in, the lady began to scream. At first I was concerned for her, secondly was it me causing this? And what could I do to help? It was as all of this was going through my head that I noticed that the lady was actually screaming a major third (a musical interval) to my singing and as the song went on, she fluctuated into a major 5th and then main key of the song. We locked eyes and she briefly smiled. I smiled back and we carried on.

Another nurse tried to stop her screaming, but I knew what it was she was doing: communicating. She got frustrated and was eventually moved back to her bed. I explained this to the staff; I tried to help and offer some support. The lady could not communicate in any other way. I felt so privileged to have been a part of a communication.

Given more time, might I have worked out what she was trying to say? It broke my heart to think that this lady, in trying to communicate, was being continually shut down. Yet, she had found at least one person who recognised her messages.”

**Paul Kane, Practitioner**

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## REFLECTIONS

Population ageing is one of the greatest achievements of modern times. People are living longer than at any time in history. One in six people in NI is aged over 65 years.

In NI life expectancy for men is 78.4 years and women 82.3 years. For people aged 65 years life expectancy for men was 18.29

years and 20.54 years for women.<sup>21</sup> Behind these numbers lies a tale of inequality and non-random distribution of ill-health.

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“The proportion of the population aged 65 and over has increased by 34.6 per cent from mid-1997 to mid-2022. Conversely, the proportion of children (i.e. people aged 0 to 15 years) in Northern Ireland has decreased since mid-1997 by 17.6 per cent to mid-2022.”

**NISRA, 2023:8**

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This gap is most noticeable when Healthy Life Expectancy (HLE) is considered. In 2020–22, the HLE gap between the 20% most and least deprived areas stood at 12.2 years for males and 14.2 years for females. Disability Free Years Life Expectancy (DFLE) is another way in which inequalities are apparent. DFLE for people in the least deprived areas of NI is 11 years longer than DFLE for their peers in the most deprived areas. This situation is likely to worsen as a result of the Covid-19 pandemic. Public health measures imposed through the pandemic have been linked to decline in cognitive function, mental health, and healthy behaviours.<sup>22</sup>

An urgent re-orientation of services for older people is needed to combat the ever-increasing pressure on health services. Observing the AOPP evolve and grow over the past 15 years has been an enlightening experience and a source of great hope for what the future could look like. There are many standout moments where I witnessed the transformative power of the arts on health and wellbeing of older, socially excluded people.

The Zoom-based reminiscence and storytelling session during the coronavirus pandemic that was packed full of anecdotes, songs and laughter. And yet provided a poignant glimpse into the life of a husband caring for his wife who had advanced dementia. During the session the couple quietly got up and left their seats as the wife was accompanied to

the bathroom. For 10 minutes or so, the image of two empty seats, on the computer screen, served as a reminder of the invisibility of family carers, the vital role that they play in enabling people to remain living at home, and the importance of the AOPP in enabling the couple to feel connected with other people and live with dignity.

Carers are a key population within the AOPP and in December 2017, Diane Lowry and her mother Margaret, welcomed photographer Joan Alexander and me into their home to share their experience of the AOPP (see photo on page 66). Diane had given up paid employment to become a full-time carer for her mother Margaret who had dementia. Diane described how their participation in arts workshops at EastSide Arts had proved to be life enhancing and a beacon of light in what at times was a lonely and challenging time for her mother and her. Margaret died in 2019, and Diane continues to remember the positive impact that the AOPP and EastSide Arts had on their lives:

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“... mum was brilliant at knitting and sewing but she would never have painted or done anything creative like that until she got dementia. And once she got that wee bit of confidence and not to worry about it being perfect - she loved doing she had the loveliest style to her painting and everything she did was beautiful, and she loved it.”

**Diane Lowry, Carer**

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For her own part the AOPP provided Diane with the social connections and confidence that have enabled her to create a new life for herself after her mother's death. This new life includes art exhibitions and a passion for dancing.

<sup>21</sup> Life Expectancy in Northern Ireland 2020–22, NI Department of Health. Available at : [www.health-ni.gov.uk/sites/default/files/publications/health/hscims-life-expectancy-ni-2020-22\\_0.pdf](http://www.health-ni.gov.uk/sites/default/files/publications/health/hscims-life-expectancy-ni-2020-22_0.pdf).

<sup>22</sup> Prommas, P., Lwin, K Chen, Y., Hyakutake, M., Ghaznavi, C., Sakamoto, H., Miyata., H & Nomura, S (2023) The impact of social isolation from COVID-19 related public health measures in cognitive function and mental health among older adults: A systematic review and meta-analysis. *Ageing Research Reviews* 85 (2023) 101839.



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“ with Kirsty we made flowers and beautiful cards. Then we had Jan Carson – learning how to write a short story. Jan wears lovely red lipstick and she wears lovely clothes which attracted mum to her. The two of them became the best of buddies. It got to be that anywhere Jan was doing book readings ... we would have gone, and we always had to sit in the front row. I would be in nerves because mum does tend to doze off at things – but she was wide awake and really, really enjoyed it. Jan dedicated one of her books – postcard story – to us and that was lovely. ”

**Diane Lowry, carer**

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The human need to be seen and to feel visible was writ large in an interview with a woman living in a care home who shared her experience of an intergenerational project whereby children from local primary schools came into the home once a week. Together the children and residents created mosaics and life-story books. A retired senior civil servant, the lady was living with Parkinson's disease, her speech and physical capabilities were severely affected but she was cognitively very well. Determined that I would understand her admiration and gratitude for the AOPP, she spoke laboriously to recount how wonderful it was to hear children's voices and laughter. She talked about how "beautiful" it was to get to know the children and how much she appreciated how the little girls would compliment her clothes or jewellery. Lest I didn't appreciate what she meant, she elaborated explaining that living with Parkinson's she often "felt invisible".

On a visit to the 'Shed' in Derry I commented on the magnificent view that they had of Craigavon bridge across the river Foyle. A pregnant silence was followed by me being gently informed that everyone in the room knew at least one person who has jumped or attempted to jump to their death from that bridge. Providing focus, purpose, and nurturing social networks, the AOPP visual arts project

delivered through the Shed is literally providing a lifeline for older men and women living in the shadow of the bridge.

When I think of the AOPP, I see Ronnie (pictured right). Formerly a professional musician, Ronnie had advanced dementia and was living in a care home. When admitted to the home Ronnie appeared to have lost interest in living. He wasn't interested in food, had lost the ability to speak and was reluctant to leave his room. The ACNI had arranged for video recording of an AOPP collaboration between the Ulster Orchestra and Oh Yeah Music Centre (see page 56) in Ronnie's care home. I was there to observe the session and interview residents, staff and musicians. A professional trumpeter from the Ulster Orchestra had joined forces with Paul Kane from Oh Yeah Music Centre to deliver an afternoon of old-time music. Recognising the high standard of the music being played, as the afternoon went on, Ronnie became increasingly animated. He started talking with the trumpeter and by the end of the session he was smiling broadly and playing the piano.

When the concert was over, interviews finished, and equipment packed away I called into Ronnie's room to say goodbye. The Ronnie who I met was excited, animated, and smiling from ear to ear. Despite his very severe dysphasia, Ronnie recounted how he had been a musician and that he used to visit care homes with the Salvation Army to entertain the 'old people'. Pointing to photos on the wall he described his days as a musician. Revealing the showman that he had once been, Ronnie took great delight in acting out the movements of people who had wanted to dance or sing to his music. Staff in the care home described how Ronnie's animated mood and sense of elation continued for many months. Thankfully the cameraman happened to be on hand that afternoon and was able to capture most of Ronnie's story.

The film is available on the ACNI YouTube channel<sup>23</sup> and I have used it many times in workshops about dementia. In one workshop when the film ended a participant, a nurse, was crying. Clearly emotional, the nurse reported that she knew Ronnie. He had been in hospital



Ronnie at the piano, see left for Ronnie's story.

for many weeks at the same time as her own mother. In all the time he was in hospital he never spoke, he just lay in bed, withdrawn from the world. The hospitalisation predated the video, and it saddened the nurse to learn that Ronnie had capacity and a life that was not known about.

The Bogside and Brandywell Health Forum (BBHF) is a radical and pioneering initiative located in Derry/Londonderry in the Northwest Corner of NI. Established over two decades ago BBHF serves a population of 17,000 people in an area of recognised social and economic deprivation, the Triax neighbourhood renewal area. The AOPP has enabled BBHF to use arts to reach and entice socially isolated older people to become engaged with services (see page 27). Enhanced engagement with older people has enabled BBHF to develop services and strategic decision making that is responsive to their needs. Mary Breslin describes how AOPP funding enabled the Health Forum to innovate and identify needs of the older people. This learning resulted in BBHF securing substantial National Lottery funding to deliver the Loving Life Living Longer project. In her case study of BBHF Mary quotes one of the artists to describe the alchemy within the AOPP:

“ Art can humanise a dull environment and can beautify an environment with the effect of reducing anxiety and depression while improving general happiness and productivity. ”

**Mary Breslin, Bogside and Brandywell Health Forum**

A relatively small initiative, the AOPP has had a major impact in raising awareness of the power of the arts to enrich people's lives, promote health and enable people to age with dignity. In so doing it has helped prepare the ground for major investment in the arts as a vital public health intervention. The health service in NI has been focused on ill-health and treatment of disease. This approach is neither desirable nor sustainable within the context of a rapidly ageing population.

In her case study (see page 61), artist Carol Moore recounts an exchange with a participant in the AOPP funded Occasional Gardener programme, which serves to highlight the crucial role of funding.

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“ At the last session, a representative from Arts Council NI was there, a participant (Annie) and I were both mic-ed for a chat on video.

I said this must be what it's like when you're a celebrity. Annie said, "Oh I don't think I could be bothered being a celebrity, I'm happy as I am". I asked her how she enjoyed the project. "I love you coming every week, I hope you are coming back", I replied, "it depends on that lady over there (pointing to ACNI rep) giving us more funding". Annie shouts over, "Hey you, come here, you need to give these ones more money". ”

**Carol Moore, Artist**

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The reality is, although the population of older people and the number of people living with dementia are increasing, arts funding is diminishing. This is a dreadful indictment on the effective use of resources to support older people to live with dignity. There is a powerful evidence base for the power of the arts to promote social inclusion, alleviate isolation and promote health and wellbeing. The AOPP is a relatively small-scale initiative, and the number of projects supported each year is limited by the amount of funding that is available. If learning from the AOPP is to achieve its full potential, the programme needs to be taken to scale and embedded in core service delivery. This will require a radical rethink of attitudes to ageing and the recognition of the rights of older people to age with dignity and be fully engaged in society. This engagement includes realising the rights of older people to “freely participate in the cultural life of the community, to enjoy the arts and to share in scientific advancement and its benefits”.<sup>24</sup>

For the past 15 years, the AOPP has nurtured people's knowledge and skills with regards to the power of the arts as a public health intervention. The result is a dynamic community that includes inter-alia older people, carers, artists, care homes, supported living centres, and local councils. Placing public health and arts-based interventions at the heart of ageing related policy will require cross departmental working and close collaboration between statutory, community, voluntary and private sector organisations. The capacity generated through the AOPP will prove an invaluable springboard in furthering this important endeavour.



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# ORGANISATIONS' PERSPECTIVES

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ArtEkta's Mementos  
exhibition, see page 22.



