

Case Study (3)

Derry City & Strabane District Council
Arts for the Third Age: Music to your ears

The Arts Council of Northern Ireland (ACNI)

January 2018

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Email to Co-ordinator from the wife of a participant following the end of AOP Project concert (30th January 2018)

“I would like to take this opportunity to say a big thank you for what you have offered not only men over 55 but also the family and friends of these participants —who have a place where there's an open door, a place of support and above all a place where they can expend energies in a sense of togetherness in creating another great concert.

It is through this wonderful initiative that many local men, married, single, widowed or other, have found a place of welcome and commonality

As a spouse of a member of this group, I wish to say, thank you.”



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1. Introduction

The Arts Council of Northern Ireland (ACNI) is recognised for its pioneering work in championing the power of the Arts to promote health and wellbeing. In 2009, as part of its five-year Strategy *Ambitions for the Arts* (ACNI, 2013) the ACNI established an innovative Arts and Older People's programme (AOP). Now in phase three funding for the AOP is provided through a partnership comprised of the ACNI (Lottery), the Baring Foundation and the Public Health Agency. Activities and priorities within the AOP are governed by five themes: isolation and loneliness, social inclusion, poverty, Health and strengthening the voice of older people. In September 2016 a total of £127,000 worth of funding was allocated to 20 organisations across Northern Ireland. The value of the grants allocated ranged from £1,025 to £9,055.

Derry Strabane District Council received an AOP grant of £8,400 to help deliver Music to Your Ears a 12-week music and drama-based intervention aimed at alleviating social isolation and loneliness for men aged over 55 years in the Strabane and Derry/Londonderry city areas. The project was successful in recruiting 80 men and proved to be very effective in alleviating social isolation and loneliness. The positive impacts were seen in the sense of connection

created between the men, the enhanced confidence, sense of purpose and strengthening of voice. The project was credited with encouraging the men to become more physically active, improving flexibility, reducing pain and improving mental health and wellbeing.

2. Context

Falling birth rates, migratory patterns and changes in housing design are combining to radically transform traditional societal structures, networks and supports. A consequence is an increase in social isolation and loneliness. Factors such as loss of family, friends and employment and decreased mobility make older people more vulnerable to social isolation. Loneliness is a subjective feeling that occurs when the number and quality of social contacts that a person has is less than what they desire. Physical isolation, has been identified as the factor most closely associated with feeling lonely (Pearce and Lillyman, 2015; Age UK, 2010). Men who live alone are more likely to experience greater loneliness. The reason for this is because men are more dependent, than women, on their partners for social contact (Bernard, 2013 and Beach and Bamford, 2014). Taken within this context it also worth noting that a report published by the DOH on health inequalities in Northern Ireland revealed that life expectancy for men in NI is 78.3 years, which is four years less than that of women (82.3 years). (Duffy et al, 2017).

Loneliness and social isolation are associated with higher all-cause

mortality rates (Holt-Lunstad, et al., 2011; Steptoe et al. 2012) and increased incidence of Alzheimer's disease (Holtzman, 2004; Wilson et al. 2007). The risk to health posed by social isolation is comparable to the risk associated with cigarette smoking, hypertension and obesity (Pantell et al., 2013). A rich and large social network is associated with better cognitive function and lower risk of developing dementia (Sorman et al. 2017 and Wang, et al., 2002). Social isolation can be addressed, and the associated risks reduced. In the interests of equity initiatives there is an imperative to find interventions that alleviate social isolation amongst men.

3. The Arts Intervention

Music to your Ears is a collaboration between Derry City and Strabane District Council and local professional musicians Terry Mc Cafferty and Mickey Harte. The AOP proposal aimed to alleviate isolation and loneliness for older men by building on skills, networks and learning from earlier music based initiatives in the area. The project sought to address challenges encountered with recruitment in Derry and to develop a drama component in the Strabane group. The project culminated in shows in the Playhouse, Derry and Alley Theatre, Strabane in January 2018.

A music-based programme for people aged over 55 years was first introduced to Strabane in 2014. In phase two (2015) it became a men-only programme and was extended to Derry/Londonderry.

Recruitment in Derry/Londonderry however proved to be difficult due to the location of the venue in what was perceived to be 'a non-neutral environment.'. In 2017 the city library was used as the venue in Derry and so great was the number of men who turned up for it that the group adjourned to the city Museum. The Music to Your Ears project ran for 16 weeks, in both Strabane and Derry. Sessions were held on Tuesdays and lasted two hours. The AOP grant (£8,400) covered the costs of the facilitators, purchase of music stands and some transport; other costs were borne by Derry Strabane District Council. The project was accessed by 80 men; with up to 30 men attending at any one time in either venue. Their ages ranged from 55 years to over 90 years; the average age was 66 years



4. Methods

Observation visits to see the project in action in Derry/Londonderry and Strabane took place in December 2017. Interviews were carried out with the men at that time, and Joan Alexander took photographs during the Derry/Londonderry visit.

Table 1

People interviewed as part of the Case Study	
Men in Londonderry/Derry	15
Men in Strabane	10
Facilitators	2
Project co-ordinator	1
Students from South West Regional College	2
Total number of people interviewed	30

Twenty-nine people were interviewed as part of the study (table 1). The interviews with the older men were carried out in parallel to the music sessions. To minimize interruption to the music a combination of individual and small (2- 3 people) group interviews was used and the facilitators were interviewed by telephone in January 2018.

