

3.4 Creative Health in Social Care

Key Points

Creative health has benefits that are particularly relevant to social care, and can help to address some of the pressing challenges the sector currently faces. As a person-centred approach, creative health empowers people to engage in activities which are meaningful to them, enriching quality of care and leading to improved health, wellbeing and quality of life. For children and young people in the social care system, creative health improves mental health and wellbeing, facilitates self-expression, fosters a sense of belonging and has a positive impact on future outcomes.

In addition to the benefits to individuals, embedding creative health into social care

systems will help to relieve pressures, keeping people healthier and living independently for longer. Where creativity has been embedded into care homes it has also been shown to have a positive impact on the workforce. In the current staffing crisis, creative health can improve job satisfaction and staff retention.

Creative health should be fully embedded across the social care system so that everyone has an equal opportunity to access its benefits. Whilst the sector is diverse, recognition of good practice in the Care Quality Commission (CQC) assessment frameworks would support providers to implement creative health as a core part of their offer, rather than a nice to have.

Creative health and care experienced children and young people

There are currently around 400,000 children linked to the social care system in England, 80,000 of whom are living in care²⁹⁷. Young people in the care system have often experienced trauma or adverse childhood experiences such as abuse or neglect, and face particular challenges in relation to mental health. Forty-five percent of care-experienced young people aged 5-15 will develop a mental health disorder, compared to 10% in the same age group in the general population. This rises to 72% for those in residential care²⁹⁸. Care-experienced young people face poorer educational outcomes and are disproportionately represented in the criminal justice system. A key mission of a proposed new National Framework for Children's Social Care will be reducing these inequalities in health. Guidance provided jointly by Department for Education (DfE) and The Department of Health and Social Care (DHSC) recommends that social workers ensure that children 'have access to arts, sport and culture, in order to promote their sense of wellbeing'²⁹⁹.

Sections 3.1 and 3.3 have described the ways in which creative health can positively impact the mental health of children and young people. Studies have also investigated benefits of engagement in

the arts as a leisure activity specifically for care-experienced young people, and found that such activities offered the opportunity to be creative and engage in self-expression and were used to manage stress³⁰⁰. The arts can open doors for care-experienced young people in relation to education and employment, and have been found to lead to increased participation in educational pathways³⁰¹. Improved psychosocial outcomes such as self-esteem, confidence and emotional literacy, as well as an increase in social capital have been demonstrated in this population³⁰². Facilitated participation in culture with care experienced young people can both improve cultural capital and provide opportunities for life story work³⁰³.

Embedding creative programmes into local authority social care pathways ensures that all young people in the system can be offered the opportunity to participate in creative activities.

Challenges in adult social care

There are a number of pressing challenges facing the adult social care sector, all of which have been amplified by the pandemic.

- Demand – with an ageing population and more people living with complex needs there are high levels of demand for social care. Age UK



estimates that 12% of over-50s are living with some form of unmet need³⁰⁴, whilst according to the Association of Directors of Social Services (ADASS), almost 250,000 people are waiting for a care assessment³⁰⁵. This places an additional burden on those who provide unpaid care, who significantly supplement the social care workforce.

- Funding – Real terms local government spending on adult social care has reduced by 29% over the last decade leading to an estimated 12% drop in spending per person on adult social care services, whilst the cost of providing care is increasing³⁰⁶. There are concerns around the financial sustainability of providers, which impacts choice, quality and consistency³⁰⁷. The Health Foundation estimate that by 2031 an extra £8.9bn would be necessary to meet demand and improve access to care³⁰⁸.
- Workforce – As of October 2022, there were a record 165,000 vacancies in adult social care. It is estimated that in the first three months

Plus One – A Cultural Gateway for care-experienced young people



Plus One, delivered by Derby Theatre with QUAD, Deda and Baby People, is a cultural gateway to welcome Derby City’s care-experienced young people and their families into creative and cultural opportunities. Plus One is embedded into Derby City Council’s approach to supporting care experienced young people both with foster families and in residential care settings. There are several strands to the approach;

Cultural and creative opportunities – Plus One provides members with free access to creative and cultural opportunities offered by partner arts organisations across the city. Plus One is positioned between creative industry and social care services and this has led to Plus One providing space for social care teams to hold outreach events inside cultural spaces for both service user events and service teams to meet. Plus One creatively produces these events enriching opportunity for engagement through creative mentors, who share their skills and talents.