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# ArtsEkta

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BY KRISHAN TANDON

Krishan is a Creative Producer at ArtsEkta.



Photo courtesy of ArtsEkta.

## ABOUT US

ArtsEkta is an award-winning cultural organisation which works at grassroots level to strengthen and deepen relationships within and between people of the global majority and other communities living in Northern Ireland.

## ABOUT MOMENTOS

Momentos was a light and sculptural project and exhibition celebrating the stories and memories of older people. The project was based on the exploration of memories, stories and sharing of traditions from diverse cultures. Professional artists skilled in reminiscence,

visual arts and crafts including ceramics, printing and collage worked with 120 participants to develop an exhibition involving:

- Global Crescent, Belfast and Blackie Women's Group, Belfast
- Bannside Women's Group, Coleraine
- Indian Women's Group, Belfast
- Jubilee Group, Portadown
- MS Society, Belfast
- ArtsEkta's Older People Group, Belfast

The Mementos project was designed to engage partner organisations in a long-term programme of arts to stimulate reminiscence with older people of the global majority

communities. Each partner group took part for 32 weeks and the project was delivered on a regional basis in areas of Belfast, Coleraine and Portadown. The ethnicities of participants ranged from India to Pakistan, Sudan, Syria, China, the Philippines and indigenous people.

Participants wanted opportunities to meet socially and make art and relationships over the longer term. They reported that there was little access to local projects for them in their area. They were encouraged to address age relevant issues such as loneliness, exclusion, wellbeing and negative stereotypes of ageing.

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“ Learning new art makes you think, keeps my brain active and my hands. Important to be active as we get older. I can't run and jump but I can make art. Long time since did art in primary school and is good to try. We have made all these pots together – it is communal art. ”

**Participant**

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## OUR IMPACT

Momentos sought to reduce isolation and promote social connectivity amongst people who were part of communities that were new, vulnerable or experiencing demographic change. By offering group-based activities, it sought to build each participant's connection to others as a means of engendering in them a sense of belonging and a belief that they could make some choices for themselves. Over time, the changes made to and by individuals would contribute to the capacity of different communities to build on their strengths and share their learning.

Momentos builds on previous practice by ArtsEkta which identified the need for programmes with long-term engagement led by the participants' own ideas and needs. ArtsEkta's network of partner organisations and community participants have a wealth of knowledge and experiences which add value to their own communities. This programme responded to this through a process of collaboration at every stage of design, development and delivery.

## STAR STORY...



During Mementos, a visiting artist briefed the group on Kintsugi, the Japanese art of repairing and making breakages beautiful and the group then used gold to decorate and repair their work.

As the term progressed, the group made paper maquettes of lamps and then small lamps out of porcelain. They then travelled as a group to the artist's studio by the coast and watched and learnt as he made a large porcelain version of their lamps.

The next month they were back in ArtsEkta selecting printed cotton fabric and cutting and sewing motifs into collages to create large banners for display at their showcase exhibition later in the year.

Meantime, Robert, a blacksmith, had been working simultaneously in east Belfast with a group of young people who are not yet in employment or education. They designed tall water reeds to then be forged from iron. They have been developing them in response to the photos of the work that the older people have made. The young people's reeds will come through the holes in the porcelain Kintsugi bowls the older people have made.

The two groups have not met, but each has seen what the other is doing and are responding to the work; 'cross pollinating' the artist calls it. Thus, older people from Belfast, the Philippines, China and India and young people from east Belfast have created a collaborative artwork which they will share with the city when it is displayed in the free to enter, city centre civic space at 2 Royal Avenue.

For this programme significant work was undertaken in terms of research, discussion and collaborative working with partners, including the Alzheimer's Society which helped to shape the engagement activities.

The creative ideas for Momentos came directly from the people involved in the project. Feedback from ArtsEkta's previous



projects measured that 70% of participants felt that they did not have the confidence to be involved in local decision making. This changed dramatically, with an 80% improvement in their capacity and confidence as a result of the project.

Most of the feedback indicated that the participants felt physically able to participate, but that they lacked the confidence or opportunity to be involved in projects. ArtsEkta also measured a positive change in the interest they had in the arts which showed that many participants had not participated in an arts project in the last 12 months or attended events. This was due to confidence, lack of awareness, and access.

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“ Art is more for my brain and music is for movement and my body. ”

**Participant**

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Participants verbally expressed the positive effect of programmes which explored reminiscence through crafts such as ceramics

and printing. Feedback from the Alzheimer's Society showed that some participants had vastly improved their verbal communication and memory through our reminiscence craft workshops, something which they had not experienced in other workshops.

The project complemented provision that already exists by bringing groups working on different projects together to create artwork for a collective exhibition, for example, marginalised groups such as ethnic minorities, people with Alzheimer's and dementia, carers and young people all working together. ArtsEkta promoted the work of all our partner organisations and the services they can offer through the project.

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“ You get company. You meet new people, hear new voices. It is worthwhile to come and meet people because it widens your horizons. This is a multi-cultural group and you meet people from many places. ”

**Participant**

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# BEAM Creative Network

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BY KATHRYN O'NEILL

Kathryn is Head of Operations and Development at BEAM.



Photo courtesy of BEAM Creative Network.

## ABOUT US

Situated in Donaghmore, BEAM creates impact through delivering regional projects across various arts mediums like drama, dance, art, creative writing, and film, engaging people of all ages and abilities.

## ABOUT YOUNG AT heART

Our Young at heART project involved working with disengaged older people through arts-based workshops. We collaborated with Age NI, doctors, clergy, and chemists to identify participants who could benefit the

most. Through interactive activities Young at heART promoted healthy lifestyles to improve participants mental health and emotional wellbeing. The group developed new artistic skills, built relationships, shared ideas, and through interaction we noted a decrease in their feelings of isolation.

The group consisted of 15-20 ladies aged between 65 and 85, all rural based, from areas such as Donaghmore, Carland, Galbally and Pomeroy. Two ladies in the group were carers for very sick family members. Quite a few of the group had been recently bereaved. Some participants had never been in a social group

before; they were very nervous and initially social awkward. Their return each week spoke volumes.

Young at heART was a great, safe hub for participants to be able to share fears, tears and laughs. Wonderful friendships and support networks were developed within the group.

## OUR IMPACT

The primary issues that our project aimed to address were those of isolation, loneliness, physical and mental health and emotional wellbeing. This project has had a huge impact on all these areas. Young at heART encouraged and gave confidence to the ladies by joining a group, making new friends, feeling of being a part of something, learning new skills and being able to bond with like-minded older women.

The relationships of the participants and the friendships formed has helped combat isolation and loneliness. As the weeks progressed, it was clear to see that friendships had been formed – seats were saved, conversations were had, and meet-ups were arranged outside of the project. Ladies opened up to each other about personal circumstances, bereavements and bonded over mutual experiences.

Each week the ladies enjoyed learning new skills, improved their levels of confidence and communication.

## STAR STORY...



The group meet on Mondays. One of the recently bereaved ladies had said she finds Monday the most difficult day of the week. Her children and grandchildren all visit at the weekend and her usually silent home becomes a hub of noise. From joining the Young at heART group, she can set an alarm for her Monday class instead of struggling to get up and motivated for a long, lonely week. She said the group has brought enjoyment back into her life, given her a purpose and created a better weekly routine. Although she still struggles day to day, having a reason to get up on a Monday morning has been invaluable for her mental wellbeing.

Working on a bespoke art piece, completing it and taking it home was very rewarding. The creations became a talking point and gave them a real sense of achievement. What was very special was the number of people who at the beginning declared “I’m not very artistic”, yet after each session had created something beautiful and discovered talents that they never knew existed. Seeing and discovering their own capabilities was empowering for them.





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# Bogside & Brandywell Health Forum

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**BY MARY BRESLIN**

Mary is the Older People's Programme Manager  
at Bogside & Brandywell Health Forum.



Photo courtesy of Bogside & Brandywell Health Forum.

## ABOUT US

Bogside & Brandywell Health Forum is a Healthy Living Centre based in the neighbourhood renewal area of Triax in Derry. We provide a range of early interventions and health initiatives to residents living with the intergenerational effects of health inequalities and poverty.

The Bogside & Brandywell Health Forum has over 20 years' experience working with vulnerable older people within the Triax neighbourhood renewal area and beyond,

as older people are one of our main thematic groups. Locally, we are lead community partner for delivering health and wellbeing initiatives and coordinate a range of older people's steering group including Feile (Streets Alive) creative arts group and a research and delivery partnership funded by DCSDC (Derry City and Strabane District Council). Groups involved in these partnerships include Old Library Trust, New Gate Arts Project, Bogside & Brandywell Initiative, Long Tower Centre, and Creggan Neighbourhood Partnership.

## ABOUT THE SHED – CREATIVE ARTS

The participants who attended the project were socially isolated older people who were over 50, both men and women, and living within the target area of Triax, either independently or in local care homes. 116 participants took part in all.

The creative art programmes included activities such as pottery, a beginners' art class, wool weaving, basket weaving, mosaic-making, with computer classes alongside woodwork skills, lantern painting, pottery and mosaic tile making.

The project delivered a range of holistic creative arts activities throughout the year, each programme lasting six weeks and the project ran from October 2022 to October 2023.

## OUR IMPACT

Without doubt the greatest success of the programme was the positive impact on the participants giving them a sense of purpose and enjoyment to reconnect with others.

“ I have long covid and the art class helps me relax and forget about my illness, Tommy (Tommy Long, artist) gives me great support and encouragement to get the most out of the class. ”

**Participant**

Although the greatest challenge for the programme was engagement from the care homes, it was also one of the greatest successes. We have built new connections and have endeavoured to keep these relationships going to encourage participation in more community activities and when possible deliver programmes within the care homes through our new Loving Life Living Longer Project funded by the National Lottery.

The participants felt a great sense of achievement in the products they produced. The relationships between artists and participants were a huge success, as they

## STAR STORIES...



Initially the group presented with themes of trauma and pain therefore I decided it would be safer to tread carefully with reminiscence themes.

This was triggered by a few group members feeling nervous that they might not 'be good enough', their art might be judged, be overly revealing or they would not be capable of producing the same standard as other group members.

Therefore, the group was invited to choose from a broad range of materials including clay, fabrics, markers, paints, chinks etc and supported to engage in explorative art making. This allowed the group members to choose items they felt comfortable working with and supported members to feel a sense of control. During sessions group members engaged in art making and casually shared memories with other members based on materials they were using.

For example, one member decided to experiment with clay, which eventually led to her creating a clay cottage. As she worked on the cottage she discussed going there as child and described it as having happy memories.

Another group member who described feeling trapped due to physical restrictions and body pain described the use of materials as freeing.

Another group member using fabrics reflected on a humorous memories of sharing clothes with her siblings.

Natural materials allowed members to explore memories of going to the beach or childhood holidays.

One group member who initially described feeling anxious about the group because she had no art experiences later stated she very much enjoyed the experience and wanted to attend an art class.

**Ashleen Mc Cormack (art therapist) who delivered the care home projects.**



Photo courtesy of Bogside & Brandywell Health Forum.

worked together to build skills, confidence and relationships with each other in a new environment where in everyday life they maybe never have the opportunity to meet.

