

# “Not so Cut Off”<sup>1</sup>: Case Study Evidence to Illustrate the Impact of the Arts and Older People’s Programme in Alleviating Isolation and Loneliness

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The Arts Council of Northern Ireland (ACNI)

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<sup>1</sup>Taken from an interview with 83 year old Woman living in a Nursing Home (see page 18)

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When you are old and grey and full of  
sleep,  
And nodding by the fire, take down this  
book,  
And slowly read, and dream of the soft look  
Your eyes had once, and of their shadows  
deep;

Borrowed from the poem "When you are old" By William Butler Yeats

### **The Story of how the Arts Changed One Man's Life.**

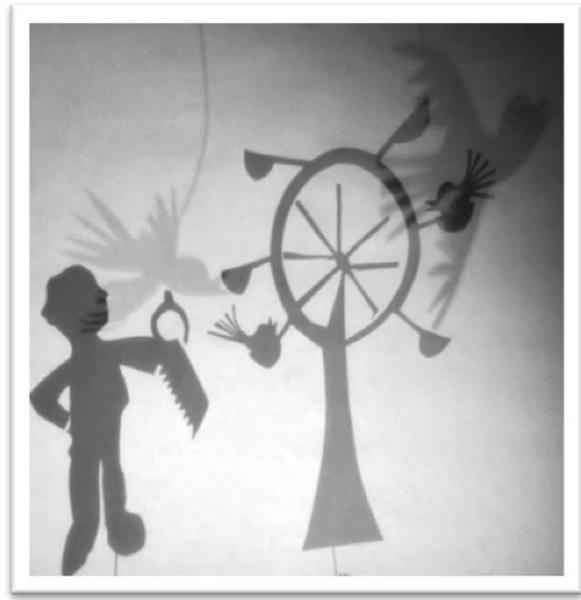
*"You are lying in bed in the morning – you have no reason for getting up. Come nine o'clock – ach sure I'll lie another hour, come 10 O'clock – sure I'll lie on another while cos I'd only be burning gas and I'll keep myself warm here – you know and then I'll lie on another while and then the morning is gone and you are into the afternoon".*

*"Right and you maybe do surface and you go through the motions of whatever you have to do you look out and you think ach maybe I'll cut the grass, or maybe I'll brush the yard or something – something futile – just to keep yourself active and then maybe you'll say ach I'll not bother – I'll go in the car and buy the paper and sit at the lough and read the paper – but you can only read the paper for so long, you've seen the swans, you've seen the water, you've seen the ducks, you've seen the people jet skiing – you've seen all that – you just say to yourself – I'll go home now and Pointless is on (the television)".*



*"I was in joinery most of my life and the building trade and then I had to retire and found I had no place to go. Now there's not enough days in the week. I've made various things. I was never artistic – I just done what had to be done – hang doors or whatever – roof houses – I never, never ever, was artistic. Everything was the same. Now I am doing things like I would never have been doing – like making bird tables and I am making wishing wells –*

*making various things – you know too numerous to mention. I made a library for Clotworthy house. One side is for adults and the other side is for children’s books”.*



*“I’ve learnt a lot and met people I wouldn’t normally meet. And something we do now on a Friday morning - there is a wee group of us meet down at the castle garden and go for a wee walk and coffee – something we wouldn’t have done on our own. The council have been good enough to let us go down to the Antrim forum for an hour to do a work out on the treadmill or whatever you want to do.”*

*“Never in my life have I done that before. Now we’ve started a wee walking group – started off just two of us and now we are a wee group of five and anyone else that wants to join is welcome. We just walk down to the lough and back for a coffee at Clothworthy house and up to our cars again – there’s still a long day you know after that to fill but it is a start.”*

## 1. Introduction

*“When I was a young mother I didn’t know why old people talked to me. But now I know. Maybe that person is the first person they spoke with today. Because you get up every day and you have breakfast on your own, you have lunch on your own and if you see somebody for instance if someone is sneezing you say ‘bless you’”.*

*“When I had a husband and a family I would have walked passed that person, I wouldn’t have seen them. But because I am on my own now I sort of relate to people more – no, I engage with people more. I watched Edna O’Brien the famous writer interviewed last week and she is aged 85 now. They asked her if she was lonely. And there is a famous woman – how many books has she has written – living in London and she said ‘yes’ she was lonely”.*

(Woman aged 68 years, November 2015, Co Armagh)

### 1.1 Background

We are privileged to be living in a time when our prospects of reaching ripe old age is greater than at any time in history. There are currently 285,900 people aged over 65 years in Northern Ireland. The over 65 age group now forms 15.5% of the total population, compared to 11.2% in 1974. This trend of an increasingly older population is set to accelerate and it is anticipated that by 2039 there will be almost half a million (498,500) people aged over 65years living here. By 2039 one in four people (24.7%) will be aged over 65 years. (OFMdFM, 2015).

A range of factors, including a reduction in family size, increased urbanisation and changing patterns of communication have contributed to the emergence of social isolation and loneliness as major public health issues; the impact of which is particularly acute for older people. In December 2015 the Office of the First and Deputy Minister (OFMdFM) predicted that by 2039 there would be an increase of 36,900 people aged 65 living alone. This figure will account for 86.6% of the overall projected increase (42,600) of people living alone in Northern Ireland (OfmDFM, 2015). Although living alone in itself is not a cause of social isolation or loneliness it is a significant risk factor.

In 2009 with the support of the *Atlantic Philanthropies* the Arts Council of Northern Ireland (ACNI) launched an innovative three year Arts and Older People’s programme (AOPP) with the aim of promoting social inclusion for older people. The programme proved to be very successful and in 2012 a second AOPP was launched funded by ACNI in partnership with the Baring Foundation and the Public Health Agency (PHA). Central to the AOPP is harnessing the power of the Arts to alleviate social isolation and loneliness for older people.

## 1.2 The Case Studies

The purpose of the six case studies set out in this report is to complement the wider AOPP evaluation (Wallace Consulting, 2015) by illustrating the impact of the AOPP in alleviating social isolation and loneliness. The case studies (AGEility, Big Telly Theatre Company, Craigavon Council, Fermanagh and Omagh District Council, Mid and East Antrim Ageing Well Partnership (MEAAP) and Waterside Theatre) were selected in consultation with the ACNI. They reflect the geographical spread of the AOPP and the diversity of arts interventions which included *inter-alia* basket weaving, circus skills, creative writing, dance, drama, silk painting, pottery, photography, mosaic, wood work and singing.

Individual (x11) and group interviews (x 8) were used to capture experience and insights from the five key stakeholder groups (older people, artists, host organisations, councils and funders). A total of 64 people participated in the interviews [Appendix I]. Following a full explanation of the project, written consent was obtained from participants in advance of the interview taking place. The interviews were audio-recorded.

The authors of this report are Una Lynch a public health specialist and Joan Alexander an award winning photographer. Lynch and Alexander worked closely together to analyse the interviews and identify explanatory themes. Shadow casting and shadow tracing images (Alexander) are used throughout the report to complement the written text (Lynch) and illuminate key findings and learning.

## 1.3 Shadow Work

Omnipresent, but not always visible, shadows are a useful metaphor in representing the different thoughts, feelings and experiences associated with loneliness and isolation. In Shadow Studies Alexander uses the shadow as a tool to create images through a process of delicate tracing and casting. These creative processes become integral and visible in the final images.

The images produced are not immediate depictions often associated with photography, instead they are slowly evolving works that are intended to take the viewer on a path into the stories and give room for contemplation. While the shadow is often seen as a foreboding sign of danger, of the unknown, a dark or sinister image, in Alexander's work, the shadow is considered as a magical presence, a silent loyal twin, only appearing with the light. In contrast to the loneliness and isolation that may surround us as we age the shadow is a constant attachment (in isolation), and witness (to the lonely).

While measuring and illustrating intangibles such as loneliness and isolation, our shadow serves to remind us that while we are always in our own presence, we can come to know ourselves more fully when we are with other people. These two sides of the shadow, the dark and light, are reflected in the contrasting interpretations of the old classic song 'me and my shadow' [appendix II]. In the Judy Garland version the shadow accompanies her "All alone and feeling blue". Whereas Ol Blue Eyes (Frank Sinatra) sings of his shadow "We're

alone but far from blue.” The aim of the AOPP is to use the arts to strengthen people’s capacity to identify with the latter.

Two types of Shadow Studies - Shadow Maps and Shadow Castings - have creatively explored the subjective feelings of loneliness, and the objective physical absence of others in social isolation. These are used to complement the written text. It is hoped that they embody the spirit of creativity and process of making that is central to the AOPP.

### *1.3.1 Shadow Maps*

Shadow Maps are created through a durational process that begins with observing areas of light and shadow as they move through a space with the sun. Alexander traces the line around the shadow lines at timed intervals so that they create visually unique drawings which are then photographed. Each shadow line is annotated with the actual time that the line was drawn, creating a visually accurate record of time. These drawings become quasi-maps that orientate a faded shadow path, giving a sense of time passed. The shadow map makes visible a shadow that would normally disappear, essentially making a passage of time physical and tangible. By lifting the lines on tracing paper it is as if the photographer has lifted time up and photographed it. The process is conceptually experimental yet firmly rooted in the history of photography (trace of light and shadow).

The final drawing becomes a photograph - traced by light and developed through time. The subjective lines of time and age are represented through the literal tracing of shadows and time. These lines are traced following the same logic as a sun dial. As the sun moves so does the shadow. The Shadow tracings illustrate how we are intimately connected to our past; the time is not lost but etched in our minds and memories.

This connection with time is an ageless and deeply subjective awareness that connects us deeply with our past, our experiences, essentially our whole selves. Valuing and rekindling this connection, that is so easily lost as we are perceived as older people, and as our physical appearance changes, is important in feeling the value and self-worth connected to our identity as humans and members of society.

It is not initially clear if the shadow profiles belong to someone middle aged, old or young. The shadow tracings are evidence that time is passing as we see the lines of shadows shift towards the edge of the page while the sun moves across the sky. In this way they are testament to the fact that while we move through time and changes they do not define us and we remain closely connected to the constant, core elements of ourselves.



**Figure 1:** Shadow Map of Seamus Connell, aged 71 years, participated in Big Telly Theatre Company's Machinations programme with the Men's Shed



**Figure 2:** Shadow Map of Jessie Gilloway, aged 86 years, lives in a Nursing Home and participated in the Waterside Theatre's intergenerational arts programme

The two shadow maps included in this report are of participants in the Arts and Older People's programme. The images were created on two exceptionally sunny days in October 2015. The first shadow map is of Jessie Gilloway aged 86 years. Jessie lives in a Nursing Home and participated in the Waterside Theatre's intergenerational Arts programme. Jessie has Parkinson's disease and uses a wheelchair to move around. An avid student of the night sky Jessie has an interest in all things celestial and was very enthusiastic about Joan's use of shadows to create her profile. The second shadow map is of Seamus Connell aged 71 years. Seamus was a participant in Big Telly's Machinations programme with the Men's Shed and was interested in helping with Joan's shadow map because it reflected his own work creating lanterns for candles.