In Derry four men were interviewed individually, two were interviewed together and the remaining nine were interviewed in groups of three. In

Strabane individual interviews were carried out with five men, the other five were interviewed in a group of two and in a group of three.

The project co-ordinator was interviewed at her base in Derry-Strabane District Council office in the Alley Theatre. The visit to Derry/Londonderry coincided with the presence of two students, from South West College, Omagh, who were on a work placement to make a film about the Music to your Ears project. A short opportunistic interview captured their perspectives.

Consent was obtained from all participants for audio recording of interviews and for the use of photographs in ACNI publications. The interviews were carried out and analysed by Una Lynch. Contributions from participants are anonymised in the report. Identity of facilitators and co-ordinator is sometimes apparent.





5. Impact

This section begins by describing the nature of social isolation and loneliness experienced by the participants in the AOP Music to your Ears project. It then moves on to outline how men became involved with the project and the lure of the music. The power of the music as a vehicle for creating connections between the men and building

confidence is described. The project is credited with improving health and wellbeing and instilling a sense of purpose in life. The role of the project in strengthening the voice of men is highlighted

5.1 Isolation and loneliness

“Mickey had to go to Germany and I would have had the three rooms of musicians on my own. So, I asked the boys in the middle room if they could take next week off and come again as normal the following week. Most of them agreed and said, ‘yeah no problem,’ but this one old guy (aged 90years) he cornered me when we were havin a wee tea break. I could hear the wee walker coming across the room and said, ‘everything ok?’ and he said, ‘grand but where are you going to be next week.’ I said, ‘well Mickey will be in Germany, but I will be here’. And he just winked at me and he said, ‘well I will be here too’. Later that evening my daughter helped me understand ‘Do you not get it, she said - He’s picked up in the morning he’s taken in there he has a bit of music with his friends, a bit of gossip and a cup of tea and then he is taken home again. Maybe that is his only outings in the whole week and he looks forward to that’. This occurred early in the first project and that’s when I realised this isn’t just about music; but keeping music as a central focus – it’s a social thing”

Terry McCafferty, Facilitator

The men talked plainly and openly about their experience of social isolation and feelings of loneliness. For some the trigger for loneliness was the loss of a spouse through death or illness.

“My wife passed away five years ago I’m a widower and it’s not an easy journey. I wasn’t in a great place”. (S2)

“I’d be inclined to be sitting in a corner. I had a stroke six months ago and my wife has Alzheimer’s and is in a nursing home.” (Man, 89 years)

For others retirement or unemployment resulted in them becoming isolated and feeling lonely.

“I’ve played in 27 countries, 12 states in America. I’ve performed to thousands on TV and radio but the last two years I hadn’t played at all. I went into a deep depression for 18 months and this has got me right back out again.” (62-year-old)

Ill health and mobility issues had also resulted in a contraction in lives and social networks.

“I have mobility issues and I have to use a walking aid to get around getting in and out of the car was the height of my outings.”



A reflection of the trust that had been built up between the men and the project co-ordinator, there was a deep appreciation of the challenges that individual members faced on a day to day basis.

“How lonely they are, how isolated they are, the health issues that they are experiencing. Some of them are carers; or looking after grandchildren. You rarely get a day when everybody is there, somebody has a hospital appointment, somebody else has somebody to look after, they have a lot of things going on in their lives, but this is something that they really enjoy.”

(Project co-ordinator)

Similarly, the men confided in each other about the lonely and isolated lives that they had hitherto been living.

“There’s men in there and they are on their own and this is their outlet here on a Tuesday”

Men spoke of how when they arrived at the group on the first day they realised that they weren’t ‘alone’ in feeling lonely.

“They all had that 1000-yard stare that I had in my eye previously and I wondered yeah how often do you get out?”

There was also a deep appreciation of the interconnection between isolation and poor mental health.

“If you are sitting in the house all the time you will just get depressed which is what happened to me.”



5.2 Getting involved

Participants came from a variety of backgrounds and music competencies.

“A lot of them have never engaged in the arts, some are experienced musicians, but others maybe have a guitar that was bought to them years ago and it has been lying there.”

(Project Co-ordinator)

Some men said that they joined the group because they were in search of a new interest.

“A new interest in life” (81-year-old)

Encouragement from wives was an oft cited reason for joining the group.

“My wife saw it advertised”

Other men talked about being persuaded by other men who were already involved with the project.

“I was in a Bookies backing horses and a man tapped me on the shoulder and said you wouldn’t be interested in playing a guitar.”

A love of music and the opportunity to learn how to play the guitar was a great incentive for getting involved.

“bought myself a guitar...I just love being around musicians and listening to their stories about song writing and performing. I just sap that up.”

For some the initial interest in playing the guitar evolved into be part of the

broader production and performance aspects of the project.

“I came along to learn the guitar...got roped into writing these scripts.”

For a core group of the men music had been an integral part of their early life and careers.

“I started singing in 69 and I sang right through the 70s it was four nights a week we were playing in a group.”

Although the genres ranged from classic, and rock to gospel, the project offered those men with a background in music a valuable opportunity to reconnect with music and musicians.

“I’ve a lot of recording experience ... gospel albums.”

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*“I was with the George Mitchel singers for five years in the London Palladium.”*  
(89- year-old)

The thought of going along to the group and meeting new people was often described as daunting prospect. The draw of the music helped overcome initial nervousness and diffidence.