- Creative mentoring – young people can be referred to a creative mentor who will support them not only to develop creative skills, but with social, emotional and educational development. Creative mentors are also placed in residential care settings where young people can voluntarily interact with the artist on an ad-hoc basis.
- Employability and volunteering – supporting care-experienced young people to access careers in the creative sector.

- Performance projects – this offers young people the opportunity to make work that reflects themselves.

Plus One is now also built into the residential social care offer, providing weekly workshops in city care homes and collaborating towards the council’s mission to embed young people’s voices throughout their decision-making processes. This includes creative consultancy in relation to documents received by young people when entering residential care and using creative approaches to provide information that not only resonates with young people, but is also creatively influenced by the voices of those in care.

All strands are supported by creative arts therapy providers, who support the safety and wellbeing of young participants and volunteers and staff. Plus One was awarded Digital Project of the Year at the 2023 Stage Award for Odyssey, an immersive VR experience that allows the audience to see the reality of transient lives.

“Odyssey was about telling stories that don’t necessarily have to reveal that you are in care or going through some sort of trauma. It is about telling universal stories of home, journey and discovery, with the potential for aspiration at the end of that” – Tom Craig, Plus One, Social Care Roundtable

of 2022, 2.2 million hours of home care could not be delivered due to insufficient workforce capacity³⁰⁹.

These challenges in social care have a knock-on effect on the NHS, with delays in discharge a constant concern. In the current context, meeting even basic needs in social care can be a challenge for providers. As a recent House of Lords report by the Select Committee on Adult Social Care, ‘A Gloriously Ordinary Life’ finds³¹⁰;

“Services are effectively considered sufficient if they meet individuals’ basic needs. There is little thought given to exploring, acknowledging or meeting a person’s ambitions and desires, let alone to helping them find the means to accomplish their goals.”

Through holistic and person-centred approaches, creative health moves beyond basic needs, and supports people to engage in creative activity that is meaningful to them. This improves health and wellbeing and can support people to live independently for longer. In doing so it can reduce the demand on social care services and improve the quality of life for people accessing care and those that care for them. There is increasing evidence that creative approaches in care settings can also improve job satisfaction and workforce wellbeing for staff.

Applying creative health in adult social care

The physical and mental health benefits outlined in this report can all apply in social care settings. More generally, creative health helps people to engage in meaningful and purposeful activity, to



Through participating in Plus One I found an incredibly strong sense of community, and belongingness, and the environment provided by Plus One gave me the confidence ultimately, after two years, to gain a bachelor’s degree at the Academy of Contemporary Music – something I had never considered to be a prospect of my future”

Lucy James, Composer and former Plus One member, Social Care Roundtable

express emotions and desires and to connect with others, mitigating loneliness and isolation. It is therefore integral to a person-centred approach to social care.

A recent joint vision on social care from the Local Government Association, ADASS and NHS Confederation calls for long term investment in prevention and early intervention, and a shift in focus away from acute hospitals to keeping people well and living independently for longer, thereby reducing the pressure on social care, whilst working with people to put in place care

Skylark Café at the Southbank Centre

Skylark Café, part of the [Southbank Centre’s Arts and Wellbeing Programme](#), is a monthly multidisciplinary arts social club for local community members living in Lambeth and Southwark with health conditions that may make it difficult for them to attend other events. The aim of the session is to come together, have fun, share joy and be creative and in doing so tackle isolation and loneliness. Members are supported to travel to and from the venue and are provided with hot food and refreshments. There is also interaction with members between sessions to check in on wellbeing, and members may be encouraged to attend other events at the Southbank Centre.

“We were very keen on being bold and really aiming to create a utopia, and by that we meant a space where everyone is happy and held, and can get everything that they need and want. And at the heart of it...is stories.” - Bernadette Russell, Lead Artist, Storyteller and Activist

The café provides a familiar and consistent space, that people can feel confident visiting, but with space for variety and spontaneity in what may happen during the session. The club is described as a ‘magical space’, inspired by literary salons of the 17th Century, adapted for ‘the likes of us’. Activities can include storytelling, singing, dancing, crafts, visual arts, creative writing, poetry, puppetry but sessions often evolve unexpectedly, which is warmly welcomed.



that works for them³¹¹. However, attitudes towards social care can act as a barrier:

“The stigma and prejudice directed against disabled adults and older people has tangible repercussions in the way that key services in society are designed to meet their needs and ambitions. The underlying narrative and the lower value that is placed on certain individuals, which originates in the assumption that they are a ‘burden’ on society, entails an assumption that a more restricted kind of life is appropriate for older adults and disabled people, with the expectation that they will accept a different and reduced quality of life compared to the rest of the population” – A Gloriously Ordinary Life

We know there is an important role for creative health in relation to the social determinants of health to improve the conditions in which people live. This can involve creating accessible environments and services which allow everyone to thrive. Initiatives such as Age-Friendly Cities aim to remove barriers to participation in society for older people. Culture can be integral to such an approach, for example in Greater Manchester where Culture Champions aged over 50 co-produce age-friendly cultural and creative activities³¹². The report ‘Ageing Well: Creative Ageing and the City’ identified strategic roles for local authorities and partnership working as key elements in supporting older people to engage with cultural life³¹³. Social prescribing can make connections to the cultural sector, and research has investigated how programmes could be better tailored to meet the specific needs of older adults³¹⁴. The Creative Ageing Development Agency (CADA) challenges ageism in arts and heritage sectors and ensures older people are fully engaged in the cultural sector³¹⁵.

People with disabilities face inequalities in access to creative and cultural opportunities and are underrepresented in the arts and cultural workforce³¹⁶. Programmes that work with disabled artists have demonstrated a positive impact on wellbeing, skills and independence, as well as facilitating pathways into arts and cultural professions. For example, an impact report for Venture Arts, a visual arts company working with learning disabled artists, found that artists reported feeling happier and less anxious, 92% had improved confidence leading to less social

isolation, 62% developed confidence and skills to be more independent and all developed supportive relationships and friendships³¹⁷. The national disability charity, Sense, supports people with complex disabilities to access arts and culture in a meaningful way, and artists to make their work accessible. Sense Arts provides music, visual arts and performance programmes, training and mentoring opportunities and, recognising the importance of lived experience, is working to increase employment opportunities for artists with disabilities within the programme³¹⁸.

Creative health and cognitive decline and dementia

There is very strong evidence for the benefits of creative health in delaying the onset of cognitive decline and in mitigating the symptoms of dementia. This will be increasingly important as the number of people diagnosed with dementia in the UK is expected to rise from almost 1m to 1.6m by 2040³¹⁹. The total cost of dementia care in the UK is £34.7bn, of which 45% is social care. The system is already struggling to meet demand, and costs are expected to triple by 2040³²⁰. Two-thirds of people with dementia live in their own homes, whilst 70% of care home residents live with some form of dementia³²¹.

Both active engagement in creative activity, such as musicmaking or dance, and cultural participation as an audience member have been linked to slower cognitive decline and a reduced risk of dementia³²². A report commissioned by Arts Council England on Arts, Culture and the Brain cites large-scale observational studies linking cultural engagement and reduced cognitive decline and finds that arts-related hobbies can reduce cognitive decline and incidence of dementia³²³. Systematic reviews have shown that a range of creative activities, including dance, musical training, creative art and storytelling, as well as cultural engagement can influence global cognition and prevent cognitive decline in older adults³²⁴.

The WHO scoping review ‘What is the evidence on the role of the arts in improving health and wellbeing?’ summarises the benefits for people living with dementia of both listening to and making music for cognition, speech, visuospatial skills and memory³²⁵. Singing, dance and visual arts have also been shown to have positive

effects. The arts have benefits for the social aspects of dementia including social isolation and communication, and music in particular can be beneficial for the mental health of people living with dementia, reducing anxiety, stress and depression, and reducing aggressive behaviours.

Subsequent systematic reviews have shown cognitive, social and psychological benefits from participatory visual arts³²⁶, music-based interventions³²⁷ and music therapy³²⁸. A scoping review on the benefits of community-based participatory arts activities for people living with dementia has shown evidence in support of using participatory arts for dementia, regardless of art form, with in-the-moment and person-centred approaches particularly impactful³²⁹.

Arts activities for people with dementia have been shown to deliver good value for money. For example, a 12-week visual arts programme across residential care homes, hospital and community venues in England and Wales was found to provide a Social Return on Investment of £5.18 for every £1 invested³³⁰.