The shadow maps serve as an allegory or symbol for the impact of the Arts on alleviating social isolation and loneliness for older people. The passage of time, normally invisible, is made tangible by the shadow lines. When viewed in conjunction with evidence of how participation in the Arts by older people has enhanced their sense of belonging, health and wellbeing the shadow maps provide a compelling reminder of the inter-connectedness between Art and public health.

### ***1.3.2 Shadow Castings***

Shadow castings are used throughout the report to illustrate individual stories and the transformative impact of the Arts in the lives of older people. Depicting a story through cut out shapes that become shadow puppets - shadow casting is an effective vehicle for communicating complex messages to a wide variety of audiences. Alexander created her shadow cast images by cutting out shadow puppets and installing them into mini shadow stage sets. The shadow images were then photographed, using lights and filters and produced as still images to create beautiful but simple illustrations. This creative process is also a testament to both pre camera photography and the ancient art of visual story telling.

### **1.4 What Made the Arts Effective in Alleviating Social isolation and Loneliness**

Evidence from the case studies serves to make visible how participatory arts interventions increased social interaction amongst AOPP target groups (i.e. people living alone, men and rural dwellers). The self-reported physical and mental wellbeing benefits of creative participation are highlighted. Seven factors emerged from the case studies to explain why the arts interventions were effective in addressing social isolation and loneliness. Five of these factors map directly on to the Ways to Health identified by the New Economics Foundation (NEF)<sup>2</sup>. Common to all of the interventions was the ability of the Arts to:

1. Bring people together (connect)
2. Encourage people to be physically active (be active)
3. Enable people to develop new skills (keep learning)

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<sup>2</sup> The Five ways to health are Connect, be active, keep learning, give and take notice.  
<http://www.fivewaystowellbeing.org/>

4. Encourage people to support and help others (give)
5. Promote immersion/absorption in the activity (take notice)
6. Allow people to create something
7. Encourage people to use their imagination

The five factors underpinning the overall effectiveness of AOPP were identified as being

- an improved understanding of what is meant by the Arts amongst older people and service providers,
- proactive engagement with older people and with colleagues from different sectors and disciplines,
- skilled community artists,
- resources, and
- the partnership between the ACNI and PHA.

Illustrative vignettes have been distilled from the case studies to highlight how the AOPP has contributed to the alleviation of isolation and loneliness in the lives of older men and women across Northern Ireland. The MEAAP Hope Art project highlights the importance of community arts for older people experiencing rural isolation. AGEility circus skills challenges the prejudiced notions of ageing that prevail in society and the limitations that we associate with age. Waterside Theatre provides an insight into the minds of people living in residential care and the transformative power of the arts in bringing children and older people together as co-creators. The Big Telly theatre company harnesses imagination to build confidence, self-esteem and community for older men. The added value of the Arts in enhancing effectiveness in the work of councils is illustrated through the experiences of people in the Craigavon and Fermanagh and Omagh District Council areas.

## 2. Context

### 2.1 Social Isolation and Loneliness

Increases in life expectancy, declining birth rates, migratory patterns and changes in housing design are some of the factors that are contributing to the radical transformation of traditional social structures, networks and supports. A consequence of these changes is the emergence of social isolation and loneliness as major public health issues. The rapid growth in research focused on the impact of isolation and loneliness is testimony to the serious impact of these phenomena on health and wellbeing across the lifespan and particularly in older age.

Valtorta et al (2016) revealed that loneliness and social isolation are associated with an increased risk of developing CHD and stroke. Herttua et al (2011) demonstrated a causal link between living alone and alcohol-related mortality, across all age groups in Finland. Steptoe

et al (2012) used the English Longitudinal Study (ELSA) to examine the impact of loneliness and isolation on mortality amongst older people. The study revealed the all cause mortality rates were higher amongst lonely and socially isolated people. The impact of social isolation was however deemed to be the greater risk, when other factors such as general health status and marital status were controlled for. The study concluded: “although both isolation and loneliness impair quality of life and well-being, efforts to reduce isolation are likely to be more relevant to mortality.” (p5797). A USA study (Pantell et al 2013) examining social isolation as a predictor of mortality likened the risk associated with social isolation to that of cigarette smoking, hypertension and obesity. It is noteworthy that this research also highlighted the “value of identifying social isolation as a potentially modifiable risk factor” (Pantell et al. p2060).

It is widely recognised that the risk of social isolation is greater amongst older men (Beach and Bamford, 2015). Older men are also less likely to access or engage with existing services (Lynch, 2015). In the interests of equity, public health interventions such as the AOPP seek to find ways of overcoming barriers to participation for men, and other ‘hard to reach’ populations including older people in areas of social deprivation, people with dementia, people living alone, carers and rural dwellers. The promotion of social inclusion and the human rights of older people are central to the active ageing strategy (OFMdFM, 2014). Built around five strategic aims - independence, participation, care, self-fulfillment and dignity the OFMdFM strategy maps directly on to the purpose of the AOPP.

## **2.2 The Arts and Older People’s Programme (AOPP)**

The Arts Council of Northern Ireland’s (ACNI) Arts and Older People’s Programme (AOPP) is a flagship project of specific relevance to the Council’s strategic priorities (ACNI, 2013). The AOPP commenced in 2009 as a three year pilot programme jointly funded (£700,000) by the Arts Council and The Atlantic Philanthropies. Building on the learning and success of the pilot the second phase (2013-16) of the AOPP is funded (£1 million) by the ACNI, the Department of Culture Arts and Leisure (DCAL), the Public Health Agency (PHA) and the Baring Foundation. Since its inception the AOPP has been recognised for promoting social inclusion and overcoming the barriers which prevent older people from participating in the arts. The programme is specifically focused on five strategic and interconnected themes: (1) isolation and loneliness, (2) social inclusion, (3) poverty, (4) Health (including dementia, mental and emotional wellbeing) and (5) strengthening the voice of older people.

The report highlights the strong congruency in the reasons why the ACNI, PHA and Baring Foundation chose to invest in the Arts for older people’s programme. The three partners recognised (1) the potential of the Arts to alleviate social isolation and loneliness; (2) the right of everyone to have access to the Arts (3) the health promoting effects of the Arts and (4) the synergistic potential of partnership working in maximising return on their investment.

### **2.2.1 Potential of the arts to alleviate social isolation and loneliness**

Building on learning from phase one of the programme the ACNI wanted to

*“use the arts to strengthen the voice of older people and to use the arts as creative tool to highlight the social justice issues facing older people on a day to day basis; including isolation and loneliness, poverty, lifelong learning, health and dementia.”* (ACNI, p1).

Since its inception in 2009 the PHA has prioritised the issue of social isolation across all population groups and has a history of incorporating Arts based interventions.

*“The PHA recognises the value of the Arts as a tool for addressing social isolation and loneliness for people who are unlikely to engage with ‘health type’ projects. If a project is described as creative, artistic, music, drama they would see that as something that they would get involved with... They may not even realise that it is benefitting them until you actually ask them afterwards.”* (PHA)

The Arts are one of the key areas of work for the Baring Foundation and within this arena ageing has become a significant focus in recent years (Cutlure 2013 & 2015; The Baring Foundation, 2015).

*“We will always have a social purpose in mind, that’s how we do our funding process. What we are always trying to do is to use a very small amount of money, we are a small organisation we’ve got little resources, extremely small amounts of money to catalyse a field which we think is important but neglected. And we very much felt that was the case. That is the first criterion it needs to be a field of activity where our money can make quite a considerable difference and catalyse others. And the second and there is tons of stuff on the website<sup>3</sup> about why we believe arts and older people is intrinsically an important issue. As well as being neglected we also believe it (the Arts) is important for the various types of benefits that it brings.”* (Baring Foundation)

The Baring Foundation also works with the Arts Councils in England, Scotland and Wales. The ACNI was the first of the Arts Councils to focus on Arts and Older people and is the only one to have formed a partnership with a health focused organisation.

### **2.2.2 Right of everyone to have access to the Arts**

The three partners recognised that participation in the Arts was a right for all people<sup>4</sup>. The PHA recognised that ageing was a life-long process. It was reflective of its commitment to public health highlighting how it works to ensure that socially excluded groups have the opportunity to engage with the Arts. The ACNI emphasised the importance of ensuring that the artistic experience was of high quality and that it promoted engagement of older people.

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<sup>3</sup> <http://www.baringfoundation.org.uk/publications-by-topic/#Arts>

<sup>4</sup> The Right of everyone to take part in cultural life is enshrined in article 15 of the UN Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural rights

*“There’s an artistic justification. We feel that everyone has a right to participate in the arts. So even if they didn’t have any special benefits that would still be the case. Older people are still part of society and they should also be able to access the arts”*(Baring Foundation).

*“We have a number of projects with Looked After Children and other younger people. There is a wide range of programmes – music, dance, drama. There is no end to the benefits that you can get right across the [age] spectrum”*. (PHA)

*“We shouldn’t lose sight of the quality of the artistic engagement which is really at the core of what we are delivering. And I suppose that is what makes it distinct from a ‘cup of tea’ is the quality of the engagement with the artist facilitator and how we are using that mechanism to engage with older people.”* (ACNI, p2)

### **2.2.3 The health promoting effects of the arts**

All of the partners spoke enthusiastically and passionately about the health benefits of engaging with the arts. As a consequence they were keen to see a broadening of access to ensure that as many people as possible could have access to the Arts.

*“There is increasingly good evidence about physical benefits for instance about Parkinson’s, about COPD<sup>5</sup> about flexibility about stamina, about gait and about mental health ... dementia and then there’s intergenerational solidarity and integration and very important benefit in terms of older people particularly older men tend to be more likely to be isolated., the sort of community participatory arts that we fund are an excellent way to bring people together.”* (Baring Foundation)

Leading by example the PHA is using evidence to inform its practice and is implementing the New Economics Foundation (NEF) five ways to health and wellbeing: (1) Keep learning, (2) be active, (3) connect with other people, (4) see the beauty in things and (5) give. (Aked et al., 2008)

*“Those five ways would be met through art and creativity. Therefore physically, and more importantly mentally, people will have health benefits through engaging with the arts.”* (PHA)

The ACNI acknowledge that the programme is having a very positive impact but recognised that the full potential of the arts did not happen in a vacuum and that the success of the AOPP was dependent on different agencies and disciplines working together.

*“The anecdotal evidence is compelling. We are not trying to demonstrate in any way that the programme is the be-all and end-all – this is a multiagency approach so it needs stakeholders across the health care environment to work together in a holistic way to meet the needs of older people.”* (ACNI, p2)

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<sup>5</sup> Chronic Obstructive Pulmonary Disease

### 2.2.4 Partnership

All partners emphasised the fact that although the AOPP is a relatively small programme it is delivering an impact disproportionate to the funding available. The partnership was valued for maximising financial investment, producing richer decision making and providing enhanced networks.