*“saw it advertised in the local paper but it was a few weeks before I plucked up the courage to go. I hadn’t drummed in over 20years.”* (64-year-old, Strabane)

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“At the start I was a wee bit apprehensive about going but I just love music” (64-year-old, Derry D9)

5.3 Connection

Music to Your Ears welcomes men aged over 55 years. Most members are aged in their mid-60s and 70s and several are aged over 80 years. The focus on the music was however a leveller.

“One of the lads here said to me - You are definitely 55 because I am two years younger than you.”
(89-year-old, laughing)

The men involved with Music to Your Ears come from all walks of life, some are looking for work, others are retired professionals, some are still working fulltime, and others have part time jobs. Some of the men have significant health issues. The common denominator between them all is an interest in music. This shared interest is contributing to a new sense of identity and community; the accoutrements of which include guitars, accordions, violins and drums.

“In Strabane it is like a swarm of bees you see the guys coming in from all directions towards the Alley theatre. People on rollators and on sticks and all coming with their guitars and people are looking and saying what’s going on there?” (Co-ordinator)

The facilitators commented on the delight that they observed in musicians who had played in bands together being reunited through the AOP.

“T hadn’t seen G in over 40 years – they gave each other a big hug and within 10 minutes the two boys were sitting down playing a song. it was as if the years had melted away”.

Music to Your Ears also united musicians who reflecting our divided community of the past had previously played parallel gigs.

“It was great to come back and meet the lads again – there’s a guy upstairs and I used to meet him, and he’d be going to one venue and I’d be going to the opposite venue if you know what I mean.”

The opportunity to talk with other men who are interested in music was highly valued.

“Just to get talking to guys who played guitars and was (sic) in groups it’s fantastic it really is.”

For other men just having the opportunity to meet people was a bonus.

“Takes you out of the house gets you seeing people again.”

The mutual support and sense of ‘togetherness’ experienced within the AOP was eloquently described:

“What one man doesn’t know another man will show him.”

The facilitators described how the interconnectedness that resulted between men resulted in them feeling part and responsible to the group.

“If I’m not part of this or if I let the guys down I will be missed here – I think that helps to make it a wee bit more real for them.”

The camaraderie helped the men see that they are noticed, and matter. The male banter and ribbing was an important element in forging friendships and bonds between them.

“I came in last week with my tee-shirt outside in and when I came in this week G had a song written about it.”

As the weeks progressed the music sessions and bonds evolved and extended in different way.

“at 12.30 everyone just went home but now the guys are sitting around jamming.”

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*“We (small group experienced musicians) meet officially on a Tuesday and then unofficially at least one more day in the week.”*

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“So much so that the guys in Derry booked a room in the nerve centre to get together on their own about six or seven of them. These are boys that hadn’t met before. Some of who had never played before either.”

The use of neutral venues has promoted strong cross community collaboration and although the venues are 15 miles apart there is also a sense of connectedness and solidarity is being forged between men in the two groups. Sharing of talent and resources is evidenced in drummers, guitarist and vocalist travelling at times between the two venues to help. The end of project concert was held in Derry on 12th January and in Strabane on 25th January. Testimony to the bonds that have been forged between the two groups, the members of each group attended the other’s concert.

The sense of connection between the men also extends to the facilitators who talked about how rewarding they found the found the work. The sense of satisfaction that they got from seeing the difference that the project was making to people’s lives was a major motivation for them too.

“That’s nice for us too because that’s kind of the wind in our sails a bit too you know”





5.4 Confidence

The sheer number of men playing guitars at practice sessions in Derry/Londonderry makes quite an impression on the observer. Some of the men involved with the AOP had picked up a guitar for the first time ever, others for the first time in 30 or 40 years and there was a certain amount of nervousness and awkwardness to get over.

“The facilitators spent the first wee while fixing strings and tuning guitars and getting these things going.”
(Co-ordinator)

“I was a bit self-conscious at the start because I hadn’t carried one in thirty years and I had no case for it, so I had to go and get a wee case.”

The men in both sites laughed and joked as they reflected on how shy and self-conscious they had been at the beginning of Music to Your Ears.

“The first day we didn’t come with guitars we left the guitars in the car, but on the second day everybody was walking across the square like Rock stars.”



Managing the different abilities, learning needs and musical tastes of presented a challenge for the facilitators.

“Dealing with people at different levels – some of the people have maybe played in bands before – some of them have no experience whatsoever. Trying to find the level and what they can realistically achieve”.

Earlier experiences of Music to Your ears and years of working with community groups and musicians across Ireland yielded the facilitators with insights and knowledge that informed the approaches used to promote confidence amongst participants.

“That was one of the major learning curves that we got out of it – who ever appears in the room on any given Tuesday determines what you can do. If we came in gung-ho at the start and said this is what the show is going to be that might not work.”

The structure and format are very malleable; adjusting and responding to who is present on any given day or events that happen. This flexibility allows space for creativity and gentle emergence of skills and talents. The facilitators stressed the importance of building confidence and found that dividing the large group into smaller groups worked well.

“We separated them into three groups - the ABs the absolute beginners who had never picked up a guitar — we even provided guitars for some and advised others where they could buy them. The other room was for people who had played you know years ago and had stopped playing for some reason. And then the third group was a group of traditional musicians – accordion and bodhran.”

The facilitators’ skills in helping the men learn and develop confidence was commented on by many of the men including a retired school principal.

“I’ve been really impressed with the two guys taking it. Mickey Joe Harte and Terry McCafferty ... first-class teachers ... fantastic patience. They encourage everybody, remembering everybody’s name and never putting anyone down.”