Activities which involve people living with dementia and their carers can have positive psychosocial benefits for both parties³³¹⁻³³². Relational approaches can be used to allow people with dementia to engage with creativity with their carers, improving wellbeing through instilling a sense of agency³³³, and research indicates that the arts can help to change carer attitudes by enabling the caregiver to see the person behind the condition³³⁴.

Creative health can be a conduit to support people with dementia from cultures where dementia may be stigmatised, or where people face barriers to accessing care. There are approximately 25,000 people from black and minority ethnic community backgrounds with dementia, but this number is expected to rise steeply in the coming years³³⁵. People from ethnic minority backgrounds face inequalities in access to care, through cultural or language barriers, stigma, and culturally inappropriate diagnostic tools³³⁶.

Researching the role of the arts in dementia care in the South Asian diaspora, Arti Prashar, the previous Artistic Director of participatory theatre company Spare Tyre identified a lack

of engagement from the community, related to stigma around dementia and a lack of awareness of care and support available. The research led to the development of a non-verbal multi-sensory embodied performance, co-created with people with dementia and their carers, and drawing on Indian-influenced dance and folk music, and traditional smells and sounds³³⁷.

Grassroots community groups understand community need and working with community

Manchester Camerata – Music in Mind

Manchester Camerata has been delivering its award-winning **Music in Mind** programme for people living with dementia and their carers since 2012, working in residential care homes and community hubs to provide people living with dementia with the opportunity to engage in meaningful activity and explore their creativity.

The programme has been developed with music therapists and specialist musicians from the orchestra, combining music therapy techniques with musical improvisation. In weekly sessions, people living with dementia and their carers are invited to explore different ways of interacting with music and musical instruments.

These sessions have been found to help people to express themselves and communicate with others, and to reduce frustration, and enable new connections to be made. Research carried out by the University of Manchester has explored the benefits of this process for people living with dementia, as an ‘in the moment’ experience, taking away the pressure to remember, or think about what happens next.

In order to spread and scale the programme, a franchise model has been established through which music champions can be trained to implement it using pre-recorded backing music. This could be care home staff, or volunteers and carers. The music champions are trained and supported by professional musicians and music therapists, with access to a range of online tools and materials to help them sustain their own sessions and groups.



We have been amazed by the creativity of care homes during the pandemic. The arts can make life more meaningful and enjoyable for everyone, provided that people are given opportunities to participate in a variety of ways. Going forward we see the future of care homes as creative communities where the arts are embedded into everyday care provision for the benefit of residents, staff, relatives, volunteers and friends”

Alison Teader, Programme Director NAPA Arts in Care Homes

members can develop the most effective solutions. If integrated into the social care system these groups could provide an important access route to services and increase the choice available to minoritised communities.

Creative health in care homes

There are around 17,000 care homes in the UK, with over 400,000 residents and 750,000 staff. Just as in the community, creative engagement in care homes is beneficial for health and wellbeing. Participatory arts have been shown to promote social relationships and reduce loneliness in older people in care homes³³⁸, whilst live music performances provide positive social experiences, a sense of achievement and awakened senses of empowerment and identity in residents, contributing to wellbeing³³⁹. These outcomes translate into further benefits for the whole care home. Care home managers report positive changes in behaviour from residents, including those with dementia, improvements in interactions with staff and carers, and a reduction in the need for medication.

Age Cymru’s CARTrefu programme delivers arts residencies in 200 care homes across Wales. Evaluation showed a significant impact on the wellbeing of residents, including those with dementia, and an improvement in staff attitudes towards residents³⁴⁰. A Social Return on Investment analysis also found a return of £6.48 for every pound invested over the first two years³⁴¹.

The kinds of creative activity taking place in care homes are diverse, ranging from film-making to

opera, dance and movement, poetry, exploring museum collections, and circus skills. Further examples can be found via the National Activity Providers Association (NAPA) which champions arts in care homes, and runs the National Day of Arts in Care Homes. This provides a focus in care homes across the UK and motivation for staff teams and residents who have developed an array of arts projects developed around the annual themes³⁴².