*“We make better decisions when we do things in partnership. Looking at things from different perspectives, I am absolutely sure brings better decisions and richer results. Pragmatically we are a small funder and it extends our funding very, very dramatically with probably leverage at least double and I suspect three times more funding into the field than we would have brought ourselves.” (Baring Foundation)*

*“It makes our limited resource go a lot further. It means that our resources can be added to the ACNI and Baring Foundation in terms of expertise as well. They have expertise in art. However what has come across strongly this year is the link with the PHA has enabled them to become engaged in areas that they didn’t do before. So coming together of the PHA and Arts Council has really doubled the impact that that project would have had if one or other had tried to do it alone. Skills, expertise being able to get to certain people - Lorraine from Arts Council for example would say – ‘I need to get to someone in the Fermanagh area’ – we can put her in contact with local groups down there. Or you know the Arts Council would have good ways of opening doors politically so we can go in with them. So it’s a real win-win.” (PHA)*



*“I think we’re very active in this (partnership). The PHA is very, very good. But financially we are a very small organisation. But despite being a small organisation the impact is high. If you look at the impact on health benefits so in a proportionate way it would be very nice if the PHA committed a lot more, not to us, but generally. It is very, very tight we are refusing fantastic projects because of lack of money.” (ACNI, p1)*

The quotation below from David Cutler Director of the Baring Foundation captures the philosophy underpinning the AOPP.

*“Older people have every right to enjoy or be part of the arts in exactly the same way as a 20 year, but obviously particularly with someone who is vulnerable there’s all sorts of access problems that they’re going to have that a 20 year won’t have. Our wish is for funders and the major cultural organisations (theatres, museums...) to see that as part of their normal job. In the way that they have seen for a long time encouraging children and young people into the arts as a major normal part of their job. It’s not very high falutin it’s just about normalising. We don’t live in an ideal world and the arts are extremely constrained and under pressure so fantastic provision for every older person with no interest in cost is simply not worth talking about because that is just not going to happen, because no one else is going to get that either. However making it more of a level playing field, and for people’s both budgets and ways of thinking, to be much more attuned to older people. I think that is entirely possible. It is absolutely what should happen and is entirely realistic and increasingly what is happening.” (Baring Foundation)*

### **3. The Case Studies**

#### **3.1 Big Telly**

Big Telly is a Regional Theatre Company, based in Portstewart. Its work is focused on using theatre to promote capacity development in isolated and rural communities. Big Telly received £14,500 through the AOPP to fund work *Machinations* – a visual and verbal arts project aimed at capturing the identity and life experiences of older men living in rural areas.

#### **3.2 Waterside**

Waterside Theatre is a theatre company based in Londonderry. The organisation aims to be as inclusive as possible within its community by making the activities affordable. They received £10,283 to fund the 'Telling Tales' project which was an intergenerational visual art project linking together care homes, community centres and schools.

#### **3.3 AGEility/Streetwise**

Streetwise Community Circus is a co-operative of circus practitioners based in Belfast working throughout Northern Ireland. They use circus as a tool to have wider social impacts. They received £15,000 to deliver 'AGE-ility' and engage with older people across eight different communities in Belfast as well as a group in Whitehead. The use of circus skills and older people was a first for Northern Ireland.

#### **3.4 Mid and East Antrim Ageing Well Programme (MEAAP)**

MEAAP is a strategic based partnership aimed at improving the lives of older people in Larne, Carrickfergus and Ballymena areas. They were awarded £15,300 to fund their HOPE (Helping Older People Enjoy) ART project. They used their knowledge of the older people in the area to target those isolated, lonely and living rurally.

#### **3.5 Craigavon Council**

Craigavon Borough Council engages with groups to develop arts projects which tackle issues such as increasing quality of life, health and wellbeing, and improving and enriching the area. They received £15,200 to deliver the 'Dance the Memories' project. This project was created after extensive consultation with the older people in the area.

#### **3.6 Fermanagh and Omagh District Council**

Fermanagh District Council (now part of Fermanagh and Omagh District Council) aimed to make Fermanagh a "better place to live work and visit". The Council was awarded funding of £20,000 to deliver a bespoke arts programme for the older people. This was the first time the two, formally separate Councils, had come together to work in partnership.

## 4. The Arts as a Vehicle for Public Health

There was unanimous agreement amongst all stakeholders that the Arts make a positive impact on people's health and wellbeing. Older people talked openly and freely about the transformative effective of the programme on their lives. People frequently talked about how the programme had been a 'life saver' and there was recognition that it was a vital way of preventing ill health:

*"It is money well spent; you know to lessen health issues in the future – saving money for the future; keeping people out of hospital, keeping them out of residential homes." (Woman aged 70 years).*

There was also recognition of how the AOPP enhanced dignity of older people, providing them with a 'stake' in society, giving a great boost to confidence and self-esteem:

*"it gave them something to talk about – some of them do have family and friends but they are very disconnected from them. They are maybe able to visit every two weeks. It [arts] gives them something different to talk about. They can say to the postman oh I'm away to create a glass quilt. (MEAAP, worker 1)*

This section of the report begins by describing older people's experience of social isolation and loneliness. It then moves on to identify the seven factors, which underpin the effectiveness of the Arts as a vehicle for public health generally and the alleviation of social isolation and loneliness in particular.

### 4.1 Loneliness and Social Isolation

All of the older people acknowledged that loneliness and social isolation were an issue for them personally or for someone close to them. They talked openly and frankly about the reality of lives bereft of human contact and conversation.

*"Loneliness is a health problem so it is - especially in the winter time – you go in and maybe don't see anyone for 24hours at times. Like I do have a family and all that – they are in touch – but talking to people you miss that" (Man 4 – 'Men's Shed')*

*"I think a lot of it is loneliness. You are dependent on someone dropping in to see you." (Woman (2) nursing home resident)*

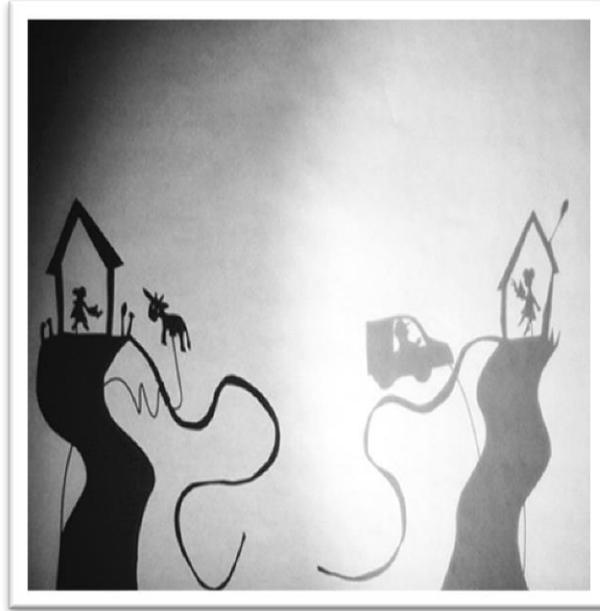


*“I still feel lonely at times. I would see my family every day and they are saying ‘mum do you want to go shopping? Do you want to do this?’ But you are still on your own” I’m not lonely in the sense that there are people around me all the time. But when you go in and you close that door you are on your own.” (Woman aged 62 years)*

There was a sense amongst the older people that society was changing and that human contact and conversation was being subsumed by technology and was no longer valued:

*“My community is changing there are very many young people living there now – all my old friends are gone.” (Woman, Belfast aged 85years)*

*“Years and years ago I used to cèilidh in your house and you cèilidhed in my house, but that doesn’t happen anymore. People are sitting watching the television. You go into somebody’s house and they don’t even turn it off.” (Woman, Fermanagh and Omagh District Council, aged 74 years)*

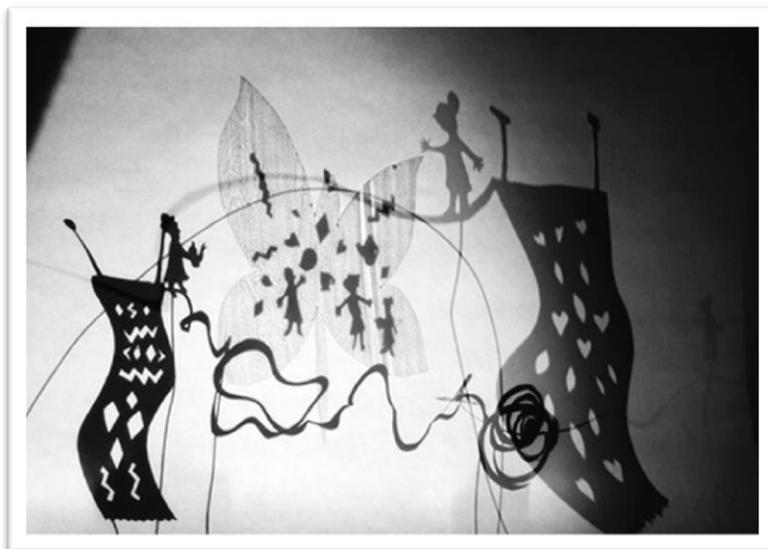


Rurality appeared to have brought particular challenges and served to exacerbate a problem which affected people irrespective of where they lived. The following quotation was taken from a focus group interview with a group of 15 women who were involved<sup>6</sup> in the MEAAP Hope Art project. The discussion highlights the reality of loneliness for those older people who are living surrounded by other people and those who live in rural isolation.

*“I never really be all that lonely because I always have something to do – it’s just having someone to speak to. I speak to the cat. Some days the cat is my only friend (MEAAP woman 5) [lots of nods and agreement from others around the table.] “Even in a housing estate – you can be lonely in a crowd” (MEAAP woman 6). “I have just moved into a housing estate and I don’t really know anyone in it” (MEAAP woman 4). I live two miles up a lane and there’s nobody passing. The only person that I would see is the postman at two o’clock– he always stops. “I live a mile up a lane and I only see the cows” (MEAAP, woman 14)*

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<sup>6</sup> 12 women had participated in the arts intervention (silk painting); the other three had chosen not to participate but had been present in the room where it had taken place and as a result felt part of the group.



#### 4.2 Bringing People Together

A common thread emerging in all of the case studies was the importance of the arts as a means of bringing people together. The art activity was the reason for coming together and that gave participants a shared purpose, something in common. This shared purpose was conducive to relaxed social interactions and conversations.

The women in the MEAAP project were involved in creating a wall hanging based on silk painted butterflies called 'taking flight'.

*"The lovely thing about Arts is that it takes away the pressure to talk. The conversations flow and they don't and they flow with little breaks and it's not awkward because there is something to do; because you have a purpose together."* (Artist, MEAAP)



The intergenerational dimension within the Waterside project brought the added dimension of connecting the young and old together in a joyful way through art.

*“Really the idea came from one of the residents saying to me ... ‘oh my goodness I hate it when the school’s not here in the summer. I can’t hear the children laughing’. [Because the school is right next door]. ‘it is so lonely when I can’t hear those voices outside – just hearing their laughter just cheers me up’. She couldn’t see the children she couldn’t actually see them – but could hear them playing at lunchtimes and play times.” (Waterside Artist)*

The arts intervention that was developed by Waterside theatre was based around bringing primary school children and socially isolated older people together to work on a range of arts activities, including story-telling, singing and visual arts.

*“ A lot of these older people live in very rural areas, without transport, they can’t drive – its farming land their families don’t live near them – others in urban areas also feel isolated from what is happening around them and these projects make a valuable contribution to help them feel part of society. It helps to break down the intergenerational barriers – the fears, the stigmas that younger people have of older people and also that older people have of younger people – hopefully all of those younger people that have participated will go out into society taking this experience with them. We had two young boys (9-10 years) who said that they would love to work with older people.” (Waterside, Artist)*

The intergenerational project had a compelling resonance with older people living in nursing homes. The beneficial effect of social integration was particularly impactful.