We contacted the artists involved in the project ask about their experience. They highlighted the positive wellbeing impact the project had on them, by providing an opportunity to enhance older people's skills and enjoyment, learning about the techniques and colour palettes when painting and creating sculpting. Most importantly, they felt they were making a difference to the participants' lives by helping them to build new friendships and building a sense of achievement in themselves and participants.

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“ Art can humanise a dull environment and can beautify an environment with the effect of reducing anxiety and depression while improving general happiness and productivity. ”

“ Seeing this in action gives a great sense of achievement. ”

**Artist**

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BBHF's experience with this project has enhanced our learning about what older people want to enjoy later life. This now influences and informs decision making at a local and strategic level within the organisation as we have the factual and robust evidence on what works for older residents. For BBHF it is the joy and positivity of being involved in such a project and seeing the benefits and fulfilment to residents that drives the passion for the work.

Creative arts are more than just a hobby for older adults; they offer a range of benefits that can significantly enhance their quality of life. By encouraging self-expression, promoting mental and physical health, and fostering social connections, creative arts play a vital role in supporting healthy aging.





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# Commedia of Errors

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BY BENJAMIN GOULD

Benjamin is the founder and artistic director of Commedia of Errors.



Photo courtesy of Commedia of Errors.

## ABOUT US

Commedia of Errors creates art that responds to, challenges and questions the changing times in which we live. It aims to broaden and deepen engagement by overcoming barriers to participation.

## ABOUT PLAYS ALOUD

Plays Aloud brings specially developed live performances and workshops to care homes, folds, sheltered housing units and dementia care facilities across Northern Ireland. The

project has been developed in conjunction with a dementia care specialist and targets key issues faced by those living in supported living facilities. We also train care support staff in activity delivery.

The programme partners with Radius Housing, Abbeyfield and Wesley and several independent providers.

Project participants are 65+, male and female (although tend to be 30:70 male to female in line with scheme populations); living in care homes, nursing homes, supported living

facilities and dementia care units across Northern Ireland; and many (but not all) are living with dementia. The majority of beneficiaries are in the greater Belfast area, similar to the population of NI, but we reach schemes across all six counties.

## OUR IMPACT

This work is designed to reduce isolation and increase peer engagement in older people (65+) living in care homes, nursing homes and supported living facilities by bringing music, poetry and comedy to audiences.

“Better than my medication!”

**Participant**

Schemes we work with have transient populations and residents often experience social isolation, loss of status and a loss of independence, resulting in a reduction in mental and physical wellbeing, as well as a reduction in access to arts and activities available to wider population due to their complex medical needs.

Activities such as ours improve mental health and wellbeing and are proven to reduce dementia-related decline as part of a wider programme of activities.

Our work encourages the building of stronger networks and communities in care homes between residents and between residents and carers. We also work with staff members to build staff confidence and diversify their skillsets.

Since the commencement of the programme, we have facilitated the building of new friendships and seen them flourish and seen beneficiaries build new confidence to engage with their peers and carers. We receive exceptional feedback and the improvement of mood and lasting positive emotional change is palpable during performances.

## STAR STORIES...



The music and poetry of our work has the power to energise and invigorate our older audiences and has a particularly profound impact on those living with dementia.

In one particular performance, a resident with progressed dementia who was almost non-verbal lit up and began reciting ‘The Lake Isle of Innisfree’, word for word, along with our performers. Her daughter (who was visiting) was brought to tears as she hadn’t seen her mother so positive or expressive in some time. She never realised her connection with the poem she had learnt in school and took a copy to read along with her in the future.

In the same performance a resident who had been feeling down all day was up dancing by the end of the show and a resident with severe chronic pain called the performance “Better than my medication”!

This is a wonderful programme to be a part of, wholesome and uplifting with real and immediate impact on audiences. For Commedia of Errors as an organisation, it has become a staple part of our calendar and undergone a process of continuous development that has resulted in a new major funder supporting the work from 2024 onwards. We are delighted that the National Lottery Community Fund has committed to a major expansion of Plays Aloud over the next three years. This will not only provide for greater stability and growth for the programme, but for the company as a whole.



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## Derry City & Strabane District Council

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BY JEAN SMYTH

Jean was Arts Development Officer,  
now retired, for Derry City & Strabane District Council.



Music to your Ears men's music project. Photo © Joan Alexander.

### ABOUT HEART OF THE SPERRINS

Heart of the Sperrins, Derry City & Strabane District Council's older people's creative project, is nestled in this north-western mountain range, covering the most isolated rural communities across the three wards of Derg, Sperrins and Faughan. Our area stretches fifty miles, crisscrossing hill lands from most westerly Aghyaran to Eglinton in the north through the occasional small villages, with sparse access to public amenities such as transport, health and welfare.

This project was developed following 2018/9 research by Thrive for Donegal Council and Derry City/Strabane Council, which led to an ultimate plan of action in 2021 to address anomalies in regional Arts and Culture Audience Development. We queried the marked drop in people of 60 years of age and older getting involved with arts and culture either as participants or audience. This funding allowed us to explore this further via accessing agencies who provide support to our older citizens such as community hubs, social clubs, day care services; places not developed



directly for arts and culture activities but who were willing to working with us through a creative process.

The Hearts of the Sperrins project set out to target 120 individuals over 60 years old not normally participating in Arts and Cultural activities, and in the end we actually worked with 160 people. We engaged eight facilitators offering a mix of music/singing, story-telling, visual arts and crafts, so the participants could choose from a variety of activities and also try something new. The Council's Arts Development and Museum Services departments developed the programme, which also included a reminiscence workshop and visits to the Tower Museum, arranging transport as required. 120 participants visited the Museum, with outreach workshops arranged for others where travel times were prohibitive.

We particularly wanted to ensure that we reached rural individuals who lived in isolation including older adults with learning needs as well as community groups. This was achieved by targeting daycare units attended for personal care and respite and dementia units highlighted through the Western Health & Social Care Trust (WHSST). We worked with four units serving rural clientele and two outreach hubs and we also offered two open

**A Heart of the Sperrins lantern, photo courtesy of Derry City & Strabane District Council.**



## STAR STORY...



Sion Mills Chit and Chatter Monday group is a newly formed group for home carers. They report that their singing project gives them company and support. The breathing exercises help them physically, as well as giving them confidence and courage to sing amongst themselves! More workshops are planned.

workshops for carers – one doing creative journalling and a singing group, Everyone's Voice, at the Alley Theatre. We approached the mental health unit's recently formed Strabane Carers Support Group, as well as a number of community organisations. New members were either totally new to arts and culture or had issues that stopped them joining arts activities.

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“ Victoria Geelan (musician) from Music Kin had such an infectious loud laugh it lights up the room – you couldn't help but to enjoy the participation in each workshop. We looked forward to her coming and getting into the mood to sing. We all went out on such a high that kept us going for days! We learnt everything from lullabies to Celine Dion songs, it was a joy, just not long enough. ”

### Participant

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There was a good gender mix, particularly in the care units, and we were delighted to involve men and woman in visual arts activities. In the craft sessions, participants created lanterns panels which allowed for individual diverse interests from tractors and dogs to wildlife, flowers and animals, all beautifully finished in glass paints, making it effervescent by candlelight.

Story-telling facilitator, Madeline, split the time between stories and singing, working it to suit the needs of the group, catering for different attention spans. Similarly for the participants with dementia, she chatted to them, encouraging their communication skills.



Music to your Ears men's music project. Photo © Joan Alexander.

## OUR IMPACT

The facilitators were highly praised for their ingenuity in how they encouraged participation by all.

Everyone was amazed by the quality and outcomes from their workshops. One non-verbal client at an Outreach Centre who normally doesn't engage with group activities, never missed a session and his finished lantern was exquisite!

Rural groups were quite wary of their ability to work at visual art, feeling outside their comfort zone. Artist Sheila Byrne met with the Kildoak group ahead of the workshop to dispel their worries. We had an amazing turn-out of men and women drawing buildings – such as an old lime kiln and schoolhouse from their local area – using historic photos from the Museum archives as source materials. All were complete beginners who never had a chance to try drawing or painting but thoroughly enjoyed the experience. They were keen for future arts classes and enjoyed the museum trip.

Likewise with other groups: they enjoyed the craft experience and it encouraged them to look for other opportunities and to approach arts activities with an open mind. All participants indicated that a good facilitator gave them encouragement and made them feel safe.

Derry & Strabane District Council intends to seek further channels of funding towards creating arts and cultural activity for people's health and wellbeing. New links created by the Museum Services will improve life for our ageing population regardless of where they live.

The legacy left from the Heart of the Sperrins programme was so positive, with similar responses to our talented facilitators who shared their enthusiasm for the arts, with our rural communities.





# Echo Echo Dance Theatre Company

BY KELLY QUIGLEY

Kelly is a dance artist and Ensemble Member at Echo Echo.



Body Wisdom in the Community project with Praxis. Photo © Patrick Duddy.

## ABOUT US

Echo Echo Dance Theatre Company is based in Derry, NI. The organisation works as an ensemble with artists who are committed to long term collaboration and mutual support.

## ABOUT BODY WISDOM

Body Wisdom is Echo Echo's long running project for 50+ which creates a space for older people to participate in quality dance/movement projects – weekly classes, regular performances and occasional outreach programmes in local care settings. In some ways it has been Echo Echo's most successful

project with a group of highly committed people who now meet regularly and create original performances. It has been running in its current form since 2014.

Body Wisdom is open to anyone 50+ of any ability to explore poetic movement practice which is founded on the principle that everyone has the ability to be creative in movement. Current membership ranges from people in their fifties to people in their eighties. There is a core group of around 15 people who regularly travel from as far as Belfast, Wicklow and Donegal to attend the weekly classes. Most of the members are women with around a



Echo Echo Dance's Body Wisdom group present *Figments* by Kelly Quigley (2023). Photo © Simon Alleyne.

fifth being men. There is a relatively even split between members living rurally and in the city. We do have one member who resides in a care home and can avail of carers to assist them if needed.

“To me Body Wisdom was a physical, mental and spiritual experience. I loved the freedom of movement it gave me. I have arthritis and was fixated on what I could not do. Body Wisdom changed my focus to what I could do.”

**Participant**

## OUR IMPACT

The Body Wisdom project has been instrumental in shaping who I am as a person and an artist. To meet, share and work creatively with largely the same group of people on a regular basis for over a decade is a very special practice that I will forever hold dear to my heart. It has been a unique experience where we have grown together so much artistically. As my perspective as an artist has grown and evolved at various points

## STAR STORY...



I was commissioned to make a piece of dance theatre with the Body Wisdom group for the 2023 Echo Echo Festival of Dance and Movement. I worked with the women of the group intensively for a month which was a very fulfilling experience for us all. We explored and collaborated through movement, song, poetry, and art, our shared lived experience as women and created a work called *Figments*.

Throughout the process I watched in awe as their confidence, self-esteem and understanding as performers blossomed, their connections as human beings and collaborating artists deepened, and as they relished in challenging societal norms in both dance and live performance, with great success I might add!

“What a powerful embodiment of our journey as women. Such different elements, kind of shamanic and tribal. Loved it.”

**Audience member**

One of the secret successes of that whole experience was that Body Wisdom gained two new members the very next week because of how inspired they felt as audience members of that festival performance, and they are still committed to the project today!