Despite the benefits of creative health in care home settings, in the current climate, with underfunding and high levels of staff turnover, the provision of creative activities is not universal and staff are limited by time, resources and lack of specialist skills and knowledge to deliver creative activities³⁴³. Research by NAPA suggests that a cultural shift in understanding of the benefits of creativity in care homes along with specialist training and the more widespread partnerships between care homes and community organisations and arts providers could support more widespread availability. The extent of provision is often dependent on the enthusiasm of the care home manager, and while extremely good examples of best practice exist, a system-wide approach including both the arts and social care sectors, with leadership from the Government is required to ensure all care home residents are able to access the benefits³⁴⁴. A NAPA Manager’s Guide to Arts in Care Homes is available.

Creative health and the social care workforce

It is not only residents that can benefit from creative health in care home settings. Evaluations of creative initiatives have also shown positive impacts in staff wellbeing, and in job satisfaction and retention. For example, evaluation of Wigmore Hall’s Music for Life programme for people living with dementia



One of the things I think we are going to have to do is think about how we can make this a really great and very rich occupation for people, and I think that creativity can be a real cornerstone of that”

Professor Martin Green OBE, Chief Executive of Care England, Social Care Roundtable

Live Music Now – Music in Care – Improving health and wellbeing for the whole care home



Live Music Now is a charity working and campaigning nationwide to create inclusive, measurable social impact through music. Programmes take place in community, healthcare, school and social care settings.

Live Music in Care provides live music sessions in residential care settings delivered by trained professional musicians to support the wellbeing of residents and staff teams. The Live Music In Care residency programme works with care homes over several months to embed musical activity into homes, building confidence and skills in staff to be able to lead music activities and to use music in their day-to-day care toolkit. In this way the programme has long term sustainable benefits for the whole care home – residents, staff and management.

“It doesn’t take away from the importance of music as an enjoyable creative, entertaining activity but it adds to that. So it becomes something that supports transitions, including settling in; it’s a tool to be used around moments of anxiety and distress; something that can support voice, choice and agency; and it can support individual care transactions.” – Douglas Noble, Strategic Director Adult Social Care and Health, Live Music Now.

Evaluation has shown clear improvements in mood and engagement for residents. Care home

staff have also reported that the activities can change the environment within the care home, and have observed positive changes in behaviours, reductions in levels of anxiety and distress and improved confidence³⁴⁶, even leading to reduction in the use of medication³⁴⁷. Staff working in care homes can use music support to residents who are feeling anxious or worried.

‘In the evening, they get very agitated and worried. In their reality many feel they should be going home, making partners’ meals, looking after their houses and families. They think they are being held against their will preventing them from doing this..... I can bring the music back into the conversation and it brings back the feeling of peace calm and joy, and gives something in my tool bag and breaks that cycle (perhaps stopping me being hit)’ - Activities Coordinator in Care Home

Developing the health and care workforce is integral to the Live Music in Care model. Training, co-planning and reflection time is built into the model of delivery led by the musicians, and standalone training opportunities are also available for professional development. Evaluation of the programme also monitors how staff build confidence and skills to deliver music activities, and how frequently these activities are carried out subsequent to the programme.

looked at how staff in care home settings experienced wellbeing in relation to remote online music sessions. Staff reported that a sense of purpose at work was an important factor of their wellbeing, and that the music sessions were able to provide this through meaningful interaction with residents and other staff members, outside of usual roles. Observing improved wellbeing in residents increased satisfaction and wellbeing in staff. Furthermore, the music sessions provided a positive, calming and relaxing space for the staff, allowing them to slow down³⁴⁵.

Supporting carers

Although difficult to define precisely, it is estimated that there are 10.6 million unpaid carers in the UK, who provide the great majority of social care, with a value estimated to be £164bn a year³⁴⁸. Carers are therefore vital to the health and social care system. However, we know they face challenges financially, in relation to support in the workplace, in accessing benefits, and with their own physical and mental health.



We did African drumming, and dance with the young people to let them free themselves and not think about the burden. Yes, they are learning a skill, but they are also giving freedom to their soul. Everyone said they enjoyed it...We fail to realise how much the arts can calm our souls when taking care of ourselves as well as others”

Anndeloris Chacon, CEO Bristol Black Carers, Social Care Roundtable

Creative health approaches have been used with carers, independently or with their cared for person, to improve health and wellbeing and facilitate social participation^{349,350}. NHS England is working with the Carers Partnership to encourage social prescription as a route to address loneliness and improve health and wellbeing for carers, which could be a new route to creative activity for this group³⁵¹.