*“You’d look forward to them coming in on a Friday afternoon. You got used to them and their wee ways – All their little chit chat and telling what was going on in their wee lives.” (Woman 1, Nursing Home Resident).*

*“You feel part of the community again; yes that’s right part of the community again - not so cut off. You can hear what is happening outside and talk about things.” (Woman 2, Nursing Home Resident)*

*“It (the arts) is very helpful ... it gives you another interest you don’t feel like you are being left out. Sometimes when you are in places like this (nursing home) – you think that the world is passing you by. You were sharing – and learning together that was the most important part.” (Woman 3, Nursing Home Resident)*

*“It can be very lonely. You thank God you have what you have. You be lonely and anxious to talk to somebody. Some of them (children) came back to visit and brought their granny with them. You feel part of it. You’d thank them for coming and they said it was a pleasure – that was lovely.”(Woman 4, Nursing Home Resident)*

The AGEility programme also spanned different generations albeit a narrower age gap with participants ranging in age from 50s to 90s. Nonetheless the experience was again seen to be highly valued, with very positive outcomes in terms of creating connections between people.

*“We hosted a course (circus skills) for eight weeks and it was absolutely hilariously funny. We had a lot of people. The eldest was in their 90s and the youngest was me in my 50s. The majority were retired people. Some of whom were active; some who were not so active. They enjoyed the company and the time they had together. They enjoyed the learning of the new skills and it is more than just the juggling, scarf juggling, doing diabolo, hoops and things and hats and things. There was a certain amount of sitting around talking with each other. Some of that was organised activity - ice breakers that make you stop and think and they found that very good. We did it because I thought it would be a good idea – it was and I am now chasing half the world for grants to do it again.”* (AGEility, participant 1)

Having the arts activity as a focus or *raison d'être* was recognised as important in encouraging men to become engaged.

*“It was a broad spectrum of the art for us the artistic wood work, the oil painting the gardening, designing our garden– we try to incorporate art into everything we do.”* (Man 3, 'Men's Shed')

*“When you are sitting at home – you'd be sitting on your own and you wouldn't see anyone unless you went out. And then you come in here and the camaraderie and you would feel insulted unless you are insulted at least twice a day”* (Man 1, 'Men's shed')

*“My friend was home on holiday from Australia and noticed how his father had deteriorated. He was literally sitting in front of the telly all day. He brought him along to circus skills and he loved it. At 81years he got on the train from Lisburn every week and came to the classes. He stayed with us until he died. His wife who is still alive says ‘that was really good because it gave him quality of life towards the end’.”* (AGEility, tutor 2)

Throughout the interviews with the older people, participants talked about the benefit of the arts in encouraging them to come out of the house and keeping them engaged with society.

*“It is also very important to keep up to date with things – if you don't you will be lost. To meet people, young people and learn from them. I am the oldest one here I am 85.”* (AGEility participant)

*“you know we are almost like school children or employees – it is a race to get in for 9 – (laughter around the table). Old T – he's doing all the match stick work – he'll make you your coffee. And after a bit of craic before you know it A is away in one direction B in another direction and... we are all away doing your own thing. But the activity – you are not on your own – you don't feel you are on your own.”* (Man 2, 'Men's Shed')

The older people recognised the importance of feeling part of something for their overall health and wellbeing. They also recognised that there were many more people in the community who could potentially benefit from getting involved.

*“Mental health and movement – stop you getting ill. If your mood is good and you are moving well that keeps you well... But really to mix with people, to feel you belong; if you don’t belong to something you are isolated.”* (Woman aged 66 years, Craigavon)

*“I called with an old man last week, he has early dementia and got such a shock he has become a wee shadow of himself since his wife died. He doesn’t go out, he’s just sitting in the chair a wee lost soul, and he doesn’t watch the television because his hearing is going. And his family don’t visit often because you know everyone is so busy now. And he’s such a proud man and he won’t accept help and you can understand he doesn’t want a stranger in to shower him. If the council would just go down there and say there’s this wee group in Lisbellaw, this wee group in Ballinamallard and see to the people bring them in and we’ll give you the money – even if it’s just to talk and there’s several people like that.”* (P4 Fermanagh and Omagh District Council)

Smiles and laughter were common throughout the interviews and people repeatedly talked about the fun that they were enjoying. It was clear that being involved in a shared art based activity helped to combat communication difficulties due to disability and language barriers.

*“We had a lot of Chinese ladies we couldn’t communicate very well and I was trying to juggle scarves it was near the beginning and I finally mastered it. And this Chinese lady was in her 80s and I happened to look up and she just gave me the thumbs up - it was lovely and it breaks down barriers as well. And it could be a great way of getting people from different backgrounds together”* (AGEility, participant).

The fun, enthusiasm and satisfaction generated through the art were infectious and people not directly engaged in the activity were affected by it and felt part of it.

*“I didn’t do it because I’ve got a shake in my hand and wouldn’t have been able to do it. But I was still here and I enjoyed watching it. I didn’t want to do it but I liked being here. We were just sitting knitting and watching them from a distance”* (MEAAP, Woman 7).

### **4.3 Encouraging Older People to be Physically and Mentally Active**

The health benefits of physical and mental activity are well documented; however encouraging older people to become more active is also recognised as being a challenge. Part of the challenge is getting over the hurdle of people thinking that they are too old to participate.



During the interviews older people often raised the existence of ageist attitudes in society, which they believed were rooted in images of older people from previous generations.

*“When you look at these old photos of older people – they were all dressed in black and they looked so old and then my goodness you realise that they were only in their 60s.”* (Woman, aged 85 years)

Although the older people considered themselves to be much younger in outlook and behaviour than their parents there was a general consensus amongst them that the prevailing images of older people were heavily skewed towards the ageist stereotype of frail, vulnerable and lonely. These images they argued served to create self-imposed limitations around physical activity and a negative self-image generally:

*“I’m the elderly woman who could be burgled; I’m the lonely woman, the woman who talks to people in the street.”* (Woman, aged 68 years)

*“You become invisible. Even your own ones think you shouldn’t be doing things. They think of you only as mammy, or as granny, not as a person in your own right you know who likes to do different things.”* (Woman, aged 65 years)

In the Craigavon dance project the instructor tackled the ageism issue head on:

*“We did an exercise: look in the mirror and tell yourself what you like about yourself. Oh the laughter, the embarrassment. The encouragement it took to get people to say I like my blue eyes or I like what I am wearing today. But to me it was a kernel of wisdom an insight that people today in their 60s and 70s are still self-conscious don’t like their teeth, don’t like their hair are lacking in confidence. If we want to combat that we need to combat ageism, we need to push the negatives away and put them in a box.”* (Dance Instructor)

Ageist attitudes were also identified as the cause of well-meaning or ill-informed gatekeepers preventing access to residents in formal care settings.

*“What we have found interesting and certainly it [the experience] has shaped the Arts Council funded project. You will get people making decisions for older people and saying things like ‘no they wouldn’t be interested in that’ ‘no they wouldn’t do that’ ‘no they wouldn’t be up for that’. And sometimes you know that quite often that reaction comes from a kind place, but it also comes from an ill-informed place. So it has taking a lot of brokerage to have Care Workers let us get at the older people (laughter)” (Big Telly, artist).*

By placing the emphasis on the ‘Arts’ the AOPP appears to be encouraging and enabling older people to become more physically active and mentally engaged almost as an additional beneficial outcome secondary to the pleasure and enjoyment of the Arts experience.

*“I think they increase it (physical activity) because it becomes a secondary thing. It is all very well to do aqua aerobics or whatever but if you are actually moving about because you are involved in an imaginative world then it becomes fun rather than an exercise.” (Artist 1, Big Telly)*

Older people frequently talked about how participation in the arts was a motivation to do more, to push themselves further than they thought possible and look to the future. The end result was feeling included and part of something.

*“It’s the one thing that we can join in – there’s a lot of us can’t join us in physical things but the children are there in front of you playing and you can join in and you want to join in”.*  
(Woman 2 Nursing Home - physically disabled by Parkinson’s disease and wheelchair user)

*“We had one older lady who was very fragile and came down with a friend just to watch. She had difficulty standing, and getting on her feet was uncomfortable. She decided that she would just sit and watch and enjoy it vicariously but instead the tutors decided that she wasn’t going to just sit and watch. She could sit but she wasn’t just going to watch. She was actively involved – the scarf juggling for her was ideal – it was slow and gentle - it was for her a great achievement because she was no longer just a spectator due to old age. She was now an active participant – she was no different to the rest of the group – she felt included, involved and important again.” (AGEility participant)*

*“I have a bad leg at the moment and I’m in agony but I still come here. I could easily just stay in the house because I am sore. But I make the effort because I know that I am coming here.” (Craigavon Dance Group, woman 2)*

Some of the artists made a concerted effort to use the art to promote physical and mental wellbeing: *“We all have aches and pains and troubled moments, you can step in and choose to shake it free and master that and enjoy it share it with others” (Dance instructor, Craigavon).*

All of the artists had observed therapeutic impacts on participants. For some it was an improvement in mobility or reduction in pain, for others it was greater motivation to get out more and become more engaged with the world around them.

*“One of the participants in the group suffered with arthritis in her hands and I don’t know whether it was the exercise [basket weaving] or the willow itself, but it had great effect; so good in-fact that I am now doing some classes with arthritis care.”* (Basket weaving, Tutor, Fermanagh and Omagh)

*“In stroke rehab there was one woman who had a lot of pain and would scream every time she moved. But she sat up for the silk painting and when she went back and they moved her she didn’t scream. She was happy, she was chatting and for significant period after she had no pain which was fantastic.”* (Silk Painting Artist, MEAAP)

*“Getting out and about is good for health... One day I took them all out to go for a walk over a bridge ... giving them tips to go out and do pictures. So I gave them homework – sort of a jokey homework but they all went out and came back and said look what I did – so they were getting out and about and that is always good and chatting with each other. Someone would come in with a lovely picture of a waterfall and everyone would go ‘where’s that?’ and you could see them thinking ok I might go there next weekend.”* (Photography, Tutor, Fermanagh and Omagh)

The positive impact of arts intervention on quality of life for people with dementia was frequently mentioned by artists, other older people and funders.

*“For the older people with dementia, when you see them before or outside the workshop there is usually a dramatic change. During a workshop they are normally less confused and less agitated. I suppose it gives them an opportunity to talk about the things that they used to do – so it’s nice - they can talk about their school days, where they used to work, it must be quite a relief for them in some ways. There was one older person I did not know had dementia in the workshop. Not at any stage in 26 weeks was there any indication and it wasn’t until we brought her here (theatre) to the tea dance and she didn’t know who we were. And I said to the carer – I didn’t realise that she has dementia. And she said ‘did you not (great surprise). We assumed that she was the most able. And she (the carer) explained that it was the relaxation and how comfortable she felt and the joy of being involved in.”* (Waterside, Artist)

Although the fostering of physical and mental activity was evident in all of the case studies the AGEility project stood out in terms of its novelty and ability to challenge stereotypical images of ‘active ageing’. The following quotations from people involved with AGEility provide an insight into the possibilities of using the arts to motivate and enable people aged three score and ten, and older, to keep active, to set goals and to learn new skills.