The creation of a supportive environment has allowed the men’s confidence to grow and the word ‘bouncing’ was commonly used to describe the atmosphere at the end of practice sessions.

“The boys in there who are playing and singing and performing – none of us had done any of that before. Individually we were sitting in different parts doing nothing and now this has transformed and pulled us all together and when we leave here today every one of us is bouncing.”

“The buzz in the room; some of those guys, they are walking on air when they come out of the room.”

As confidence grew some of the men took on the challenge of learning skills such as composing music and writing lyrics.

“I always had the lyrics and I had the music in my head. I brought one or two of them (songs) here and I showed them to Mickey Joe Harte and Terry. They did one of the songs in the very first show. So, then I just came in and sang them, and the lads sat down round me writing down the cords of what I was singing so then they put the music to it.” (61-year-old)

Others who had been involved in earlier incarnations of the project were enthused to try their hand at writing scripts and/or acting in short skits.

“Amazing how many guys haven’t done any acting and they are volunteering.”

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*“Something to look forward to – some of those wee sketches I writ some of it – I d never written anything in my life.”*  
(62-year-old)

It was very apparent that both facilitators were held in very high regard by the men. Their music pedigree also earned them respect and admiration. The opportunity to work with and learn from these musicians

appeared to bolster confidence of the participants.

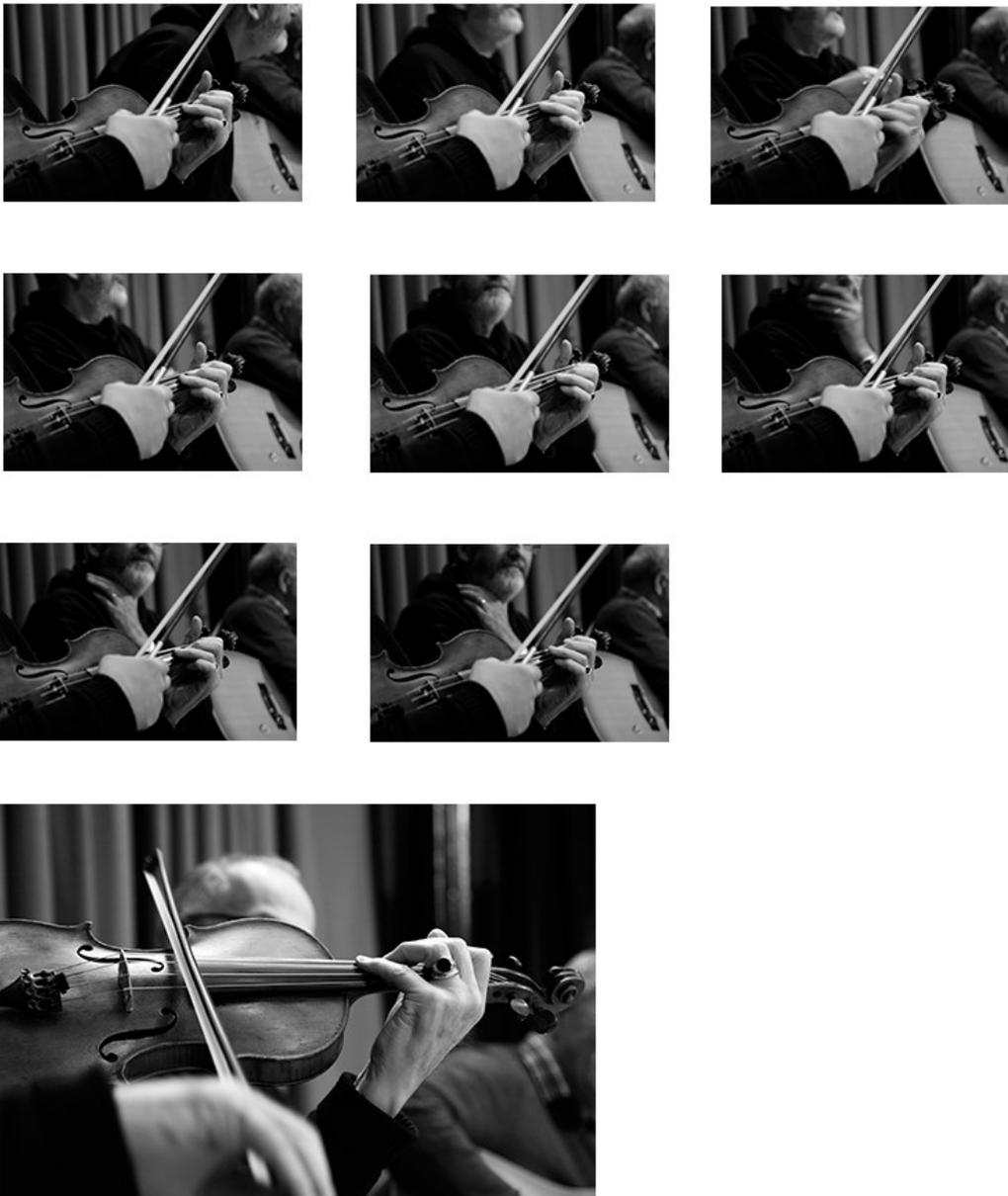
*“Good tutors like Terry and Mickey – they have good credibility they have toured the world, they have been on television and radio – they have done it. Mickey Joe is huge in Germany and he is now number One in iTunes Irish country charts with his song For the Broken Hearted.”*

The facilitators were also aware of the importance of their role in keeping the men motivated and engaged,

*“Bond and mutual respect that we have hopefully earned – you need people there like ourselves to figure out what they are best at and to give them that bit of direction that they need. If we weren’t there – and it is hard to blow your own trumpet – but if we weren’t there it might last for a few weeks, but I think it’s the end product the kick that they get out of the show and the fact that we crack the whip a wee bit.”*



## 5.5 Health



Past illnesses and ongoing conditions including Alzheimer’s disease, arthritis, cancer, diabetes, depression and stroke were commonly reported by the men.