Maximising the potential of creative health

In the face of huge challenges, we need to rethink the way we approach social care. Recent policy documents and reports from organisations working in the sector have pointed to a shift towards integrated and personalised approaches, addressing the needs of the whole person in the context of the lives they wish to lead. However, in practice, social care services are struggling to meet basic needs. Creative health can play an important role in supporting people to live well, with meaning and purpose as part of a holistic approach to social care, but in order for everyone to feel its benefits we need to put in place structures that ensure it is accessible to all, in communities or in care settings.

A recognition of the value of creative health approaches in Care Quality Commission (CQC) regulatory assessment frameworks could act as a strategic driver for healthcare systems, local authorities and private care providers to prioritise provision within care settings, and create a sustainable and scalable infrastructure to support creative health practitioners working in this area. Doing so will not only improve the health and wellbeing of those accessing care, but also has the potential to positively impact the social care workforce, providing opportunities for professional

development, and could be explored as a route to address challenges in staff retention.

With many examples of good practice, and a strong evidence base to support the use of creative health in social care, we must now take a strategic and systematic approach to embedding creative health across health and social care systems. The *Power of Music* report, which highlights the vital role for music in supporting health and wellbeing, particularly for people living with dementia, proposes a Power of Music Commissioner, who will lead a governmental taskforce and develop a cross-sectoral approach to integrating music into health and social care³⁵². In this report we will recommend that a cross-departmental approach is also taken to creative health more broadly, to maximise its potential across all policy areas, with social care a key theme.

Ensuring opportunities to engage in creative and cultural activities are available to all requires a cross-societal approach. The evidence shows engagement in creativity and culture has very significant benefits in particular for older adults, and that continued engagement can lead to improved health and wellbeing, supporting people to live independently for longer. There is a role for local authorities, cultural organisations, private organisations and the VCSE sector in ensuring that these opportunities are available and accessible, and those who will use the opportunities should be fully involved in their planning and co-design. This may include provision of services, supporting infrastructure such as transport, consideration of access to culture in planning decisions and appropriate cultural funding and programming. Such a whole system response can be facilitated by national level infrastructure that removes barriers to cross-sectoral partnership working, with Integrated Care Systems an important facilitator of this approach.



There’s not enough of it, and it’s not everywhere. Everyone should have a right to quality creative engagement and that’s not happening”

David Cutler, Director, The Baring Foundation and author of ‘Every care home a creative home’, Social Care Roundtable

Creative Ageing

The benefits of creative health can be felt across the life course but can be particularly relevant as we age. The UK population is ageing and there are currently over 11m people, or 19% of the population who are over 65³⁵³. However, the number of years spent living in good health is in decline. The number of years we can expect to live disability-free is 62.4 for men or 60.9 for women, with large discrepancies of up to 17 years between the most and least deprived areas of the country³⁵⁴. Fifteen million people currently live with a long term condition, most prevalent in older adults - 58% of over-60s have at least one long term condition³⁵⁵. It is predicted that the number of people with a major illness could increase by 37% by 2040, affecting mainly older adults³⁵⁶. This will have a significant impact on health and social care services.

Creative engagement into older age can prevent, treat and relieve symptoms across a number of physical and mental health conditions, including stroke, cardiovascular disease and respiratory disease, as described in Section 1. In relation to older adults in particular, dance has been shown to have benefits for strength, balance and falls prevention^{357,358}. Meta analysis of randomised controlled trials investigating dance interventions for Parkinson's showed positive outcomes in motor function, gait and walking ability, and that dance performed better than other exercise-based interventions in improving balance and quality of life³⁵⁹. A trial is currently underway examining the efficacy of embedding English National Ballet's 12-week Dance for Parkinson's programme within NHS clinical pathways³⁶⁰.

Age UK's Index of Wellbeing in Later Life found that maintaining meaningful engagement with the world around you is vital to wellbeing in later life and that out of 40 factors considered, creativity played the largest role in supporting wellbeing³⁶¹. National Institute for Health and Care Excellence (NICE) guidelines already recommend that a range of activities are provided for older adults at risk of decline in independence and mental wellbeing, including group singing, arts, crafts and other creative activities³⁶².

Maintaining social connection and reducing loneliness and isolation are vital to quality of life

Breathe Dance for Strength & Balance

Breathe Dance for Strength and Balance is a 10-week dance programme, run by Breathe Arts Health Research, for adults who have had a fall or are at risk of having a fall. This programme is delivered within the Older Person's Assessment Unit (OPAU) at Guy's Hospital, London.