*“P who is in her 80s got free vet treatment for her cat. The vet laughed so much when she explained that she had been going to circus every Friday morning – he said he couldn’t charge her.” (AGEility, tutor 1)*



*“We are all doing this broad thing called circus – but as G has said people gravitate towards certain things and as tutors you are always observing – so in that same room you will have stilt walkers, and jugglers and people who like the diabolo are trying to hone in on what people naturally gravitate towards and helping them to advance in circus there is natural progression where you learn one thing and then another and other it is so much more chaotic and random than that so you got to try and build skills and activities on an individual basis – under that umbrella that we are in this together. (Tutor 1, AGEility)*



*“My balance was always fairly good and the stilt walking was something that I took to. I had tried it as a kid it’s funny I just got up on them and took off – at 75 I am still in my prime. The next thing I found was the juggling and I am learning to juggle with the scarves and the*

*beauty of it is the scarves will stay in the air for a while and not come down too quickly and then when I have mastered that I will move on to the balls.” (AGEility, participant male)*



*“When I heard about the lady that mastered the unicycle – that must be my ultimate aim.”  
(AGEility, participant male, 75 years)*

#### **4.4 Developing New Skills**

Developing new skills was central to the success of the AOPP. Skills development was paced according to the ability of each participant. For many the prospect of learning something new was a major part of the attraction and motivation for getting involved and staying engaged.

*“I’m not a dancer – I was looking for something outside my comfort zone. I was retired; I was looking after sick relatives. Both of them have died now and I was looking for new things.”  
(Craigavon Dance Group, woman aged 66 years)*

*“It is different from what is going on here every day. I agree with that. It makes you think differently about different things.” (Nursing Home Resident, 3)*

The excitement of learning something new was however coupled at times with a sense of ‘I couldn’t do that’. The artists were sensitive to this and used gentle and incremental approaches that enabled people to gain confidence and skills, without feeling judged.

*“We stay away from painting with paint brushes or drawing. At the start of the project we used Hillary’s (artist) own technique – tissue paper technique – instead of painting it is strips of tissue paper in different colours that are used. Water is put on them and you let them dry and then acetate is put over the area that you want to keep and you build it up. And what it means is the older people can create a paint affect picture without having to hold a paint*

*brush. It is a nice ice breaker. It is a very quiet project. It is a slow technique, it is gentle and it is a nice way into the project. Now in the first couple of weeks both the children and the older people are saying 'don't know why we are doing this' and we say 'just bear with us – you trust us and I promise that you will like what you produce'. And when we show it to them at the end they can't believe what they have produced"* (Waterside Artist).

*"We'll do seated work as well – balance control and – I'll not correct the habits of a lifetime – my role is to help people understand their own physicality and what they might aim for and beyond."* (Dance instructor, Craigavon)

As reflected in the discussion between the three men below it was evident that the confidence which stemmed from developing a new skill in one area encouraged people to try new things in other areas of their life.

*"We have had cookery classes. We make bread – (Man 3) – you know talking about that reminds me I haven't made bread since last winter – must start again (Man 1). We built a pizza oven. It's like the painting – said I couldn't bake but it's so easy"* (Man 2, 'Men's Shed').

The freedom to learn and develop skills in later life in a relaxed, unpressurised environment was valued by all participants. For some this was the first opportunity that they had ever had to do what they wanted to.

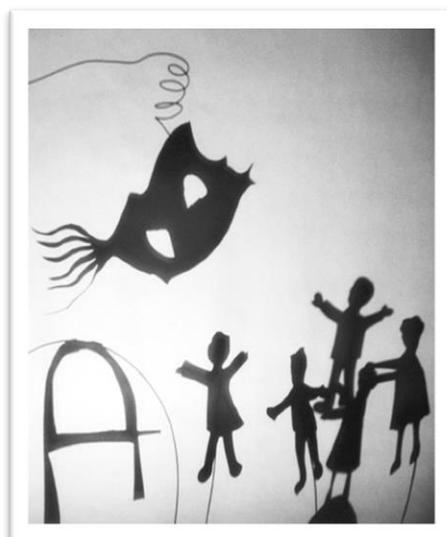
*"I was a left hander – I used left hand more than the right because you know it came naturally. It [the intergenerational arts project] made you feel better about yourself so it did – because many a time [as a child] you felt you weren't worth it. The teacher used to say to me to use my right hand but I couldn't and she kept at me all the time."* (Woman 1, Nursing Home Resident)

*"When I was 16, 17 I used to dance a lot but never went to classes ... it is wonderful to have the opportunity to do it now – I love it, I love doing it – it is a lovely group".* (Craigavon Dance Group, woman aged 70 years)

The satisfaction that stemmed from learning new skills was palpable in both the interviews with participants and with the artists.



*“Raku pottery – I’d heard of pottery but no I’d never heard of Raku and we found it very interesting. You could put your own design on it. Well mine was supposed to be a cat but it turned out more like a fish (lots of laughter in the group)” (P2 Fermanagh and Omagh District Council).*



*“ It’s great to see people who have never made anything in their lives and are convinced that they won’t be able to do it and then to see them leaving - it’s like that thing we had when we were a child. We made something in school and we couldn’t wait to get home to show it to mum and dad. You never really lose that.” (Arts tutor 2, Fermanagh and Omagh)*

The mutual satisfaction of participant and artist is reflected in the quotations below taken from a group interview with women in the MEAAP group that created the silk painting collage and from the artist that worked with them.

*“To start off with nobody in the group had ever tried painting on silk – some of us had never done any painting. It was silk painting and it was all new to us” (MEAAP woman 1). I thought I couldn’t do that I had no talent for painting (MEAAP, woman 4). I was exactly the same I*

*thought don't ask me to paint I couldn't do that (MEAAP, woman 5). We were very surprised at how well it did turn out"* (MEAAP, Hope Art, woman 3).

*"We did the butterflies and we put them on a backing before we put them on the voile - so that they would stand out. I took them away and brought them back for us to iron them on. And they all went 'so where's our butterflies? And I said well these are your butterflies and I hadn't done anything to them in between. I had stored them flat and they were like 'what?' and I had to show them the photos and say look see these are your butterflies. It's lovely to see that sense of achievement: 'goodness look at what I've done'"* (Artist, MEAAP).

#### **4.5 Supporting and Helping Others**

Having a shared purpose and working together resulted in people helping and supporting each other. Each of the arts interventions played to people's strengths and as a consequence allowed individual knowledge and skills to shine through. The Waterside intergenerational project was constructed to ensure that vulnerable and excluded older people felt valued with something worthwhile to contribute.

*"We used wool a lot and the men loved it – telling the children about the sheep and wool – they felt like they were helping them to learn, they were giving something back – sharing their skills and life experiences. Makes them feel part of society again"* (Waterside, Artist).

*"They [the children] enjoyed it – made me feel happy like you were doing something. Felt great - like when you were speaking to them – like they were so excited and surprised. To them it was a different way of life. We were helping them learn and that felt good"* (Nursing Home Resident - woman 2).

The confidence gained from participation in the Waterside project encouraged one resident to propose ways in which the learning opportunities could be expanded.

*"There is not enough learning – give some of the younger people who are not working the opportunity to come into the homes and work with the older people and learn from them. They could learn from us about things like Parkinson's and how they can help themselves. Some of the wee children would talk about their granny and say she had the same thing (Parkinson's) it feels good to be able to help them."* (Nursing Home Resident, 4)

The Big Telly project with older men tapped into the men's skills in 'fixing things' and this resulted in them providing services at teddy bears hospital across Northern Ireland. The events are very well attended by families. This voluntary work was a source of great pride and satisfaction for all of the men.

*"We have travelled a lot as well. We have travelled all over Northern Ireland. We go to that Big Telly thing. We went to Banbridge and in Antrim they were queued right on to the Randalstown Road, and that one in Portstewart on Saturday – they were hanging out the doors".* (Man 4, 'Men's Shed')

Stemming from the solidarity generated between members of the various arts group the most common type of support was peer to peer support. This reciprocal relationship was a major influencing factor in people feeling connected and not alone.

*“If you are stuck and can’t get something done there’s always someone here to help. For instance there is a woman over the other side of the table and she is a powerful crotchetier. I never knew how to crochet and she taught me how to do it” (laughter around the table). (MEAAP Woman 3, learnt to crochet aged 70+ years).*

*“When one woman – a lady in her mid-60s managed to do three ball juggling for about 10 repetitions – you know someone stopped and noticed and when she finally dropped a ball everyone erupted into applause – because her achievement gave everyone hope.” (AGEility, Participant)*

#### 4.6 Becoming Immersed

Common to all of the AOPP interventions was the ability of the Arts to distract the mind and absorb concentration. Participants described becoming totally immersed in the activity and attributed this characteristic as being a potent antidote to negative thinking and low mood.

*“Whenever you are dancing everything else goes out the window. You are focused on the dancing – nothing else. But you are not under any stress to get it right. We are not worrying about having to get it right. Although in our mind we do want to get it right. If you don’t get it right it is not a disaster.” (Craigavon Dance Group, woman aged 68 years)*

*“Personally speaking I wouldn’t have come to anything. I have arthritis and I would never have thought that I could paint but I did it and I enjoyed it. Felt so proud to see them (butterflies) all up. It helps your mind. It makes you think about different things rather than just sitting in the house lonely” (MEAAP, woman 10).*

*“It’s very relaxing ... well you are painting away you are thinking about what you are doing – just relaxing your mind and away you go. Without it you would be thinking about other things and worrying and things like that” (man 3, ‘Men’s Shed’)*

*“I love music – I sang in the church for 14 years. I was singing from I was seven year old. Music - it relaxes me”. (Nursing Home Resident 4)*

The innate influence and power of the arts to absorb the mind and enable people to immerse themselves in an experience outside of their everyday life was recognised by all of the host organisations and artists.

*“Why do people feel lonely and isolated? It is usually because they are thinking about themselves too much. But when you are doing something, for those two hours you’re not thinking about yourself or your problems” (Arts Tutor 2, Fermanagh and Omagh District Council).*

*“Taking part in arts activities is especially good because you can become very absorbed in creativity and there is that feel good factor of creating something of which you are proud.”*  
(Craigavon Council)

*“The clay is very therapeutic – working with their hands and for the mind as well. I’m really amazed at how the time passed – two hours go by and you forget about everything else.”*  
(Arts Tutor 3, Fermanagh and Omagh District Council)

*“You take them out of their troubles, out of their world, their pains and aches for 90 minutes – they have loads of laughs and at the end of it then they feel so better because of just being removed from it.”* (Artist 2, Big Telly)

The innate power of the Arts, to ‘occupy minds’ and to relieve feelings of ‘isolation and loneliness,’ was recognised as being good for everyone’s health and wellbeing irrespective of age. Consequently the relevance of Arts based programmes as a public health intervention for the wider community was raised repeatedly:

*“To relieve loneliness and isolation to keep people’s minds occupied that could save a lot of money for the health service.”* (P4 Fermanagh and Omagh District Council )

#### **4.7 Creating Something**

All six projects were focused on creating art pieces, something tangible that could be seen or heard and witnessed by others. The pieces were varied and included a performance, a piece of poetry, photographs, pottery and painted silk. Common to all was a sense of achievement. Those people whose work resulted in tangible pieces such as willow baskets, painting or pottery described how the piece embodied the conversations, fun and friends that had contributed to its production.