*“I’d actually stopped the music I had a wee touch of cancer in 2014 I’ve totally recovered from it.”*

Participation in the AOP was credited with improving health or helping to build resilience to cope with symptoms. Being involved with the group was credited with encouraging the men to be more active.

*“Because I have mobility issues it is pushing me to get out and find ways of*

*managing. You are learning to manage your condition."*

Getting to and from the classes has resulted in extra exercise for all of the men and engaging in regular practice sessions was credited with improving flexibility and overall function.

*"I broke my hand and thumb a couple of years ago. It doesn't hurt me at all now. Exercising and playing and meeting other musicians who lift your spirits."*

Playing the guitar and other instruments was described as requiring a significant degree of dexterity and strength and was characterised as an enjoyable form of rehabilitation.

*"I was a late starter learning the guitar I was in my late 30s early 40s. I had a stroke last year (February 2016) and discovered afterwards that I couldn't play the guitar I hadn't got the strength or the co-ordination. You need the co-ordination for changing the cords and you need the strength to hold the strings down. So, for a long time I just put the guitar away and forgot about it. And then when I saw this advertised and it was pure luck that I did. It has helped me. And more than that it has helped me get the interest back. After the stroke I just lost interest."  
(67-year-old)*

Learning song lyrics and lines for the drama and engaging with other people

were all credited as helping to improve cognitive function and memory.

*"The other thing is the Alzheimer's – it helps with my memory."*

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"My memory is fantastic; my memory is a lot better."

Improvements in memory were commonly reported to the facilitators.

"One guy came up to me – he had an accident a few years ago and he has a bit of issues with his memory. He felt that learning the songs for the show and the lines and being in that group where he has to engage with people and learn the song – he felt that it was great for his memory; and in other ways and was helping him in his day to day stuff, which I thought was fantastic."

Mental health was something that the men were very conscious of. Personal experience had yielded profound insights into the difficulties that older men face.

"Depression at our age is rife. When I started this, I was unemployed. I'd tried to learn the guitar about 12 years ago but then I got an injury and couldn't move my arms for two years. Depression set in big time. I wasn't able to lift the guitar, so it went into the attic." (61years)

The motivation in the AOP project, Music to Your Ears, for men to get out

and meet people was recognised as being a crucial antidote to the apathy, loneliness and depression that they associated with social isolation.

“I was just lying around the house.”

The social contact within the project was viewed as being vitally important.

“Mentally it helps – just meeting up with the boys.”

The AOP was credited with helping to build resilience and ability to cope with the day-to-day challenges of life.

“There are still bad days, but they are manageable – me and my wife had been together 44 years.”

The positive impacts on the men’s wellbeing are described as a source of delight for wives, families and friends.

“She would say – I’m probably smiling a lot more, laughing a lot more back to the person that she knew years ago. I wouldn’t say that I’m suffering from depression, but I was on the verge.”

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*“She seems to think that its better – my attitude - I’m happier.”*

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“his in-laws said, ‘it’s just like he has had a new lease of life because before that it was hard to get him to go anywhere’.”



5.6 Sense of purpose

Music to your Ears is providing a focus and giving meaning to lives of the men involved with it.

“Reason for getting up and coming out.” (67-year-old with Alzheimer’s)

The ‘getting together’ every Tuesday was helping to create a much-valued sense of routine and purpose.

“It gave me a purpose again. I go home and I’ve a wee bit more life back into me.”

The sense of purpose generated through the programme was described as giving ‘meaning to life’.

“It’s a big relief to be able to have something to aim for if you do not have anything to look forward to you don’t have anything. Now I practice the guitar and try and write a few more songs and you can’t wait to get in here on a Tuesday to share with the guys. 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.”

Reflective of the wide age range within the group some of the men were still of working age; but living in an area of high unemployment the prospects of getting work are slim. The AOP was viewed as vital in giving these men a much-needed outlet once a week.

“There’s men here and this is their outlet for a couple of hours. They’re over 55 and unless you’re working it’s hard to get a job”.

The end of project concert was described by the facilitators as providing an essential focus and something for the men to work towards.

“I’ve done projects like this before... the one thing that I always found was you needed to have an end product, an end goal – like you know with the show.”

The concert although a daunting thought for some, was valued as a goal to work towards.

“A bit foreboding but at the same time it was something to aim at.”

The facilitators described the importance of building trust with the men in order to help them prepare for the concert.

“It takes the 10 or 12 weeks to pull it all together. I see the big picture and guide them towards it.”

As the men gained confidence in their music skills and with each other they were planning for things that they could do in the future. Some spoke animatedly about busking and taking the music into residential care as a way of ‘sharing’ some of the good fortune that they had received.

“Give us to this time next year and you could see us go around old people’s homes doing carol services and having a bit of craic.”

Renewed confidence and interest was resulting in others contemplating a returning to the ‘gigging’ world of their youth.