I have witnessed first-hand how valuable on many levels arts participation for older people can be – physically, emotionally and socially. Participation in high quality arts projects, where one can experience freedom of creative expression is an essential component to a fulfilling life regardless of age and could be argued holds even more importance as we get older.

Body Wisdom is unique as it has taken years of consistent commitment from many people to make the project work. That level of dedication is just not something you come across very often especially in this part of the world and with very little financial support. So I am very proud to be a part of it while it lasts.

over the years, the members of the group have enthusiastically shared and explored in those shifts and changes with me – something I will always appreciate deeply. There is a level of trust and communication that develops from working at such depth for such a long time and I think that shows in our work, especially our latest piece of work, Figments, which premiered at the Echo Echo Festival of Dance and Movement 2023.

The members themselves have grown into amazing artists individually and collectively. One member has just completed an Inclusive Dance Cork course and another was successful in applying for a General Arts Award 2023/24 from the Arts Council NI for the first time.

The impact of this project has been monumental for all involved. This is mostly due to the high expectations and good will of all involved, as this project isn't funded and wouldn't be possible without that.

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“ I have enjoyed being part of Body Wisdom – like being a child again – invited to play on the floor, let me out of my box. I have learned so much. There is such delicacy and potency in the slightest gesture, or in the biggest. I am constantly surprised and delighted by how articulate the body is – this heap of old bones, some of them sore.

The process of finding dance within myself and within the group – with all the trust and sharing that involves – is very special, life-enhancing. I am always elated at the end of each session. I am attentive to movement in a new way. I find dance everywhere, or it finds me. ”

**Participant**

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# Engage with Age

BY EAMON QUINN

Eamon is the Director of Engage with Age.



Photo courtesy of Engage with Age.

## ABOUT US

Engage with Age's mission is to empower older people to live healthy, happy, independent, and more connected lives. Based in Belfast, our work includes programmes tackling loneliness with older people, health improvement, supporting older groups and forums, and advocacy including significant dementia friendly work.

## ABOUT OUR DEMENTIA-FRIENDLY ARTS PROGRAMME

Engage with Age has developed a dementia-friendly visual art practice over the last eight years. People living with dementia

are empowered to create artworks based on their interests and life experience. Art workshops are a way for small groups of people with early to moderate dementia to engage with each other, enjoy memories and pastimes, and create work in a methodology that is paced to suit their needs, with an approach that limits distractions and maximises the person's engagement and control.

The Dementia Friendly Artist in Residence programme works in centres with people living with dementia. The participants have early to moderate dementia, as a level of intellectual and motor capacity is required to participate and to not frustrate participants. The centres are in East and South Belfast

## STAR STORIES...



One older lady in her late 70s lives in a supported living centre and has a degree of independence. Through conversations she talked about how levels of stress had declined over recent years having come to terms with bereavement. She recounts improved memory and improved levels of enjoyment. She fully participated in the programme. She used to work in hospitals and always had lots of keys in her possession. Her artwork was based on keys and doors and responding to the Covid-19 pandemic, being glad to now be free and able to go outside.

One gentleman, also in his late 70s, had been living with a dementia diagnosis for some years. He was adept at painting and could work with watercolour paints to paint landscapes, objects and animals and whole scenes with little support. This year the participant still retained strong painting skills and made a number of stand-alone images. His dementia has progressed, however, and sometimes he would take a break from painting, perhaps a bathroom break, and return to the workshop and not remember that he was part-way through painting a scene. He would ask “who has painted this?”

Another lady in her 90s had painted throughout her life but hadn't for many years. She enjoyed taking up paint brushes again. Staff in the centre sent her family photographs of the work she had made and her children were thrilled that she had regained her ability to paint. The project allowed her to enjoy artistic activity again.

and have been a mix of residential and day centres. Participants are mostly aged 60 or older, with some participants in their 90s. The gender breakdown is evenly split male to female, which is interesting as much work with older people living without cognitive impairments is predominantly 65% female/35% male. Participants take part in a series of ten workshops each, in groups and with a view



'Remember I forget'. Photo courtesy of Engage with Age.

to building up the art activity and art works produced. There is a training element to the programme with 70 people learning techniques to work with people living with dementia, including care staff in the venues, family members and carers.

## OUR IMPACT

### Impact on participants

Centre staff report a wide range of positive impacts on physical and mental wellbeing, including that: participants are more communicative as they were undertaking an activity that suited them (pace, ability, distraction-free setting); interaction between participants increased; participants talked about their past and histories and that staff and fellow participants learned more about each other.

Staff also noted that after the sessions participants were more relaxed, their communication was improved, and their body language was more positive and confident. The benefit of the sessions lasted the rest of the day and into the next day. They also noted that participants' sleep improved on evenings after art sessions. They felt that participants experienced pleasure undertaking the sessions,

and experienced degrees of pride in the work when they saw the artworks finished and visited the exhibition.

### **Impact on venues**

Venues found that the sessions provided a structure for the day for the centre. While the activity wasn't part of any formal care plan, the centres publicised the art sessions and artworks to the families of those using the centres, which improved communication and interest in the relatives attending the centres. Individual family members engaged better with their family members as a result of the programme.

### **Impact on staff/carers**

Staff members learned techniques on how to use the art sessions, which they then went on to use after the programme finished. Staff morale was positively affected by the workshops and the training. Staff members were very pleased to see their clients enjoying themselves and staff remarked a number of times that supporting their participants was easier after workshops concluded.

We had hoped to engage more with family members/carers; however, this presented practical difficulties as while participants were attending day centres, carers are using that time for respite/time off. Likewise with residential centres, family members or carers are often working during the week and unable to visit during daytime.





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# Linking Generations Northern Ireland

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BY VICKI TITTERINGTON

Vicki is the Director of Linking Generations NI.



Photo courtesy of Linking Generations Northern Ireland.

## ABOUT US

Linking Generations NI (LGNI) acts as a small catalyst organisation supporting the development of intergenerational practice across Northern Ireland. We create opportunities to bring generations together to address societal issues such as ageism, community safety, isolation and loneliness, health and wellbeing, good relations, and much more.

LGNI's vision is for a Northern Ireland where all generations are respected, understood, connected and engaged together in their

communities. We work closely with local partners to support them to adopt an intergenerational approach to existing work adding value and achieving multiple outcomes.

## ABOUT LINKAGE & ART

LGNI's LinkAGE & Art project was delivered as part of ACNI's Arts for Older People 2022-2023 funding cycle. Through this project LGNI aimed to create linkages between care home residents and school pupils and engage them in intergenerational arts activities. LGNI staff matched each intergenerational group with a local artist to explore a variety of art mediums.



“When the school kids were calling to do arts project it gave us a wee lift every week and we had such good fun.”

“The kids joining us at the Care Home – they brought so much joy / laughter to us at the Care Home especially when our days can be long.”

“Each time the school kids came it was a real boost to us and it gave us something to look forward to and brightened up our days.”

### Residents

Our partners were: Movilla House Nursing Home and Movilla High School, Newtownards; Marina Care Home and Woods Primary School, Magherafelt; Ringdufferin Nursing Home and Killyleagh Integrated Primary School; and County Care Home and Model Primary School, Enniskillen.

The project was delivered by artists Diane Henshaw, Trisha McNally and Diane McCormick.

“I found the project tremendously impactful on all beneficiaries. A difficult group of elderly folk with no artistic activities happening so this project really lifted their hearts, also they loved the links with the young people.”

### Artist

Primarily our project aimed to engage older people living in care homes giving them the opportunity to participate in the arts and connect with young people in their community. LGNI identified the need for this project as an intervention in the aftermath of Covid-19. Many care home residents had been shut off from their communities, families and young people during this very scary and isolating time. Care homes told us that many of their existing relationships with schools and youth settings had simply broken down and advised they would like support to rebuild links.

### STAR STORY...



Watching the relationships grow week on week was an inspiration. One little boy in particular attached to an older gentleman with dementia and went straight to him at the celebration event. The teacher said he talked about him all the time. The gentleman despite his dementia knew and recognised the boy. Pure joy!

Each of the four projects involved people with dementia. The age of the older participants ranged from 63-102.

The younger participants in this project were recruited from local schools close to the participating care homes and included three primary schools and one secondary school. The pupils' ages ranged from 8-14 and all took part in Dementia Awareness sessions facilitated by LGNI using Alzheimer's Society resources.

“I enjoyed talking and getting to know the older people and doing the art together – it makes me happy.”

“No matter what age you are you can always have some fun in art.”

### Pupils

Photo courtesy of Linking Generations Northern Ireland.



“The children thoroughly enjoyed working with the older residents and they are more aware of dementia and how some older people suffer from this. As the care home is in close proximity we intend to keep connections maybe through reading or art.”

**School teacher**

## OUR IMPACT

This intergenerational arts project engaged care home residents who were at risk of being excluded from wider community and society. The intergenerational nature of the project brought together age groups that wouldn't normally work together or engage with one another. Approximately 100 participants took part in a total of 28 intergenerational arts sessions and four celebration events, with around 50 pupils and staff members taking part in Dementia Awareness sessions.

LGNI collected feedback from participants, artists, teachers and care home activity coordinators. A sample of headline findings included:

- great for the mental health and wellbeing for all involved;
- contributed to alleviating social isolation and loneliness of older people;
- increased awareness of dementia;
- supported Care Home standards and educational outcomes;
- supported the learning of new things.

When surveyed participants' feedback showed:

- 81% of participants told us that this was the first time they had been involved in intergenerational work;
- 99% of participants told us they enjoyed being with people of a different generation;
- 89% of participants said they felt more connected to their community;
- 82% of participants said they had learnt something new.

“The project brought great joy to the residents. They loved to see the children coming. No matter what mood the residents are in, when they knew the children are coming their mood lifts... We intend to keep active links with both the school and Linking Generations.”

**Activity coordinator**

From LGNI's perspective, this project has supported our core aim of developing quality and sustainable intergenerational practice. All of the care settings involved have continued their links with local schools and embraced intergenerational approaches to home life. LGNI has been delighted that those involved have continued their work and regularly share their experiences and updates at our LGNI network meetings, as part of LGNI's Christmas and Global Intergenerational Week campaigns and on social media. This project wasn't just a one-off activity that ended. It created amazing new links that continue to flourish.

LGNI has had other projects funded by the Arts for Older People Fund in previous years, including Art 'UR' Age<sup>25</sup>, EngAGE Art 2017-2019<sup>26</sup> and Having a Yarn<sup>27</sup>.



[www.linkinggenerationsni.com/project/linkage-arts](http://www.linkinggenerationsni.com/project/linkage-arts)

<sup>25</sup> [www.linkinggenerationsni.com/project/art-ur-age](http://www.linkinggenerationsni.com/project/art-ur-age)

<sup>26</sup> [www.linkinggenerationsni.com/project/engage-art-2017-2019](http://www.linkinggenerationsni.com/project/engage-art-2017-2019)

<sup>27</sup> [www.linkinggenerationsni.com/project/having-a-yarn](http://www.linkinggenerationsni.com/project/having-a-yarn)

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# Old Library Trust Healthy Living Centre

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BY SINEAD DEVINE

Sinead is DEEDS Coordinator (Dementia Engaged and Empowered Derry & Strabane) at the Old Library Trust.



Photo courtesy of Old Library Trust.