*“Creating - the fact that you are actually making something. You are creating something – you know it is inside your head – you see it how you want to make it. Like G is out there making ... nobody is going to go up to G and say ‘you should do this or you should do that’ cos G has the finished product in his head and he knows what he is aiming for. Now he goes home at night and he feels good about it. You are finding talents you didn’t know you had.”*  
(Man 2, ‘Men’s Shed’)

*“It is a creative tool that more people are willing to engage with than if you were simply hosting a get together. It is all very well having a coffee morning but if there is nothing there to sow the seeds of connecting them via either creating an art piece or creating a piece of music that caters for all abilities and all backgrounds. That is where the four artists were brilliant because it could move at the pace that that group could move at”.* (MEAAP, worker 1)

One of the pieces produced in the Waterside project was a mosaic co-created by the nursing home residents and school children. The residents talked fondly and proudly about the

beautiful mosaic, which is situated on a wall in the garden. In addition to the aesthetic enhancement of the garden the mosaic represented a connection to the world outside and functioned as an embodiment of happy memories.



*“My room is in the back and I can see the mosaic from my window. It is beautiful. The hard work that went into it and the giggling, it was loud, but in a good way - lots of giggling.”* [83 year old, Nursing Home Resident]

All of the projects had some form of public exhibition/performance. This aspect was greatly valued by the older people. They took great satisfaction from having their work seen by others and having the opportunity to see work produced by other older people and to talk with new people.

*“The day we went to meet the other group it was good to see that our butterflies looked every bit as good as theirs did”* (MEAAP, woman 7).

*“People couldn’t believe what we had done. The pottery, the photographs, the baskets everything was there – you felt really proud.”* (Fermanagh and Omagh District Council, P2)

The public exhibitions and performances were recognised by the host organisations as a valuable means to enable older people to meet others and to support the development of wider networks.

*“We had maybe 300 older people down at the discovery centre – and it is was basically a showcase and an exhibition of work that they had created. We provided buses for all of those people”.* (Craigavon Council )

*“We have been inspired and would love to go again to do a bigger project. The showcase was out of this world and made it all worthwhile”* (MEAAP, worker 1).

The composition 'Midnight at Innisfree' produced as part of the Craigavon Council Age on Stage project is an example of the excellent and innovative work produced as part of the AOPP.

**Midnight Innisfree**

*Cloud floats*

*Birds arise*

*Daffodils stare*

*Peace splash*

*Flutter eyes*

*Snail lapping*

*Clouds stand*

*Blended hearts*

*Couch beneath*

*Garden bee*

*Solitude glance*

*House dropping*

*Pensive vales*

*Trail glade*

*... Midnight Innisfree*



Composition by Anthea McWilliams with members of Craigavon Age on Stage

Age on Stage Residential at An-Cregan, September 2015

## 4.8 Imagination

If one word was to sum up the essence of the AOPP that word would be ‘imagination’. Participants and artists repeatedly talked about how the programme encouraged or allowed them the freedom to use their imagination.

*“As a tutor you are always using your imagination. A juggling ball isn’t always a juggling ball. A diablo isn’t always a diablo and juggling stick isn’t always a juggling stick – it’s just a tool with which you can open up more avenues to more fun. As an adult we are constantly told to grow up and you know that is probably very negative for our health, because you know if we stop the connection with the child in us what do we become?”* (Circus skills tutor, 2).

Harnessing the power of imagination is an explicit purpose of the Big Telly intervention.

*“I know your health is important but imagination is your greatest resource. The isolation - it is not just that Betty meets Johnny; it’s that Betty has a conversation with Johnny about how things might be different. I kind of think it is about imagination allowing us to imagine what is not there...”* (Big Telly, artist 1).

In their work with the Men’s Shed project Big Telly worked incrementally with the men encouraging them and nurturing confidence in their creative abilities. The quotations below illustrate how from tentative first steps into the world of creative writing, the men wrote and performed a short story for children, eventually donning the costumes and persona of clown doctors in a public performance.



*“Like Emma from Big Telly came along here and put on a few things – she was absolutely brilliant. We made up a story – she gave us a couple of ideas and then we came up with the story and made the props for it. We were up at a couple of the schools and told the story. It was about a dog and a panda bear – the dog lived in one garden and the bear in another and they couldn’t reach each other.” (Man 2, ‘Men’s Shed’)*

*“When they made the beds for our Bear Hospital they said ‘ok we are making the beds but we’re not doing any acting’... When they came along and I said – ‘here get into that there - can you be the consultant the doctor who is head of tropical diseases’ and they were incredible. It was just about giving them permission to be playful. It wasn’t about performing. They became disgruntled porters and they were very superior consultants they were you know lots of different people. All they needed was permission to play and that for me is what the Arts is about. Permission to be playful, to think differently about things and to engage... The commitment to imagination – where they were using like jump leads to connect teddies up to overhead projectors with utter conviction. And for kids to see older people being utterly playful seems to me that’s what it is about. That is what makes my heart beat fast”. (Big Telly, Artistic Director)*

## **5. What made the Arts and Older People’s Programme Effective**

Applications to the AOPP are assessed against tight criteria to ensure that funded projects reflect the programmes overall goals. The case studies provide an understanding of the factors that made the AOPP effective in addressing isolation and loneliness. These were: an improved understanding of what is meant by the Arts; engagement with older people and with colleagues from different sectors and disciplines; skilled community artists; resources and the partnership between the ACNI and PHA.

### **5.1 Understanding of the Arts**

The lack of understanding amongst the general population of what is meant by the Arts was identified by all participants as a hurdle that had to be overcome. The AOPP is explicitly focused on promoting social justice and on using the Arts to combat social exclusion amongst older people. As a result the programme targets those populations who are least likely to have had experience of or access to the Arts. This includes for example those older people who are economically and socially disadvantaged, older people living in isolated and rural areas and people who are living in nursing homes. As a consequence it was perhaps not surprising to hear that the older people targeted by the programme viewed the Arts as something for the privileged, something that was beyond them.

*“Whenever you talk to an older person about Art it is museums or galleries performances or plays. The traditional opinion is quite narrow. It is fine art. Generally a lot of older people feel Art is painting.” (MEAAP, worker 2)*

*“Art to me was something professional and big titled things. I never had a brush in my hands before. Maybe painting the house at home, something like that. But once I got started I took*

*to it. I found it very relaxing. I took to it and found I could paint. Before I said 'ach sure I can't paint' but you don't know until you try it - and since that I have done several paintings". (Man 3) ('Men's Shed')*

*"My understanding of the arts was it didn't affect me because it was too high brow and high falutin and it was for the upper class – before I came to this – high falutin things like the opera, the orchestra and all that. Now I think differently – it belongs to everybody". (MEAAP, Woman 8)*

Significantly all stakeholders talked about the lack of understanding of the arts on the part of the general population and the majority of politicians. This lack of understanding was attributed as the reason behind lack of investment in and commitment to community arts.

*"There's this perception of the arts as opera and drama all of which are very important but arts is more general than that – it is about creativity - individual and collective. It doesn't have to be costly to do these things. A civilised society has to have opportunities for all citizens to be creative. We are not just consumers, of course we do that as well but a civilised society should have resources to support such activities because they are intrinsically good for people. They have such positive spin offs in terms of health and wellbeing – all those things. It seems irrational" (AGEility P4).*

*"You cannot expect everyone else if they (politicians) are not buying in. There is a real misunderstanding of what the Arts is about. Community Arts are quite a subtle thing. A lot of people don't realise that they or their relatives are participating. The Ulster Orchestra must have been mentioned a 1000 times in the past 10 days and other high end arts. I do believe in those ... but it is difficult for the public to understand when they hear talk about millions of pounds and their local school is faced with closure, or they can't get an operation and they say I don't get to see them ( Ulster Orchestra...) so why should they be getting that amount of money" (Waterside Artist).*

Craigavon Borough Council<sup>7</sup> has a long history of supporting and promoting community arts and has invested significantly in the area, both in terms of building awareness of what community arts is and in funding arts based programmes.

*"Before the Showcase day, we had taster workshops - we talked about what arts and older people meant and we have done funding fairs. We do have an arts forum - Craigavon arts and they delivered £15,000 every year for the Council." (Craigavon Council)*

## **5.2 Engagement with Others**

Working with colleagues across different sectors was seen as vital to the effectiveness of the programme and getting older people engaged. Closely related to this was the use of participatory and bottom up approaches whereby older people were actively engaged in

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<sup>7</sup> Craigavon council has been incorporated into the new Armagh City Banbridge & Craigavon Borough Council

design and delivery of programmes. The Fermanagh and Omagh District Council workers were very frank in admitting that they learnt that the hard way. Determined to get the project off to a good start and against their better judgement, they seized on the opportunity of touring showband to host a tea dance during the summer. The local older peoples groups do not meet over the summer months and as a consequence traditional communication networks weren't available. The result being that although the event was beautifully organised it was sadly a huge disappointment.

*"One person showed up. We had a band, we had lovely food, we had candles on the tables and it was the single worst start to anything. It was a mistake to try and start it with a tea-dance. The end of programme tea-dance was an amazing night"* (Council Worker 1).

The success of the end of programme tea dance reflected and was testament to the participatory approaches, the relationships and networks which characterised the work carried out during the AOPP.

*"We worked with Alison Forbes [older peoples forum] she knew exactly what day people did different things, right down to be able to tell us that people in one area liked a particular type of dancing and people in another liked something else"* (worker 2). *We planned the programme together, worked with others such as the Men's Shed group in Enniskillen to make sure that we weren't duplicating (worker 1)".* (Fermanagh and Omagh District Council)

Fermanagh and Omagh District Council applied for the AOPP to help foster collaborative work across the new council area. This goal was achieved and by collaborating together the workers identified ways in which the Councils arts venues – Omagh museum, Strule theatre in Omagh and Ardhowen in Enniskillen could be made more welcoming and comfortable for older people. In addition to small changes to physical environment the workers learnt that by encouraging older people to return and become familiar with venues they naturally became more comfortable and started to use the venues more frequently. This has resulted in a significant boost in potential audience numbers.

*"We introduced sofas ... I suppose for some people who hadn't been to the museum before they expected it to be like a library. Instead the approach is 'make yourself at home' and the only way to do that is through familiarity"* (worker 1, Fermanagh and Omagh District Council).

*"It has given us a new audience that we can target. There have been a few music events like the orchestra [Ulster] and they are coming to that and they know that there is blue badge parking and they can use that. We are building on some of the things that we found to be successful like the films, like the tea-dances that brought them in and gave them a social element. Knowing that they liked the wee bit of food and drink so it is building that in. So when they come to the film the ticket price includes a cup of tea and bun afterwards for them. With the programme (AOPP) we didn't charge but going forward we can't afford to do*

*that, so for the film in December we charged £3. We had 22 pre bookings we never had that before so they are clearly happy with that.” (Worker 2, Fermanagh and Omagh Council)*

Waterside Theatre also reported that introducing people to the Arts through the AOPP had resulted in an expanded audience base.