“After nearly 40 years he’s starting to advertise now to see if he can get any jobs gigging and he never thought he’d do that again.” (F1)

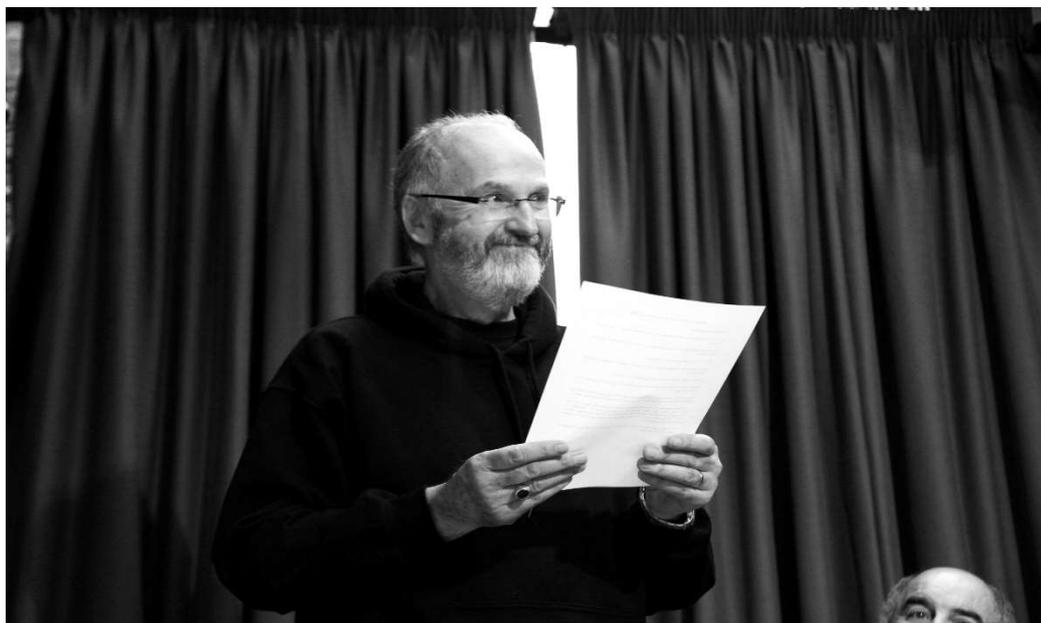
The inclusive ethos of the project means that it plays to the strength of each man and allows talent to shine through, irrespective of age.

“My family were saying you should learn to play the guitar. So, I went down. I was getting nowhere with the fingers, but I was walking about singing ‘As Time Goes By’ from Casablanca – when I hear good music I just have to sing —and a man that sang for Ireland

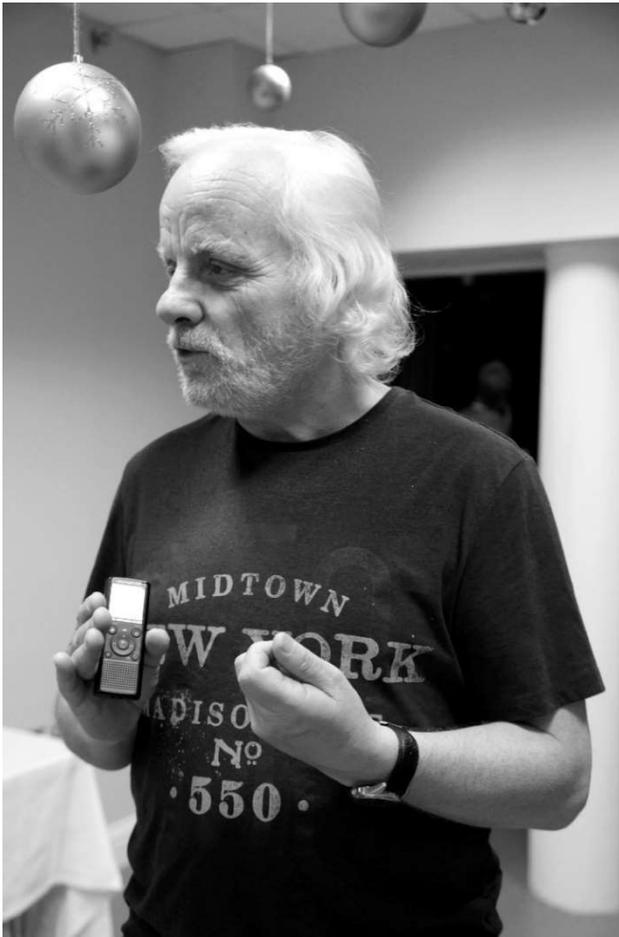
(pointing at Mickey) said ‘you’re going to sing that in the Alley theatre’. After a couple of weeks, I said to Terry ‘I’m getting nowhere with the guitar’ and he said, ‘forget the guitar – you are our singer’.” (81 years)

The facilitators were very conscious of the power of the project to attract and engage men. Seeing first hand the positive impact on participants, the facilitators were enthusiastic about the idea or making ‘Music to Your Ears’ available to men across NI.

“I think that this project should be rolled out across all the councils because the thought of putting on a show, being on a stage is something that they [the men] thought about when they were younger, but they didn’t follow through on and they are thinking now well if I don’t do it now I am never going to do it. And to provide an opportunity for people like that it is an eye opener.”



5.7 Finding a Voice



Growing older, growing stronger, growing louder could be the strapline for Music to Your Ears as an intervention that is giving visibility to older men, helping them grow in confidence and giving them a voice.