## ABOUT US

The Old Library Trust, in Creggan, Derry, provides services, including arts projects to improve community health. DEEDS (Dementia Engaged and Empowered Derry & Strabane) is our flagship project keeping people with dementia well for longer in their own community.

## ABOUT TREASURED POSSESSIONS

Treasured Possessions: The People's Artefacts was a high-quality artistic experience for members and began with a dementia-friendly

visit to the Tower Museum examining artefacts. Members then explored their own Treasured Possessions through storytelling sessions. Artist Emmett McSheffrey's workshops explored portraiture through the ages and group portraits were taken. Twelve members with their Treasured Possession had their portrait taken and their story recorded. These were then presented in an exhibition with QR codes for viewers to listen to the [stories](#).

The participants for Treasured Possessions were all older people aged 65–93 years of age living with dementia, all of whom were members of the DEEDS social and activity

groups. These are mixed male/female groups, based across the city and district of Derry and Strabane. Four groups are city based in Derry/Londonderry with groups on the Cityside and Waterside. The Park group services the rural area and the Strabane group offers the service to Strabane town and outlying rural district. Our partners who host the groups are Hillcrest Trust, Shantallow Community Centre, Caw Nelson Drive Action Group, Learmount Community Development Group and Strabane and District Caring Services. Members are living in the early to mid-stages of dementia and become members through a referral process via the Memory Clinic (Western Health & Social Care Trust), social workers, GPs, as well as family and self-referrals.

## OUR IMPACT

The impact of the project has been immense. There were so many firsts for our members. Many had never been to the museum or participated in an arts process like this before.

“Visiting the Tower Museum – never been before – was the best part of the project.”

### Participant

One unforeseen impact was that members got to play around with polaroid cameras in the portraiture workshop. Members noted and others agreed that often they are photographed but don't have the opportunity to take a photo themselves anymore.

Staff and volunteers found that you can't underestimate what people with dementia can do or understand. For example, during a conversation about selfies (“are they art?”), they marvelled at conversations the members were having involving abstract reasoning around art. Treasured Possessions allowed the staff and volunteers, as well as audiences, to see beyond the diagnosis of dementia, to see the person and hear their own ideas, thoughts and opinions on a range of things including

## STAR STORY...



We had a lady (P) who had not been long with DEEDS when we began Treasured Possessions. She'd never been to the museum and whilst had encouraged others as a teacher to explore art, she revealed that she'd not had many opportunities to experience art outside of this. She really enjoyed the museum, seeing the objects and exploring what these meant to her. She was a quiet, shy lady, always seeing to the needs of the others. However, she began to open up, sharing more back in her social group and was absolutely delighted to be chosen to represent them. Each portrait was taken in members' own homes, where we also researched, and recorded the stories. She was very proud to welcome us with her sister into her home to talk more about her chosen object which was very dear to her. We looked around the room, seeing many wonderful things that she could have brought to the project, but she had chosen a book – interestingly a book of memories, created by

friends and family for her last big birthday. The book was full of wonderful stories, photos and anecdotes from her childhood and growing up, showing how hard she'd worked as a teacher, had been a pillar of her community and contributed so much to her local church.

The project had given her much needed space to have her story heard. It had gone from “Sure who would be interested in me?” to really enjoying sharing the story of her life. The process had said to her “I am important. My story is important. We hear your story. Yes, your story is important”, giving her a great sense of pride. But it also became a huge focus for family as sadly she passed away not long after. Unfortunately, she was not the only group member to pass, and families bravely gave permission for their portraits to be exhibited, noting that having their voices recorded and portraits shared had given them great comfort in their loss. “A sense of lives well lived and enjoyed to the end with projects like this.”





Photo courtesy of Old Library Trust.

their own lives. They also learnt about a different kind of arts process, as this was so different to a general arts and crafts project. Among members, we saw an increase in confidence to join in, to add to the conversation and try new things since the project, leading to more requests for arts-based activity.

Many with dementia withdraw from cultural events and venues due to the challenges they face to engage, so this project offered many opportunities they do not normally have, in a

safe and dementia friendly way. Whilst our DEEDS social groups offer weekly connection, projects like Treasured Possessions extend this connection further out into the wider community to explore art, to share their life stories, as well as experience services such as museums and art galleries. The sense of pride of both members and families being a part of an exhibition has been wonderful to see. Indeed, we are excited to launch a new exhibition in this year following on from this project.



## OLD LIBRARY TRUST HEALTHY LIVING CENTRE

### Treasured Possessions: The People's Artefacts



Ann



Colm



Gerrard



JJ



Margaret



Mavis



Listen to the stories:

[www.youtube.com/watch?v=9kyU7QUBvxk&t=47s](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9kyU7QUBvxk&t=47s)





# Prime Cut Productions

BY UNA NICEOIN

Una is Executive Producer at Prime Cut Productions.



Photo © Paul Duffy.

## ABOUT US

Established in 1992, Prime Cut Productions is an Independent Theatre Production Company based in Belfast and is one of Northern Ireland's critically acclaimed arts organisations. Excellence is at the core of our practice, and we are committed to producing artistically engaging experiences for our audiences, artists and participants.

## ABOUT STARLITE STORIES

Starlite Stories is an arts and reminiscence project that explores dance and music, the ballrooms and dancehalls of Belfast's past. Delivered since 2021, Starlite Stories has

brought Prime Cut Productions together with older people's groups throughout Belfast City to celebrate the dancehall traditions of the city in a series of workshops for older people, culminating in a set of portraits of and for the participants and a documentary film.

“ This project was very good. I enjoyed it very much. It got me out of my flat as I don't leave my flat. Anthea was a great organiser and really got involved in the programme. ”

**Participant**



Photo © Paul Duffy.

“ Thank you to Bobbi and Anthea for a very special selection of musical exercises. They are very special and different to anything I ever experienced. When I am at home listening to music on the radio, I now love to move to, like the exercises I have learnt in the class. I love it and feel so comfortable and agile. Please come again. Thank you so much. ”

**Participant**

The participants in Starlite Stories are all older people – the minimum age is 55, but the average is by and large older than this. We work with participants from a variety of settings: some are people who attend older people’s groups in their local community, for example, Forthspring Inter-Community Project and Ballynaveigh Community Development Association; others live in assisted living accommodation or folds – the majority of which are run by Radius Housing who have become a key partner in the delivery of the project. To date, all of our participants come from Belfast but we would be eager to expand this across Northern Ireland. Our participant gender breakdown is approximately 70% women, 30% men.



Photo © Paul Duffy.

“ This project was just my ‘Heaven’. I loved it from the beginning. My youth was spent every weekend enjoying going to dances in nearby towns. I loved the ‘magic of showbands’, their music breathed in my soul, my heart trembled when I met my boyfriend who later became my husband. I enjoyed reminiscing about with our group about our fondest memories of our girlhoods. We had so much to talk about, it brought laughter and tears to our hearts and brightened our daily lives. ”

**Participant**

Of our participants, approximately 30% are living with dementia, and this demographic is notably bigger in our 2024 programme.

## OUR IMPACT

The first Starlite Stories was delivered toward the end of the Covid-19 pandemic and its impact cannot be overstated. In terms of disadvantage, the main areas of marginalisation were the age of the participants and the effect of close to two years of isolation as a result of lockdowns and ongoing social restrictions. For many going to their local community centre, taking part in peer activities ranging





Photo © Paul Duffy.

from the arts to crafts to physical activity to simply socialising, was a key part of their lives and this was taken away. Many lost friends and family to the pandemic and were unable to attend funerals or memorials. Many were completely isolated from their families. For older people the pandemic was a far grimmer experience than for the general populace. And the participants of Starlite Stories included people who had travelled the world, come from other countries, had wide and varied careers, a rich collection of lives. Many now felt that they were no longer central or relevant, a key component of the communities that they lived in, that things had moved on. Within each of the partner organisations and among their friends, they felt important and that their views and opinions were valued, but within each of the wider communities they saw themselves as being removed from what was going on. The project and the film enabled participants to acknowledge that their experience was widespread, that there were many others who felt the same, and to celebrate the wealth of experiences throughout all the groups.

Starlite Stories represented a real evolution for Prime Cut, bringing together dance, photography and film to create a new kind of project that has been incredibly successful. As part of our ongoing communication with our



Photo © Paul Duffy.

partner organisations, we are keen to find ways of engaging with the wider communities that each Centre is located in.

As an arts organisation, Prime Cut have developed incredibly since we first started to deliver Arts and Older People Projects in 2015. We have created tools of advocacy including documentaries and multi-media art installations which have given the participants a voice and raised awareness of dementia. Starlite Stories gives another dimension to this, a fully documented arts project that's also an advocacy tool for arts projects for older people. We have developed working relationships with other arts organisations and practitioners, as well as community organisations and we would like to grow and develop this further.

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“ I found the project very enjoyable and therapeutic. I also like the dance routine with the music and it was good exercise. Will be missed as it brought us together and it was also fun to do. It brought a lot of good memories for us. ”

**Participant**

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# Streetwise Community Circus

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BY JIM WEBSTER

Jim is the founder and CEO of Streetwise Community Circus.



Photo courtesy of Streetwise Community Circus.

## ABOUT US

Streetwise Community Circus (SCC) is a 'social circus' organisation, using circus workshops to improve lives of marginalised people in society including young, old, people living with dementia and disability groups.

## ABOUT OUR OLDER PEOPLE'S PROJECTS

We deliver a range of circus programmes across Northern Ireland including weekly sessions in Belfast, Millisle, Enniskillen, Whitehead and Lislea in partnership with local community development organisations, who are all represented on our committee. We also

run ongoing outreach programmes around these centres in sheltered accommodation and dementia units with the aim of enabling these participants to join the sessions in the community. All sessions are dementia friendly.

The participants attending our programmes range in age from 55 to 95 and include all genders. Many of our regular core groups are based in rural areas and all are attended by a range of abilities from very active older people to people living with health restrictions. We work with residents in sheltered accommodation, including a wide range of physical abilities and people aged between 60 to 95 and as well as care homes and dementia units. We have developed specific



Drew, see Star Story left. Photo courtesy of Drew, © Arts Council of Northern Ireland/Brian Morrison.

techniques including “sit-down circus”, which ensures that all abilities can enjoy the mental, physical and social benefits of being part of our programmes.

## OUR IMPACT

SCC tutors include some of Ireland’s leading circus street entertainers with international reputations. By getting these artists teaching in the community, we ensure that participants work with the most experienced tutors, capable of adapting workshops to their needs, making activities fun and engaging, and gaining the full range of benefits. Learning circus skills provides opportunities for physical benefits, including improving coordination, balance and regular exercise.

There is evidence that activities like juggling have specific impacts, such as improving cognitive functioning. Mental health benefits include improved confidence, self-belief and raising self-esteem. By running regular programmes, we offer a real opportunity for

## STAR STORY...



Drew started attending our Friday Age-ility sessions in September 2014 because “it looked interesting” and has continued ever since. As a 59-year-old IT consultant, he was one of our younger members and now with 10 years’ experience of practising circus skills, Drew has developed some genuinely high-level skills. His particular area of interest centres around the balancing skill of rola bola, where he has developed his own set of combination tricks.

Drew retired a week before the first Covid lock-down and, due to a chronic heart condition, was in the high-risk category and forced to self-isolate for 18 months, unable to leave the confines of his house or garden. Over this time, Drew attended three weekly Streetwise Zoom classes which included physical warm up sessions, flower stick and juggling.