*“We are getting new audience participation as well. It breaks down that feeling that the Arts isn’t for us. A lot of them had never been to a theatre before; they would never have picked up a theatre programme before. And the care homes as part of their social calendar, they could have something different in that they can come to the theatre, they can come to a play to the pantomime and we will be accommodating” (Waterside Artist).*

The Mid and East Antrim Agewell Partnership (MEAAP) exists to ensure that older people’s voices are heard and that their needs are taken into account in the planning of services. The MEAAP Hope Art projects were designed and delivered in partnership with the groups. This was seen as being vital to the groups taking responsibility for and feeling ownership of their work.

*“We need more MEAAPs across Northern Ireland just to challenge the model and replicate it. To challenge people and arts organisations– it is not about you bringing people to your venue it is about you going out.” (MEAAP, worker 1)*

Sensitive to the particular vulnerabilities and needs of participants living in residential care Waterside Theatre and Big Telly did observation and listening visits in advance of commencing any work. The learning from these visits ensured that the arts interventions were tailored to the needs of each group of older people.

*“Listening in on conversations we noticed that a lot of the older people were talking about their jobs and what they used to do and they thought their foyer was cold and uninviting – we also talked with the manager and decided on mosaic work.” (Waterside Artist)*

*“On some occasions we asked the artists to go in and to meet their audience a week before they were coming to do the show and that really helped. It helped because a lot of the show was organic and it came from their experiences. It also broke down any barriers and made them, the older people, understand who these people were who were coming in and what was happening – and it wasn’t parachuted in it was much more embedded” (Big Telly, Artistic Director).*

Getting people through the door or to engage in the first arts session was perceived to be the greatest hurdle to overcome. Once engaged people were said to stay on and were hungry for more when the programme ended. Significantly a number of participants had gone to the class/group as a favour to someone or because a friend of family member had recommended it.

*“There was an art teacher coming in and I said I don’t know anything about art. But G said we need so many names so just put your name down for we need so many for to get her to come. Unbelievable, I just can’t get enough. Now when I see something I want I’ll try painting it” (Man 1, ‘Men’s Shed’).*

*“The opportunity can be there but it is the people making the step and getting out there and getting involved. That is probably why the Arts Council includes the money for volunteers to make sure people are coming out” (Craigavon Council).*

There was a prevailing sense of gratitude amongst older people for the opportunity to participate in the programme. People spoke about being grateful that they had not missed it and pleased that there weren’t ignorant of it taking place. There was an acknowledgement in many cases that a lot of people don’t know what’s going on and that word of mouth was the main form of communication amongst older people. Dissemination of information and recruitment was perceived to be particularly difficult due to the challenges inherent in rurality.

*“You need to use any medium at all to get the message out, funding the advertising is important” (Man 85yrs, Fermanagh and Omagh).*

With the zeal of the recently converted participants in the AOPP have become informal ambassadors for the benefits of the arts. Stories of how people had persuaded, cajoled and coerced friends and family to become involved were a common occurrence.

*“The 10 groups that are part of the Hope art project are our greatest supporters if there are other events and opportunities they always want to get involved with us” (MEAAP worker 2).*

*“I think we recognise that have come here by chance and as a result we have become almost messianic about promoting it and trying to recruit others” (AGEility, woman).*

*“We try everything – word of mouth. We talk every coffee break about ideas to recruit. One thing we do try and instill in them is that they don’t have to stilt walk (laughter) there is a deep fear of that” (AGEility, man).*

The AOPP recognises that inability to travel due to lack of transport or disability is a major contributor to social isolation. Provision of transport enabling people to participate in groups, show case events and tea dances was core to the success of the programme in engaging socially isolated older people. Transport was funded directly through the programme or by local councils. Those older people living in rural areas talked at length about the difficulties associated with participating in activities due to the rurality and extreme isolation. These difficulties were compounded by lack of public transport and access to cars.

*“Transport is a mega problem to get there (groups). There is virtually no public transport system where I live.” (P1 Omagh-Enniskillen) A lot of women are widows and they don’t drive – they have no way of getting out.” (P3 Fermanagh and Omagh)*

Bringing the art to the people in nursing homes, isolated and rural areas was greatly appreciated and crucial in achieving social inclusion.

*“She (tutor) came here (rural church hall) and that was great – otherwise we wouldn’t have done it. (WW2) I don’t drive so having her here was really good otherwise I couldn’t have gone” (MEAAP, Woman 4).*

### 5.3 Skilled Artists

Any arts project focused on including people who have little or no previous experience requires skills to manage the tension between participation and quality of the product produced.

*“What you produce isn’t necessarily that important sometimes. But using it as a way of bringing and I suppose for me bringing different generations together. Creating partnerships in the community that will last past the legacy of the project. (Waterside, Artist)*

The skill of the artists in facilitating community arts was key to ensuring that people felt confident and relaxed and created work that they were proud of. For the artists it was important that the art was used to bring out the best in the older people and let them shine.

*“That is part of the skill of an artist. Like anyone can buy a set of silk paints and read the instructions and take it to the group. But somebody who is an artist and experienced in working in the visual arts has a sense of vision of what it might look like at the end – you can look at that and come back from it and go - well what do I need to sort of put a little ring around and what can I let go free you know what I mean. And you can see it progressing and know that something will be produced that people will be proud of.” (Artist, MEAAP)*

*“I felt that we had really found the structure to make them look as brilliant as they can be; sometimes the work exposes them rather than celebrates them... There is a woman of 89 who has written this poem – so because she is 89 she has to be allowed to do her poem. And the poem may be crap or it might be too long. And for me it is totally patronising to say just because you are 89 you are going to read a poem that is actually 3minutes too long. So we try and being really strict with directors – that poem might have been brilliant if it had been 30 seconds or a minute...that lady ended up looking not great – like wee dodderly old lady well done you said a poem – but nobody thought she was brilliant. If it had been edited and if it had been a minute long people would have been riveted and people would have thought she was amazing. So I feel our job not to be patronizing – basically if the audience is going to be bored don’t let them do it. You don’t expose professional actors to that – you don’t let them go on stage and look rubbish and you don’t let older people do it. And that’s what I mean about how to celebrate them.” (Big Telly, Artistic Director)*

The AOPP participants benefited from artists being skilled and experienced enough to understand and manage the creative process, the emotional ups and downs that can happen, the potential to lose confidence, the need to go with the flow, the excitement that an unexpected outcome is probably around the corner. The MEAAP project workers repeatedly commented on the skill of the artists in the Hope Art project and the ways in which they were able to bring the best out of everyone.

*“The one that sticks with me was the singing. Whenever the ladies got up and this one lady did the solo and it was just so it is like an ear worm for me I am nearly singing it every day.” (MEAAP worker 2) That was the song that they created ‘I love where I live’ they wrote it themselves along with the musician. They wanted to put Larne in it because that was where the group was from but musician was able to say ‘no keep it I love where I live and it is more connectivity for everyone else who is there [audience]’ (MEAAP, Worker 1).*

Central to the sense of achievement around the AOPP was the degree of challenge, the frisson of excitement about doing something new and frequently something outside normal comfort zone.

*“It’s a shame you weren’t here to see them the first week. Cos they came here and said ok I’m going to give it a go but I can’t do this and I can’t do that there’s no way that I’m going to be able to do that. These people are going home now and their grandchildren are lending them juggling kit and they are showing off to their grandchildren that they can actually do some of the stuff that they can do” (Circus Skills Tutor 2).*

*“We would learn something every week. Not every technique worked. We had to tailor techniques ... there was ill health – different things happened. We had to choose the art work according to what people could do. Physical disability, sensory disability – we were never given a breakdown [of conditions] we had to work that out for ourselves. We didn’t see a label. We just went in and got to know each older person and tailored a programme” (Artist, Waterside).*

*“We took two pieces into residential care. It was a really challenging piece there’s violence in it and it’s really challenging. There’s a woman in it that gets burnt because people suspect her of witchcraft. Halfway through it I found myself thinking ‘What are we doing? Why are we doing this? Why aren’t we just dressing up as Elvis and singing a few songs?’ - Because it seemed too challenging to me. And one person was getting upset and I thought ‘Oh God, oh God, if I was in a residential home with dementia is this what I would want?’ And I was really anxious, and so was the care worker. And afterwards we talked to the residents about it and they said they absolutely loved it and without doubt it would never leave them. It was challenging. They were going ‘I can’t believe we had something challenging.’ (Big Telly, Artistic Director)*

## 5.4 Resources

In a time of ever diminishing budgets the AOPP grant was perceived as vital in ensuring access to the arts for rural and socially isolated older people.

*“The thing you are not arguing for is the art – you are not trying to hide it in a web of other outputs and it is important that the Arts Council gives it the status and credibility it deserves.”* (Big Telly, Artistic Director)

Funding from the AOPP also served to leverage funding from other sources thereby enhancing the overall arts funding available to socially isolated older people.

*“We need to have the funding in place before we go out to groups. Otherwise we are raising expectations that can’t be met. The Arts Council funding has shown that we are able to bring in matched funding we can do that but we need someone to put a piece of the pie on the plate first for us to do our magic. And it IS magic”* (laughing) (MEAAP Worker 1)

Responding to the lack of capacity amongst the target groups MEAAP and the two councils helped groups to write funding applications. All six case studies highlighted the challenge in securing funding to repeat a programme or to get core funding and as a result it was difficult to consolidate skills and build up a culture of arts based work.

*“Sustainable programmes – we have always found that you can get funding for a lot of really good programmes but the challenge is sustaining it. Funding bodies will ask for some new programme, they don’t like to see the same thing coming back it is difficult to get core funding.”* (Council 1)

Having participated in the programmes and experienced the benefits people were keen that government would provide core funding. For most participants the argument was made in terms of cost effectiveness and savings that would be made by using the arts as a tool for prevention of ill health and to support rehabilitation.

*“I suppose when people retire if they didn’t have something to go to they could deteriorate physically and mentally. By getting involved in something like this here it doesn’t cost very much – but the cost of treatment would be an awful lot more. It must be very cost effective.”* (AGEility, participant)

Investment in the arts was also viewed as a way of giving people skills that could be used to boosting the economy generally and strengthen tourism, particularly in rural areas.

*“Definitely not a luxury – tourism is the bread and butter of Fermanagh and arts and crafts is a crucial part of that”* (P2, Fermanagh and Omagh District Council).

There was a sense that the current understanding of rural isolation was too narrow and needed to be broadened to take account of the diversity of population living in rural areas.

*“Rural isolation, living in a rural area sometimes you think the only people that they consider in rural areas are farmers and you know farmers are a small percentage of the people who actually live and work in rural areas. And yet farmers are the only ones that seem to matter when you talk about rural Ireland whether it’s North or South.” (Arts Tutor 2, Fermanagh and Omagh District Council)*

The Men’s Shed participants described the artistic ways that they had recycled materials. Including the building of a greenhouse from empty plastic bottles. They expressed great frustration and despair at what they perceived to be the huge waste of ‘scrap’ materials, which they felt could be used to great effect within their project and others.

*“I’d like to see more businesses and organisations in NI reaching out. There is an awful getting wasted that we could use and recycle. I mean that is one thing that someone in government could be saying to business – look around see what charity is there that could benefit from your scrap. Look at the bonfires – so much surplus materials in the country – we could make use of. The amount of stuff that is burnt in those – what could we not do with the like of that? And the grants they get for it.” (‘Men’s Shed’ – Man 3)*

The absence of an Arts strategy for Northern Ireland was identified as a significant gap in ensuring inclusivity and access to the Arts.