A reflection of how ‘forgotten’ older men are feeling can be heard in the delight and enthusiasm with which they spoke about the project.

“Everything is based around young people but for us boys this is just fantastic.”

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*“It’s one of the best things that has happened to the town in a very long time.”*

The enhance visibility and voice was revealed in several anecdotes including one told by a facilitator.

*“One of the guys was called a family meeting – his son was home from America at the time and they all had lovely big family dinner and he stuck on the DVD of the show and as soon as it was finished they put it back to the start and played it again.”*

As the men find their feet they are using their voices in different ways. Some, drawing on their love of history are raising awareness of the rich history locally. Others are becoming motivated and inspired to you use their skills in lyric writing and music composition to highlight social issues including homelessness (appendix I). ‘Working to Live’ a catchy little number that resonated with many men, was written by Jim Hunter in the Strabane group and was included in the concert in the Alley Theatre.



The observations below from 18 and 19-year-old male students, who were working with the project, illustrate the power of *Music to your Ears* to challenge stereotypes and celebrate age.

**A:** *I was expecting very elderly men. I don't mean this in any disrespect but men maybe just past it. But what I noticed today is the men are full of life, full of joy, full of enthusiasm*

**B:** *They've a passion for music. They all seem happy when they get together and play. Their facial expressions, like they're joyful they may be in their 80s and that, but if you heard them they could be in the 20s. And the way they are getting on - the craic*

**A:** *Very young, not in age, but young at heart. I probably don't look at them as elderly men I probably just looking at them as musicians*

**B:** *They are channelling their youth. They are up dancing and all which is good*

**A:** *You get that stereotype of when they get to that age they are not great to approach and all that. But they are fantastic, so they are*



## 6. Collaboration

The collaborative approach between Derry City and Strabane District Council and local professional musicians Terry McCafferty and Mickey Joe was central to the project's success. The Council (Jean Smyth) coordinated the project and managed the logistical and publicity aspects. Content, structure and delivery was managed by Terry and Mickey. The respect that the partners had for each other was evident.

*"The facilitators are very important. Someone who is not too highfalutin, and I think it needs to be someone fairly local; bringing in someone from far away has huge travel costs."*

(co-ordinator)

~~~

"Jean does a good job of the promotion and all that kind of stuff." (F1)

~~~

*"Terry has been around for just so long and is a fantastic song writer as well – he has great pedigree in that. He has won loads of competitions... he's not one to push himself forward you know in those terms. He would be very much in the community he is probably one of the guys who does more with local young bands and gets them involved in council projects and a lot of it is voluntary. He has an old school approach going around and knocking on doors and I'll be emailing and all that."*

Being involved in Music to Your Ears requires a major investment of time on the part of the facilitators. Career musicians with heavy travel schedules, they do not have a lot of 'spare time'. Mickey described his initial reticence to become involved:

*"Initially I suppose I was a bit reluctant to get involved because I wasn't sure – not that I didn't want to do it but I've other things going on."*

That initial reluctance has since been replaced by a deep commitment to the men and the project. Testimony to this can be seen in how he scheduled a series of performances in Germany around the end of project concerts.

*"When you are invested in it and you've got to know the guys and you've built up friendships and relationships with them as well; it impossible not to feel that it is part of your job to be there. I'm a working musician so I'm in Germany for four nights before the Strabane show and I'm going to fly in on the day and do the rehearsal and put on the show that night and then I go back to Germany a few days later for 10 days. I was able to work it that I could go in out [of Germany] so that's what it means to me. I would hate to miss the show."*

Happy with what has been achieved through the project, all partners expressed great satisfaction that the

project had developed organically from the ground up.

*“This is home grown. It is very much about what they wanted to do.”*  
(Co-ordinator)

Seeing first hand the transformative impact that AOP ‘Music to Your Ears’

was having on people’s lives was rewarding and a source of great satisfaction for the facilitators.

*“We get a kick out of that as well – we’ve brought people together and they are staying together.”* (F2)



## 7. Discussion

Social isolation is a major public health problem associated with premature death. Older people are recognised as being vulnerable to it and at risk of acute feelings of loneliness. Research suggests that older men experience social isolation differently to women and are less likely to engage with group-based activities. The impetus to find interventions that alleviate social isolation and loneliness for older men could be great. Life expectancy for men in NI is four years less than it is for women (DoH, 2017).

The AOP Music to Your Ears project proved to be highly effective in engaging older men from a wide variety of backgrounds. It taps into men's interest in music and the draw of the 'music' was described as helping to overcome anxieties about going to a group. The project has helped to create new friendships and forge strong connections between members. The men spoke openly of the social isolation and loneliness that they had experienced before joining the group. There was a sense of there being life before and after Music to your Ears, with the project proving to be a powerful vehicle in alleviating social isolation and loneliness for them. The sense of camaraderie and solidarity within the Music to Your Ears project is found in the quotation from a participant:

*"What one man doesn't know another man will show him."*

Learning to play an instrument or starting to play again has helped the men to grow in confidence. Playing the music, writing scripts and songs and working towards the end of project concert gave a great sense of purpose. Engagement with Music to Your Ears has enabled the men to find a voice; for some it is the satisfaction of singing or performing. For others the skills and new-found confidence is enabling them to use their voice to advocate for social change through song writing.

Music to Your Ears was shown to provide an incentive for the men to be more physically active and many reported improved dexterity, strength and cognitive function. The involvement of local professional musicians gave the project kudos, the men clearly had huge respect for them and this enhanced motivation to stay involved.