“ These classes were absolutely fantastic as they provided my only social contact throughout my lockdown. ”

In December 2020 Drew suffered an accident in the house on a slippery floor snapping all the quad tendons in his left leg. When asked how active he was before his accident, he showed his surgeon a video he had posted of himself balancing on a rola bola, raising a glass of wine to his friends on his birthday.

“ I feel that video made them take me seriously about my aspiration to recover and I was worth putting the effort into, rather than treat me as an older patient. ”

“ Over the following months Streetwise staff were unbelievably helpful in my rehabilitation, still via zoom which assisted in my full rehabilitation. This process has led to me gaining confidence in other areas of my life as I have now returned to cycling and have got back on to my motorbike, activities I have enjoyed all my life. ”



reducing isolation by bringing people together from different back grounds in a fun activity, creating common bonds and respect as participants develop a range of differing skills. Publicising our activities and participating in public events also challenges stereotypes towards older people.

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“The social aspect is important but I find that if I've had a bad week the need for total physical and mental concentration required to practice, means that 10 minutes of plate spinning on my rola bola resets and clears my mind.”

**Drew, participant**

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As an organisation we continually adapt our work to reach new groups. During Covid, we trained staff to work via Zoom, enabling us to reach some of those most isolated by the pandemic. In addition, staff were trained to work as solo tutors allowing us to work cost effectively with smaller groups and work in sheltered accommodation and nursing homes.

We created “sit-down” circus techniques, which broadens the participation in these settings, and through this experience we have established how we can integrate people living with dementia into mainstream workshops.

Since 2020, we have identified how our network of core programmes can be used to reach people living in sheltered accommodation at a time in their lives where there is a real risk of isolation. When people first move into housing schemes, they may have lost a partner, moved from their own home leaving neighbours and community links behind. By offering people a chance to join a circus workshop and social group outside of their accommodation, people can establish new long-term friendships which can last for years and be sustained even in declining health.

We recently carried out an evaluation to establish the barriers which may prevent people in housing schemes attending workshops in the community. This highlighted the cost of transport as a significant factor. As a result, we now budget for taxis to remove this barrier and offer the opportunity for those who are most at risk of isolation to benefit.





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# ARTISTS' PERSPECTIVES

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Prime Cut Productions.  
Photo © Paul Duffy.



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## Paul Kane

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**Partner organisation:  
Oh Yeah Music Centre**



**I have been a musician for the past 45 years. I have produced albums, film soundtracks and facilitate workshops. I am currently Music and Older People's Manager at Oh Yeah.**

### **How, why, and when did you start working with older people?**

I started working with older people 13 years ago and developed the Music And Older people programme with Oh Yeah; up until then we had only ever worked with young people. We work with the most marginalised older people, those with later stage dementia and carers. I also run a small charity called OTH Music Collective that works with mature musicians.

In my tenure with Oh Yeah and as a freelance facilitator, I have worked in both rural and urban settings, in residential, day centres, community centres, parks, and many public places. I have done intergenerational work with people over 65 and children and young people. I have worked with a wide range of organisations including Prime Cut, CAP, Golden Thread Gallery, Beyond Skin, Alzheimer's Society, NI Hospice, AGE NI, Dementia Wards, Kabosh, Belfast Health and Social Care Trust, and more.

### **What impact have you observed/experienced?**

I once did a one-off session in a dementia ward in Belfast. Before the session I asked the head nurse if there was anything I should know in advance. She said that one lady screamed a lot

and I should just be aware of this. A few songs in, the lady began to scream. At first I was concerned for her, secondly was it me causing this? And what could I do to help? It was as all of this was going through my head that I noticed that the lady was actually screaming a major third (a musical interval) to my singing and as the song went on, she fluctuated into a major 5th and then the main key of the song. We locked eyes and she briefly smiled. I smiled back and we carried on. Another nurse tried to stop her screaming, but I knew what it was she was doing: communicating. She got frustrated and was eventually moved back to her bed. I explained this to the staff; I tried to help and offer some support. The lady could not communicate in any other way. I felt so privileged to have been a part of a communication. Given more time, might I have worked out what she was trying to say? It broke my heart to think that this lady, in trying to communicate, was being continually shut down. Yet, she had found at least one person who recognised her messages.

### **Please share an anecdote or two from your sessions**

Mary arrived three weeks after we had started. She said she had been in two minds about coming at all; her husband was very ill and needed her support. She had been told a little about the project but she felt she could not sing, had never written a song before and that 'her story' was uninteresting and not



Carers from the project *Hearth & Home* project at Newington Day Centre. Photo credit © Bernie McAllistair.

worth anything. She was one of the quietest in the group until one day we started talking about ice cream. She both loved the stuff and the local Italian ice cream parlour – she loved the architecture of the place and commented that she was amazed at herself for talking so passionately about this. In fact the whole group joined in and it became the focus of a song we produced. Mary said out loud at one meeting how involved everyone was and how we (the facilitators) listened and changed lyrics when prompted by the ladies. She said this was much more than a music session: it was a tonic, a joy, a release, a place to be recognised, a place where she was allowed to be herself. She said she had been to other carers' groups but she came away even more depressed by other people's stories. Every week she not only looked forward to the sessions but chatted to her husband about that they had been doing.

“This was much more than a music session: it was a tonic, a joy, a release, a place to be recognised.”

#### Participant

In the short review we had Mary said that she would really miss the sessions, that these had become some of the best two hours of her week. She got to make new friends and for a short time had a guilt-free few hours knowing her husband was only in the other room also doing a music workshop. She loved learning how to write a song, recording it as well as recording a spoken word piece for a podcast. She felt safe and encouraged not only by us, but by other participants. She said she was SO glad she decided to join the group – they will now continue to meet up even though the project has finished. She wants to be part of anything else we do in the future.





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## Clare McComish

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**Partner organisation:  
Arts Care, Community Arts Partnership (NI) & ACNI**



**I've worked as a professional visual artist, arts facilitator and within arts administration for 24 years.**

### **How, why, and when did you start working with older people?**

I started working regularly with older people after accepting the role in 2007 as an Arts Care (NI) Artist in Residence. My residency was at the Northern Ireland Adult Hospice working with palliative, end-of-life patients. I worked with three regular outpatient groups a week and worked with individuals admitted to the In-Patient Unit for respite and end-of-life care.

### **How were you involved with the Arts and Older People Programme? Who did you collaborate with?**

During my residency at NI Hospice, I became aware (in 2009) of ACNI funding for the Arts and Older People Programme. I designed a successful application to deliver a multi-arts, year-long programme. The success of that initial programme continued over many years with continued support from ACNI. The majority demographic was older people from North/West Belfast, an area of high social deprivation and we worked with older people, in palliative care, some presenting with dementia, motor neurone disease and various life-limiting conditions. We also supported their elderly carers.

As an Arts Care project artist, I have delivered many arts and older people programmes, including in day centres, residential homes, and with rural and inner-city elderly community groups. And through my role as project artist with Community Arts Partnership, I've worked with elderly members of the BAME community in rural areas and with Men Sheds' groups in North Belfast.

### **What impact have you observed/experienced the arts as having?**

Over the last 15 years, I have enabled and facilitated a plethora of arts services for a wide range of older people. My work within healthcare settings is incredibly important to the mental health and wellbeing of service users. Levels of isolation and depression are high for those experiencing long term or life-limiting illnesses. The impact on their carers who face pressures both emotionally and economically takes a huge toll on mental and physical health.

Bringing arts directly to these groups or individuals gives people an opportunity to engage in a creative activity or experience, transporting them out of their current situation for a period. For example: guided by an experienced poet, creative writing can give voice to a host of buried emotions and memories; a live musical performance can lift the soul of someone who has lost some/all physical abilities; dance and movement sessions can create a joyous communal



Photo courtesy of Clare McComish.

experience; and creating collaborative or individual artworks can increase artistic expression, levels of communication and assist with dexterity issues. Completing an artwork that can be exhibited, installed in the building or simply created for a loved one, gives the participant a sense of achievement and increased self-worth.

Working with community-based groups increases social interaction and builds relationships. This supports the wider community networks that engage with older people. Men are generally harder to reach through the provision of arts. Working directly with the Men's Sheds groups gives greater access to older men who would generally shy away from talking about creativity, social, health or emotional issues. Once initial processes begin, barriers drop, and they are more responsive to the creative process.

Working in rural areas gives opportunities for individuals who live in remote areas to come together to engage and decreases social isolation. This was very important during and post Covid-19 lockdowns. It also gives their community leads a chance to check in with participants about their general health, wellbeing and social concerns.

Working as an artist with older members of the BAME community gives people an opportunity to express and showcase their cultural identities. Some are first generation immigrants to Northern Ireland who have lived within the community for many years. Working with creative facilitators allows them their voice and opportunities to reminisce about their mother countries. They can relate their experiences of living in Northern Ireland now and raising their children here.

### **Please share an anecdote or two from your sessions**

I've selected a more recent story working with an older people's day centre in south Belfast. It has a catchment area of inner city south and west Belfast. The group consists of participants presenting with mixed abilities, including stroke recovery, participants presenting with early dementia symptoms and other attendees with more general ailments or mobility problems. It was an eight-week programme, once a week, and I'd worked with this group before.

As I'd already developed a relationship with the group, trust had been established. In Belfast that equates to lots of wise cracking and friendly-cheeky banter from the group of



Service user, City Way Day Centre, Belfast. Image courtesy of Clare McComish.

ten. The older people attend the centre most days and it's a vital service as most participants live alone. If they didn't have the day centre, they would have little or no human contact throughout the week due to issue with mobility/disability.

Within the group there is one very quiet, fragile lady of Thai heritage. She's lived in NI for many years, has two grown sons but now lives alone. She sees one of her sons, normally at the weekend; the rest of the week she is alone. She tells me she has never done art before and that her arm doesn't work so well anymore. I tell her I will guide and help her as we go. We started the initial session with a creative writing workshop, 'I am'. It's a good ice breaker and gives a quick insight to everyone's lives. It also helps assist staff find out more about their older people. The group delves into past stories about family, friends and past careers.

Over the following weeks they work on painted self-portraits. For the Thai lady it's the first time she has mixed colours or worked with acrylic paint. Each week she tells me how much she enjoys the art and looks forward to my weekly session. At the end of the project, she thanks me for allowing her to try painting for the first time in her eighties and how much it has meant her.





## Carol Moore

Partner organisation:  
Kabosh



**For 40 years I have worked as an actor, theatre and film director, writer and creative workshop facilitator. I co-founded Charabanc Theatre Co. (1983 -1995); was a NESTA fellow (2003/5); and have made multiple short films about cultural diversity.**

### **How, why, and when did you start working with older people?**

My mother came to live with me for the last five years of her life. I recorded her talking about her childhood, losing her brother at sea, etc. I love engaging with older people and their lack of filter. Then a friend who worked in broadcasting started to become forgetful and was eventually diagnosed with dementia. It is a brutal disease, watching the essence and vitality of someone slowly disappear.

### **How were you involved with the Arts and Older People Programme? Who did you collaborate with?**

In 2019, I designed a dementia project for Kabosh called 'Art Attack', delivering workshops to three AGE NI dementia day centres in Belfast, Lisburn and Ballyclare. I used images, memory boxes, and clothes from the 1940s and 1950s to prompt conversations about childhood memories of home, furniture, clothes, music and so on. Photographs and audio memories were archived, culminating in a 1940s tea dance for participants and families.