*“If the people at the highest level haven’t bought into the arts it is really, really hard to expect everyone else in society to buy into it. The societies with the highest educational attainment have a creative education policy in place. With Creative Scotland - education and health clearly linked in.” (Waterside, artist)*

The lack of a coherent or proactive approach to ensure access to the Arts for older people generally and those experiencing social isolation in particular was a recurring theme. The older people in particular expressed anger and apathy at the lack of leadership in this regard from the majority of locally elected politicians.

*“Well I think Stormont or some of the elected people should come down stay with the group for the day and see what goes on and talk to the people. Because like I’ve been up at Stormont before and they haven’t a clue; the politicians don’t have a clue what it is like in the real world they need to come down and listen to people. The bus pass is vital and they are sitting up there arguing about who came up with the free bus pass. They don’t realise that the pension doesn’t go far and even if you have the car you are still putting petrol in and minding the money. It’s important that they [politicians] let the funding come down so that we can help other people to get involved in things. It would help mental health, loneliness and isolation for a lot of people, which they are always talking about but they don’t seem to do anything about it.” (P3, Fermanagh and Omagh District Council).*

### 5.5 The Arts Council Northern Ireland and the Public Health Agency

Finally all of the case studies highlighted the importance of partnership between the ACNI and the PHA. The PHA was recognised as being an influential and authoritative force in terms of changing the focus on ageing from illness and disability to health and wellbeing. This, it was, argued enhanced the opportunities to do innovative and exciting work.

*“If there was an option for a GP to write out a script ‘you need circus’. We have OTs in the Ulster and the Royal who will call us over and ask will you come and do this or could we try a bit of scarf juggling. I know that it works with the kids I certainly know that it would work with the older people”* (AGEility, Circus skills, tutor 2)

The leadership provided by the ACNI ensured that whilst the outcomes are alleviation of isolation and loneliness the primary focus of interventions remained on the Arts.

*“When the Arts Council is involved the Arts are not just a tool, they are a tool, but they are not just a tool, they are valuable in themselves”*. (Big Telly, Artistic Director)

## 6. Discussion and Recommendations

### 6.1 Discussion

It is impossible in a report like this to capture the sparkle in people's eyes as they shared their experience of participating in the Arts and Older People's Programme (AOPP). Older people, artists and host organisations all talked about their experience with the evangelistic passion of someone who has seen the light.

The ACNI has shown great leadership and vision in harnessing the power of the arts to improve quality of life for older people. The AOPP is now in its seventh year. A total of 97 Arts projects have received valuable funding and the programme continues to demonstrate that the Arts can be an effective and efficient way to address the issues associated with social isolation and militate against the associated health risks. The Baring Foundation has recognised the ACNI's leadership as the first Arts Council in the UK to focus on older people and the only one to have developed a partnership with public health. The Public Health Agency has brought a wealth of expertise and networks to this current phase of the AOPP and the dividends are evident in the enhanced focus on older people living in rural communities, residential care and older men.

People are living longer than at any time in our history and this is a cause for celebration. It is however in all of our interests that we work to create a society in which those additional years of life are good years. Years full of good memories, good experiences and a good quality of life. A lonely and isolated life is not conducive to or compatible with those goals nor is it consistent with good health outcomes or dignity.

*"Dignity is promoted by a society that supports civic standing by providing adequate income, decent housing, and access to a range of other necessities of life, including education and health care. Such social orders invest in their citizens, providing the underpinnings of a 'dignified existence' not out of pity or charity, but to answer the demands of fairness and equity." (Jacobson, 2012: 150)*

The six case studies included in this report have provided a privileged and humbling insight into the lives of older men and women across Northern Ireland. The case studies also make visible the reality of lives affected by social isolation and loneliness. They illuminate the power of the Arts to transform the dark shadow of social isolation and loneliness to a comforting and protective companion shadow imbued with confidence, fun and friends. When people feel confident, connected and part of society their resilience and ability to cope with situations is enhanced. This increases the potential for improved public health and a life lived with dignity. It is not possible to turn the tide of demographic change, it is however, very possible and easy to implement interventions to counteract social isolation. The AOPP has provided persuasive evidence that the Arts are an important and effective

tool that can synergize interventions focused on alleviation of social isolation across a range of sectors.

## 6.2 Recommendations

The AOPP is a financially modest programme, with a total budget of £1,700,000<sup>8</sup> (2009 – 2016). 7,283 older people have benefitted directly from participating in the Arts and Older People's Programme. This number does not take account of the thousands of other older people who attended public events and performance, nor does it include the extended family members, friends and care workers who have also benefitted from the programme. It is worthy of note that the Baring Foundation chose to be a partner due to the potential of AOPP to provide rich social dividends for a relatively small financial investment. The evidence from the case studies shows that it made a wise investment.

The recommendations below are aimed at ensuring that the potential of the Arts continues to be harnessed to alleviate social isolation and loneliness for as many older people as possible. The recommendations are directed primarily, although not exclusively, towards the Departments of Culture, Arts and Leisure and Health, Social Services & Public Safety.

1. **Cross Sectoral working:** Effective arts interventions do not happen in a vacuum nor are they delivered by artists working in isolation. Promotion of cross sectoral working is essential to ensure that talents, resources and networks achieve their maximum potential.
2. **Intergenerational collaboration:** The rapidly changing demographic profile requires proactive interventions to encourage and support opportunities for intergenerational collaboration to promote the building of a cohesive and supportive society. The arts are a robust tool to promote the building of collaborative relationships and strengthen trust and mutual respect across the generations.
3. **Development of the evidence base for the impact of the arts:** The development of a robust evidence base is necessary to maximize the effective use of resources and successful outcomes. This can be achieved by making mixed methods evaluation and research an integral part of arts programmes.
4. **Skilled Artists:** Effective arts interventions are dependent on skilled artists. Creation of a skilled and competent arts community will require investment in training and education around the needs of older people and the skills required for community arts work. The creation of networking opportunities to share experiences and develop collaborative ideas would further enhance the capacity of the Arts community to meet the needs of a rapidly ageing population.

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<sup>8</sup> The budget for the initial AOPP pilot (2009 – 2012) was £700,000 and in phase II (2013 – 2016) £1million

5. **Arts on prescription:** The Arts and Older People's Programme has provided an impressive insight into the potential of the arts as vehicle for health promotion and alleviation of social isolation. An Art on prescription scheme could be a powerful way of helping people at risk of the detrimental health consequences of social isolation. Such initiatives are already in place in various locations throughout England<sup>9</sup>.
6. **Development of an Arts culture:** Support the development of an Arts culture in Northern Ireland by investing in publicity and dissemination of stories and information about Community Arts activities. This would include greater use of the social media and traditional methods such a local newspaper, television and radio, to maximize publicity for community Arts initiatives.
7. **Core Funding:** Provision of core funding and enhanced resources to support the development of existing and new Arts focused intervention across the older people's sector.

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<sup>9</sup> See <http://www.groundwork.org.uk/Sites/targetwellbeing/pages/arts-on-prescription-tw>



"A Story is not a story unless you have someone to listen."

Quotation taken from the 'Growing Together' yew tree sculpture (below) by Kevin Killen, Tully Mill, Fermanagh



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## Appendix I

### **Older People x 44**

Group interview 1 Eglinton – 3 women

Group interview 2 Antrim – 4 men

Group interview 3 Belfast – 7 people (3 men and 4 women)

Group interview 4 Ballymena – 15 women

Group interview 5 Craigavon – 8 women

Group interview 6 Enniskillen x 6 people (2 men and 4 women)

Individual interview Eglinton x 1 woman

### **Artists x 9**

Waterside x 1 person

Interview MEAAP x 1 person

AGEility x 1 person

Craigavon x 1 person

Group interview Big Telly group interview x 2 people

Group interview Fermanagh group interview x 3 people

### **Host organisation (not artist) x 6**

Fermanagh/Omagh Council staff Group interview x 3 people

Craigavon council staff Individual interview x 1 person

MEAAP Group interview x 2 people

### **Funder x 5**

PHA Individual interview x 1 person

Baring Foundation Individual interview x 1 person

ACNI Group interview x 3 people

## Appendix II

### "Me And My Shadow"

Shades of night are falling and I'm lonely  
Standing on the corner feeling blue  
Sweethearts out for fun  
Pass me one by one  
Guess I'll wind up like I always do  
With only

Me and my shadow  
Strolling down the avenue  
Me and my shadow  
Not a soul to tell our troubles to  
But when it's twelve a clock  
We climb the stair  
We never knock

'Cause nobody's there  
Just me and my shadow  
All alone and feeling blue  
And when it's twelve a clock  
We climb the stair  
We never knock

'Cause nobody's there  
Just me and my shadow  
All alone and feeling blue

Judy Garland Version

**"Me And My Shadow"**

Like the wallpaper sticks to the wall  
Like the seashore clings to the sea  
Like you'll never get rid of your shadow  
Frank, you'll never get rid of me

Let all the others fight and fuss  
Whatever happens, we've got us.

Me and my shadow  
We're closer than pages that stick in a book  
We're closer than ripples that play in a brook  
Strolling down the avenue  
Wherever you find him, you'll find me, just look  
Closer than a miser or the bloodhounds to Liza

Me and my shadow  
We're closer than smog when it clings to L.A.  
We're closer than Bobby is to J.F.K.  
Not a soul can bust this team in two  
We stick together like glue

And when it's sleeping time  
That's when we rise  
We start to swing  
Swing to the skies  
Our clocks don't chime  
What a surprise  
They ring-a-ding-ding!  
Happy New Year!

Me and my shadow  
And now to repeat what I said at the start  
They'll need a large crowbar to break us apart  
We're alone but far from blue

Before we get finished, we'll make the town roar  
We'll make all the late spots, and then a few more  
We'll wind up at Jilly's right after Toot's Shore  
Life is gonna be we-wow-whee!  
(here comes the party!)  
For my shadow and me!

Say Frank?  
What is it, Sam?  
Do me a favor?  
What do you want, now?  
Would you mind taking it, just one more time?  
From the top?  
No! From the ending!  
Wonderful!

And while we are swinging, to mention a few  
We'll drop in at Danny's, The Little Club too  
But wind up at Jilly's, whatever we do  
Life is gonna be we-wow-whee!  
(Wow!)  
For my shadow and me!

Frank?  
Oh, forget it Sam.  
*Frank Sinatra and Sammy Davis Jr Version*

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### **Note on the authors**

The authors of the research report, 'Not So Cut Off', are Una Lynch, a public health specialist and Joan Alexander, an award-winning photographer. Lynch and Alexander worked closely together to analyse the interviews and identify explanatory themes. Shadow casting and shadow tracing images (Alexander) are used throughout the report to illustrate individual stories and the transformative impact of the arts on the lives of older people.

### **Further reading**

An Evaluation of the Arts and Older People's Programme (Wallace Consulting, 2015) is available on the Arts Council's website: [www.artscouncil-ni.org](http://www.artscouncil-ni.org)

Alternative versions of this summary publication may be made available upon request to the Arts Council of Northern Ireland.