Strabane and Derry City Council is commended for its work in developing Arts based initiatives to alleviate social isolation and loneliness. The AOP funding enabled this innovative project to happen. Learning from it could be used to support development of music-based arts interventions for older men across NI. It is likely that wider implementation of the approach would help promote more equitable health outcomes and opportunities for men.

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## Authors

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**Ms Joan Alexander** is an innovative and award-winning photographer whose accolades include the University of Brighton Bright Spark award, the Santander Innovation award; the Danny Wilson Memorial Award for most outstanding emerging photographer in Brighton Photo Fringe. Her work has been showcased by contemporary arts organisations including Fabrica and Night Contact. In 2015 she was nominated for the prestigious Drawing Rooms London Bursary Award for creating innovative and ambitious work during Dear Serge series at the De La Warr Pavillion. An associate with Sonrisa Solutions Ltd she combines a degree in Scholastic Philosophy (QUB 2001) with an MA Photography (Brighton, 2011) and a wealth of experience photographing older people. She contributed innovative shadow to the ACNI publication 'Not so Cut Off' (Lynch & Alexander, 2016). More recently she has been developing her 'shadow boxes' as bespoke arts education package, Shadow Studio.

## Appendix I Songs written by Members of the AOP Group

## WORKING TO LIVE

**G**  
Friday Night and I Just got paid  
**C**  
Saturday night and I just wish I'd stayed home  
**G** **D**  
Sunday morning the preacher snarls at me.  
**G**  
Sunday evening I'm in Strabane  
**C**  
We're going to the dance, well that's the plan.  
**G** **D** **G**  
I'm not living to work, I'm just working to live.

**C**  
Monday morning it starts again,  
**G**  
Tuesday morning it starts to rain,  
**A7** **D**  
Wednesday morning I'm fallin outa bed,  
**C**  
Thursday morning we're almost there,  
**G**  
Friday morning the cupboard's bare.  
**D**  
I'm not living to work, I'm just working to  
**G**  
live.

We're driving up and down this land,  
Going to the Pallidrome in Strabane.  
Dancing and singing the weekend all away.  
Dancing to the Clipper Carlton Band,  
With my baby in my hand.  
We're both gonna dance the night away.

**C**  
Monday morning it starts again,  
**G**  
Tuesday morning it starts to rain,  
**A7** **D**  
Wednesday morning I'm fallin outa bed,  
**C**  
Thursday morning we're almost there,  
**G**  
Friday morning the cupboard's bare.  
**D**  
I'm not living to work, I'm just working to  
**G**  
live.

The crowds they come from all around,  
Dancing to that crazy big band sound  
In the Pallidrome and the Orchid ballroom too.  
It's the swinging sixties we're having fun,  
Bring your daughters, bring your sons.  
Come and join us, bring your dancing shoes.

**C**  
Monday morning it starts again,  
**G**  
Tuesday morning it starts to rain,  
**A7** **D**  
Wednesday morning I'm fallin outa bed,  
**C**  
Thursday morning we're almost there,  
**G**  
Friday morning the cupboard's bare.  
**D**  
I'm not living to work, I'm just working to  
**G**  
live.

**C**  
Monday morning it starts again,  
**G**  
Tuesday morning it starts to rain,  
**A7** **D**  
Wednesday morning I'm fallin outa bed,  
**C**  
Thursday morning we're almost there,  
**G**  
Friday morning the cupboard's bare.  
**D**  
I'm not living to work, I'm just working to  
**G**  
live.

**G C G D G**

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## She Has a Name

She was yesterday's headline  
Alone and discarded  
She was homeless  
Found laying in a door.  
"Poor woman" we'd think  
Avoiding eye contact,  
But in somebody's heart  
She's much more.

She has a name

She's a niece, she's a daughter,  
She has sisters and brothers  
She was loved by them all  
Just the same.  
She has friends, she's a mother  
She has a story to tell,  
She's a woman,  
She has a name.

She has a name

Under blankets they found her  
By a four star hotel.  
On a cold winters night  
With no home.  
She's not the first to be found  
Near that very same spot.  
Not the first  
To pass so alone.

She has a name

As we sit to a meal in our own cosy homes.  
Watch TV  
A warm bed to ourselves.  
Spare a thought for a moment,  
Say a prayer for this mother,  
And help those  
Who can't help themselves.

She has a name

She's a niece, she's a daughter,  
She has sisters and brothers  
She was loved by them all  
Just the same.  
She has friends, she's a mother  
She has a story to tell,  
She's a woman,  
She has a name.

She has a name

She didn't judge us  
So lets not judge her,  
We don't know  
How she found herself there.  
We're all one human race  
It would be a disgrace  
If we turned  
And we didn't care

She has a name

Show that you understand  
Hold out a hand,  
Let humanity  
Be our guiding light.  
They're not ghosts on the street  
They've life stories to speak.  
Let's help change  
Let's make it right.

She has a name

She's a niece, she's a daughter,  
She has sisters and brothers  
She was loved by them all  
Just the same.  
She has friends, she's a mother  
She has a story to tell,  
She's a woman,  
She has a name.

She has a name

Kathleen O'Sullivan

That is her name

*Kathleen O'Sullivan was 43 years old and homeless. She couldn't find shelter and died in the doorway of a in Lower Oliver Plunket Street, Cork on 06/12/2017. The national broadcaster, RTE, carried the blunt, cold headline "Body of Homeless Woman found on Street in Cork".*

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