During lockdown, I designed a project called 'The Occasional Gardener', because I saw the benefits of maintaining good mental health working in my own garden, aged 60+. From 2022-2024 Kabosh's partner was Macklin Care Homes. So for three years, we have delivered seven-week quality engagement programmes utilising art, gardening, singing and movement with residents in care homes. The participants are male and female, mostly 70+, but not all have dementia. There are also residents in their 50s with various disabilities who require 24-hour care. Staff also participate.

### **What impact have you observed/experienced the Arts having?**

Working specifically with participants with dementia requires carefully designed engagement experiences, and a 2 to 1 ratio, with activity staff supporting the two facilitators.

Artists Kat Reagan and Neil Kerry with residents.  
Photo © Johnny Frazer.





Jackie with care worker. Photo © Johnny Frazer.

Small sizeable chunks of activity means participants are not overwhelmed or confused. Residents are often closed off on our arrival, so while setting up we spend time casually chatting to each person.

The artist always shows the finished self-watering plant pot, clay dish, or gardening related piece of artwork that participants will complete during that session. Participants are genuinely delighted with each finished piece and more so when the work is hung in communal spaces or designed for their own rooms.

The gardening tasks are tabletop activities: hanging baskets, window boxes, terrariums or shrub planting. I always try and show pictures of plants in bloom, particularly if it is early in season. Residents help place compost, plant food and plants in the containers, as well as watering. We often hear words like “beautiful”, “I love that colour”, “Thank you so much for coming”. But observing residents visit the garden, seeing the plants in situ and how delightful it is for them and staff illustrates the wellbeing that the creative arts brings.

Being with other residents helps with the social isolation and loneliness that is unfortunately prevalent in care homes. The tasks always

encourage cognitive function and motor skills, even if they require assistance. It is important participants are treated as the unique individuals they are, so they are always given a choice of materials, whether it’s paints, pens or plants.

The art/gardening sessions of two hours, also includes a tea break to rehydrate, another opportunity to chat or sing. Depending on time, I record and collect individual stories of their lives, and put these together for the homes. It is surprising how, when given a prompt, the memories come flooding back.

On a different day two other facilitators (singing and movement) come to teach a new song accompanied by hand movements: connecting a cognitive task with physical activity.

All the facilitators are professionals working in the creative industries: Anna O’Kane, a dedicated community visual artist, Kat Reagan, a singer and singing teacher, Paula O’Reilly, an experienced choreographer and Neil Keery, a movement director and actor.

We have all chosen to engage creatively with older people because we see increased mental wellbeing through palpable enjoyment in their

own self-expression and participants' increased sense self-worth. It is a joyous project for us all as artists.

### **Please share an anecdote or two from your sessions**

Anecdotes in sessions are fleeting snapshots. Every week several ladies from different homes would say, "I'm not creative", "I've a sore arm, so I'll not be able to do anything", "Do you know I am very old", "What am I doing here?". The next moment they are completely focused picking out colours, painting, rolling clay or putting compost and flowers into window boxes.

When making the bird on a wreath, one lady said, "I'm going to tell my daughter I made that myself". She laughed, nudging me, "I'm not going to tell anyone you helped me". The same woman, after the 'garden quote montage' was framed, said, "Now if anyone sees that hanging up, even if they are grumpy, it will make them smile." Those who aren't verbal, often laugh and smile, pointing at their work, trying to get the attention of everyone else. In

previous sessions, a lady told us she worked at the Ladybird factory making Levi shirts. She said, "I left one day two stone heavier from when I came in" ... meaning a few shirts mysteriously disappeared.

At a different home, a lovely lady used to sing around the clubs in West Belfast. She still had a beautiful singing voice and would frequently break into song without any prompting. The singing facilitator said the lady cried one week because she said she was "so happy".

At the last session, a representative from Arts Council NI was there and a participant (Annie) and I were both mic-ed for a chat on video. I said this must be what it's like when you're a celebrity. Annie said, "Oh I don't think I could be bothered being a celebrity, I'm happy as I am". I asked her how she enjoyed the project. "I love you coming every week, I hope you are coming back". I replied, "it depends on that lady over there (pointing to ACNI rep) giving us more funding". Annie shouts over, "Hey you, come here, you need to give these ones more money". Here's hoping ...





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## Jacqueline O'Hagan

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Partner organisation:  
EastSide Partnership



**My background is in theatre production as a stage and production manager. I then moved into arts administration focusing on community engagement through creativity.**

### **How, why, and when did you start working with older people?**

In 2016, I began engaging with groups to find out what creativity meant to them, how it was or could be a part of their daily lives and how it might benefit them. Groups working with older people were responding to say there was a need for more opportunities for them, near where they live, to be creative, as a means to improve their mental and physical health and wellbeing.

### **How were you involved with the Arts and Older People Programme? Who did you collaborate with?**

After engagement with groups of older people from care homes and staff from the Public Health Agency who were working with client groups and more, I was able to design out a programme that addressed what many people were asking for. We were delighted to be supported by ACNI's Arts and Older People Programme for three years to develop this work.

We brought in artists who had experience in working with this age group, as well as artists who had dementia-friendly training.

We work in a very urban neighbourhood and worked closely with local care homes and assisted living centres and carers to shape and deliver the programme. We worked alongside Engage with Age (see page 39) and the East Belfast Dementia Friendly Steering Group to ensure we were able to reach the participants this programme was intended to benefit.

### **What impact have you observed/experienced?**

This was the first project which I developed through co-design and implementation, and it impacted on me and my practice hugely. I realised for the first time just how challenging it can be for some people within our communities to engage and take part, how isolating this can be for them and how impactful it is when projects are designed to break down these barriers. Simple things can be taken into account, such as the time of day, or the venue or transport which might be a barrier to people feeling welcome. We chose venues in the heart of the community to ensure people felt they were a part of that community where it was possible, while also knowing that bringing our activities to the participants' own space was sometimes necessary.

I found it was important to include people with lived experience in the consultation and planning of our projects.



Photo courtesy of Jacqueline O'Hagan.

I also realised that we should not assume what people are or aren't capable of. We included creative activity such as linocut, ceramics, creative writing, music, watercolour and more to challenge our participants creatively.

Over the course of the three years, we formed a community of participants. People from care homes, individuals, clients from Public Health Agency programmes and carers, often with their elderly parents all took part. Friendships were formed and a sense of belonging blossomed, with many coming together to attend other creative events outside of this programme. This is so valuable in the overall health and wellbeing of people as it breaks down social isolation.

We adjusted to be flexible to the ever-changing needs we were hearing through ongoing consultation and started to be more innovative with what we were creating.

We developed a programme in partnership with Jan Carson. This project worked with a group of about ten individual carers, all caring for elderly parents, many with physical disability or a dementia diagnosis. For ten weeks, we brought these carers together to

write and create a short radio drama based on their experiences as carers. It was honest, heartfelt and funny. Each week, while our carers spent time with Jan, we hosted our weekly creative workshops next door and their parents were able to attend at the same time and get creative. This offered those carers the ability to relax and fully engage, knowing their parents were enjoying a facilitated activity close by.

### **Please share an anecdote or two from your sessions**

There are many anecdotes to tell and the experience of writing this has taken me back to what was a very positive project for me to work on.

I do have a story that does stand out though and it is of two participants who journeyed with our Artful Ageing Programme from its beginning, until we stopped delivering it. The story is of a mother, Margaret, aged 90 who was living with dementia at the time, along with her daughter and full-time carer, Diane.



Margaret and her daughter, Diane. Photo © Joan Alexander, courtesy of EastSide Partnership.

Both attended our weekly workshops from the first day. We were aware of Margaret's diagnoses and that her memory was not great. She also didn't speak often but we could tell that she was able to crochet and paint and take part in our creative activities.

Over time it became clear that, while Margaret may have not fully remembered the detail of each session, she would light up when she came into the workshops. Diane noted that she could see a change in her mother when they attended; she associated the feeling of happiness in being in that space and taking part.

These sessions were an outlet for Diane too. She was able to take part in the creative element of the workshop and talk to other carers who attended as well as staff from the care homes who brought residents with them. She was also able to chat to us and became a volunteer for our organisation, volunteering at other activities and becoming a part of our own team.

When we developed the programme for carers to develop a short radio drama, Diane was able to take part and connect with other carers too.

This is just one story; there were so many like this. Residents from different care homes making new friends, people living with dementia benefiting from music reminiscence or creative writing opportunities. At the very core of it though, the programme offered social interaction and a space to be creative right on people's doorsteps. I have moved away from the creative industry to work on an environmental project within the same organisation. I have taken the learning and skills from this project to my new role, developing walking groups and activities for older people, using the same methods mentioned throughout this case study to ensure our older residents feel included in what we do.





## Liz Weir MBE

**Partner organisation:  
Armstrong Storytelling Trust**



**Having told stories for over 50 years, for the past eight years I have been Storyteller in Residence for the Armstrong Storytelling Trust (AST), a charity taking storytelling into communities in Northern Ireland.**

### **How, why, and when did you start working with older people?**

Storytelling with older people has been an essential part of my professional life since my days as a librarian when we welcomed groups into public libraries. So many people have great stories to tell but lack an audience, so part of my philosophy has been to make space for older people's voices to be heard. Sharing stories is therapeutic and so much earned wisdom can be passed on to succeeding generations.

### **How were you involved with the Arts and Older People Programme? Who did you collaborate with?**

Over the years AST has worked on various projects which involved storytellers visiting groups of older people in care homes, day centres and at places such as luncheon clubs. During the pandemic we pioneered working with people online in their own homes, linking with groups such as Dementia NI, DEEDS and the Museums Council. 'Magic Moments' was a reminiscence project and 'Memories are Made of This' was an intergenerational reminiscence project which brought together older people and local primary aged children in rural areas. We worked with both men and women and

in some cases worked with people living with dementia and their carers. Some groups were in rural areas where there could be a lot of isolation, and others were in inner-city settings. Sessions culminated in a celebration where the primary school children came to ask questions and interact with their older neighbours.

### **What impact have you observed/experienced?**

The impact of such interactions is plain to see when the sessions are taking place. The engagement, conversation, is obvious when storyteller and audience work with each other. The aim is to provide a pleasant experience but also importantly to stimulate memories and spark a reaction from listeners.

The more experience storytellers have of such projects, the more the artist has to bring to the next one as listeners often share anecdotes, treasured memories as well as songs and poems.

A longer project helps build a good relationship between the facilitator and the audience and people come back with new stories or memories which have been triggered by previous encounters.

To see people who may start off a session slumped in a chair suddenly straighten up and start to smile and engage with our storytellers is a joyous experience. Such encounters surely promote wellbeing and precious fragments of memory are shared.



Photo courtesy of Liz Weir.

Local school classes often join groups of older people – they come with questions prepared: “What sort of food did you eat?” “Where did you work?” “Did you go on holiday?”.

To hear the interaction between young and old folks who live in a neighbourhood is a privilege.

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“ Thank you so much for such a wonderful engaging programme of storytelling for our dementia groups and their carers. Our volunteer loved it as well. It was a great form of connectivity at a time of enforced isolation. The storytelling, songs and music unlocked lots of memories for the participants to share. I am really hoping that the Arts and OP funding from the Arts Council continues this important work and that we can work together again in the future. ”

**Sinead Devine**  
**Co-ordinator DEEDS and OP Services**  
**(Old library Trust)**

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“ My wife is badly affected by Alzheimer’s and gets little or no enjoyment from the normal activities that most people take for granted. However, the weekly Zoom get-together with the DEEDS Team and the participants from around this area always brought a smile to her face and was the only occasion that I can genuinely say she enjoyed. I would add also it was lovely to hear the experiences related by people who were brought up in the countryside in contrast to the people brought up in the City. ”

**Carer**

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### **Please share an anecdote or two from your sessions**

There are so many examples! As we had an intergenerational group of people with dementia and young children, we were sharing nursery rhymes which everybody knew. One old lady showed no signs of engagement and then suddenly sat up when she saw my very



Photo courtesy of Liz Weir.

old teddy bear and started singing “Me and My Teddy Bear”, a song I remembered from childhood. Then suddenly old and young were all singing it together. She taught it to the wee ones! From then on, she was totally engaged in the session.

Storyteller, Sharon Dickson, often does a piece about the Belfast Blitz and on one occasion an old man called her over thinking she was the person in the story (based on her own mother) and got his wife to retell a story about a woman in Donegal Pass who was trapped under rubble after a raid. The Dublin Fire Brigade were called to assist Belfast firefighters and a big Dublin

fireman reassured the trapped housewife saying, “You’re all right, Sadie” in a thick Dublin accent.

Hearing the strange tongue she said, “Don’t tell me the Germans are here!”

The firefighter said “No, Sadie, we’re the Dublin fire brigade.”

Her response was “Don’t tell me Hitler has blown me all the way to Dublin!”

Local storytellers have been retelling that story ever since to many more groups of older people – one story begets another!

Local school children are fascinated by some of the objects we sometimes bring in for reminiscence. They had never seen a record player or a telephone with a dial ... they cannot believe people had NO phones.

“What sort of phone did you have? Did you have a NOKIA?”

We show them lasts for repairing shoes and a chamber pot which often causes horror – the thought of no indoor bathrooms let alone using a “gazunder” creates consternation but of course the older folk have many stories to share about tin baths and outhouses!





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# Afterword

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**BY DAVID CUTLER**

**David is the Director of the Baring Foundation.**

One of the most enjoyable parts of my (very enjoyable) job in the last ten years has been visiting Northern Ireland and seeing – just a fraction – of the wonderful creative ageing work made possible by the ACNI's Arts and Older People Programme.

Often, we have needed to persuade our partners about the need for this work but the Arts Council of Northern Ireland has led the field by having the first, and now by far the longest, dedicated fund for arts engagement by older people.

Two things that struck me repeatedly in those visits was how good arts organisations are in engaging at the grassroots, and, while not losing a focus on quality, how much fun everyone was having!

This report makes clear that the AOPP has been instrumental in building a creative ageing sector that is broad and deep in Northern Ireland, and that doing so takes time.

By consistently giving grants over fifteen years, alongside support from the Public Health Agency, ACNI has given a status to artistic work with older people. It has also given a platform to the benefits of arts in older life as found in a recent evidence review in NI by the Institute for Public Health.<sup>28</sup>

This means that there is much to celebrate in creative ageing in NI and much for other countries to learn and be inspired by.

I must end by recording my thanks to Lorriane Calderwood who has driven this programme for ACNI since its inception and remains its indefatigable champion. Thanks too to everyone who has contributed case studies to this report as well as to Dr Una Lynch for her account of creative ageing in NI and reflections on what we can learn from the case studies.

And perhaps I should move to NI when I retire. I hear there is a lot of fun and creativity to be had.

**28** McQuade L. and O'Sullivan R. (2021): Arts and Creativity in Later Life: Implications for Health and Wellbeing in Older Adults. A Systematic Evidence Review. Institute of Public Health Published September 2021. Available at: [www.publichealth.ie/sites/default/files/resources/Arts-and-creativity-full-report-final.pdf](http://www.publichealth.ie/sites/default/files/resources/Arts-and-creativity-full-report-final.pdf).

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## Funded organisations 2010-2024

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### A-Z

#### A

ABC Community Network  
 Accolade (All Communities Art Communications)  
 Action Mental Health  
 Age Concern Causeway  
 Age NI  
 ALLY Foyle  
 Alzheimer's Society  
 An Gaelaras Ltd  
 An Munia Tober  
 Andersonstown Community Theatre  
 Ards and North Down Borough Council  
 Ards Arts  
 Ardtrea and Desertcreat Senior Citizens Group  
 Armagh City, Banbridge and Craigavon Borough Council  
 Armagh Senior Citizens Forum  
 Armstrong Storytelling Trust  
 Arts Care  
 ArtsEkta

#### B

Ballintoy Young at Heart Club  
 Banbridge District Council  
 BEAM Creative Network  
 Belfast Exposed Photography  
 Beth Johnson Foundation inc Linking Generations NI  
 Beyond Skin  
 Big Telly Theatre Company  
 Bogside and Brandywell Health Forum  
 Border Arts 2000  
 Border Arts Carnival Group

#### C

Carn Media  
 Castlereagh Lifestyle Forum  
 Causeway Coast & Glens Heritage Trust  
 Causeway Coast and Glens Borough Council  
 Commedia of Errors  
 Craigavon Borough Council  
 Creggan Education & Research Services  
 Crescent Arts Centre

#### D

Dementia (NI)  
 Derg Valley Care  
 Derry City and Strabane District Council  
 Derry Theatre Trust Ltd t/a The Millennium Forum  
 Down Community Arts Ltd  
 DU Dance (NI)  
 Dylan Quinn Dance Theatre CIC

#### E

EastSide Arts  
 Echo Echo Dance Theatre Company  
 Edenderry Community Development Trust  
 Engage with Age  
 Erne East Community Partnership Ltd

#### F

Fermanagh District Council  
 Forthspring Intercommunity Group  
 Foyle Deaf Association

#### G

Gilford Art Group  
 Golden Thread Gallery Ltd  
 Greater Shankill Partnership Property Dev. Co.  
 Greater Shantallow Community Arts

**H**

Harmony Community Trust

**I**

In Your Space Circus Ltd

Intergenerational Music Making CIC

Kabosh Theatre Ltd

Killyclogher Senior Citizens Club

**L**

Lisburn & Castlereagh City Council

Lisnafin/Ardnalee/Trust CCDA

Live Music Now

LLTCA

Loughinisland GAC

Loughshore Care Partnership (LCP)

**M**

Mid & East Antrim Borough Council

Mind Wise New Vision

**N**

Neillsbrook Fold Tenants Association

New Belfast Community Arts Initiative T/A  
Community Arts Partnership

New Lodge Arts

Niamh (Northern Ireland Association For  
Mental Health)

North West Play Resource Centre  
(The Playhouse)

Northern Ireland Hospice

Northern Visions Ltd

**O**

Oh Yeah Music Centre

Older People North West

Open Arts

**P**

Peninsula Healthy Living

Play Resource Warehouse

Pomeroy Resource Centre

Portadown Wellness Centre

Praxis Care Group

Prime Cut Productions Ltd

Prison Arts Foundation

**Q**

Queen's Film Theatre

Queen's University Belfast

**R**

Reminiscence Network Northern Ireland

Richmount Rural Community Association

**S**

South Lough Neagh Regeneration Association

South West Age Partnership

Spark Opera Company

Sticky Fingers Arts

Strabane District Council

Strand Arts Centre

Streetwise Community Circus

**T**

The Black Box Trust

The Council of the Northern Ireland War  
Memorial (Incorporated)

The MAC (Metropolitan Arts Centre)

The Monday Club

The Mummings Foundation

The Old Library Trust

The Prom Friendship Group

The Ulster Youth Orchestra

Tullycarnet Neighbourhood Collective

**U**

Ulster Orchestra Society Ltd

University of Atypical

Upper Springfield Development Company

**V**

Verbal Arts Centre NI Limited

Void Art Centre

**W**

Waterside Theatre Company Ltd

West Bann Development

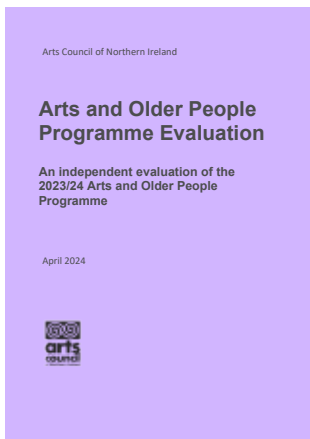
WheelWorks

Womens Group (Carew II Family &  
Training Centre)

Workers' Educational Association



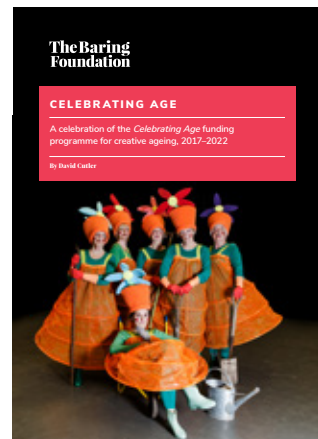
# Selected resources



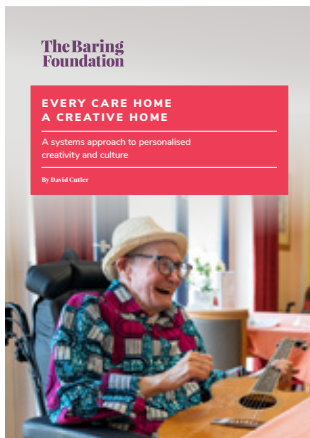
Arts and Older People Programme Evaluation 2023/24  
Arts Council Northern Ireland 2024



The State of Play: Arts and Older People Programme  
Arts Council Northern Ireland 2018



Celebrating age: A celebration of the Celebrating Age funding programme for creative ageing, 2017-2022  
David Cutler 2023



Every care home a creative home  
David Cutler 2022



Treasury of activities for older people (Volume 1)  
Liz Postlethwaite 2019



Treasury of activities for older people (Volume 2)  
Liz Postlethwaite 2021



Older and wiser? Creative ageing in the UK 2010-19  
Dr Rebecca Gordon-Nesbitt,  
King's College London  
2019



Key workers: creative ageing in lockdown and beyond  
David Cutler  
2020



Around the world in 80 creative ageing projects  
David Cutler  
2019



The Artist in Time  
Chris Fite-Wassilak  
2020



The role of local authorities in creative ageing  
David Cutler  
2017



Not so cut off  
Arts Council Northern Ireland  
2016



Winter Fires  
François Matarasso  
2012

Baring Foundation resources can be found on our website:  
[www.baringfoundation.org.uk](http://www.baringfoundation.org.uk)

Arts Council of Northern Ireland resources about the AOPP programme can be found here:  
[artscouncil-ni.org/resources?query=Arts+and+Older+People](http://artscouncil-ni.org/resources?query=Arts+and+Older+People)

ACNI's YouTube channel is also a great way to explore inspiring projects:  
[www.youtube.com/results?search\\_query=arts+council+northern+ireland+arts+and+older+people](http://www.youtube.com/results?search_query=arts+council+northern+ireland+arts+and+older+people)



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