Patients are prescribed strength and balance physiotherapy, and they can choose this dance-based programme or the unit's exercise class. Co-design has been key to embedding this service, and Breathe Arts Health Research work in collaboration with patients, physiotherapists and artists to design and deliver the programme. Initial findings have shown that patients have seen improvements in physical function, confidence levels and independence. Of the pre- and post-assessment data collected, results show:

- 64% of patients reduced their Timed Up and Go Assessment (time taken to stand from a chair, walk 3 metres, turn and walk back to the chair and sit down),
- 74% of patients increased their gait speed (how long it takes to walk 6 metres at usual walking speed),
- 42% of patients reduced their 180 degree turn (how many steps are taken to change direction through 180 degrees),
- 61% of patients reduced their fear of falling.

and wellbeing, particularly as we age. More than 3.6m over-65s live alone and many can go long periods of time without social connection. This can have a detrimental impact on physical health, increasing the risk of heart disease, stroke and impacting immunity and can lead to poor mental health including depression^{363,364}. *'Older and Wiser – Creative Ageing in the UK'* identifies social connectedness as one of the key beneficial impacts of engaging with creativity in later life³⁶⁵.

Cultural engagement is also important. Cultural participation is linked to positive emotional experiences, greater self-esteem and confidence,



and an improved ability to deal with negative life events³⁶⁶. A review of 70 peer-reviewed studies into the role of cultural participation in supporting wellbeing and social connection for older people found good qualitative evidence that engaging in culture led to opportunities for social interaction and fostered feelings of belonging and inclusion³⁶⁷. A survey of over 55s found that a significant proportion of people recognise the value of cultural engagement for their wellbeing, in particular outdoor historic parks, gardens & heritage (53%), and indoor galleries/museums/heritage (42%)³⁶⁸. However, engagement drops after 75. Cultural institutions and heritage sites can provide evidence-based programmes that can foster wellbeing and social inclusion for older people, and people living with dementia and their carers^{369,370,371}.

There are inequalities in cultural engagement in older adults in relation to ethnic background, rurality and socioeconomic background. In order to avoid reinforcing health inequalities, opportunities for creative and cultural engagement in older age must be culturally appropriate and available to all. Examples cited in the Baring Foundation report *'On Diversity and Creative Aging'* include multisensory programmes in celebration of Windrush Day, Chinese block printing, and dance activities based on Bollywood, Flamenco and African dance. It cites examples of programmes to meet the needs of those less likely to access creative ageing including men, people with a disability and the LGBTQ+ community³⁷². CADA has investigated this in relation to the South Asian diaspora and found that in addition to the physical and mental health benefits, the arts can be used to address stigma and taboo subjects and tell the stories of the diaspora. It finds that programming South Asian arts and culture can attract audiences from all cultural backgrounds and connect older people with a shared history of place, work and community³⁷³.

GemArts – Feel Good Women's group

GemArts, based in Gateshead, is a nationally recognised leader in the South Asian and diversity arts sector. Their Arts, Health and Wellbeing programme, 'Cultural Threads' works with artists across diverse artforms and communities living in Gateshead and Newcastle, using creative engagement to reduce isolation and loneliness. As part of this programme, their Feel Good Women's Group works with older women, particularly those from minority ethnic communities who may face barriers to accessing healthcare, and who may be at greater risk of isolation.

Cultural Threads enables participants to develop new creative skills which are culturally relevant, overcome barriers to talking about issues, celebrate their culture and identity, improve health and wellbeing, and consequently empower them to take control of their lives and plan for a more fulfilling future. The group engage in varied creative activities, facilitated by professional artists, and recently displayed their decorative artwork at the Baltic Centre for Contemporary Art in Gateshead during GemArts Holi Festival celebrations, attracting over 5000 visitors. This further provides a sense of confidence and pride.

"This project, it means a lot. I feel good when I meet people and hear their stories and get to share my stories. And if you are suffering you feel like you are not alone. You feel more relaxed and like "I am not the only one feeling these things". When you share it here it really helps. You get it out and people are sympathetic. Our group is a very helpful group. Being welcomed makes me feel good. The staff are very good. I always feel like coming to the session each week. I like to draw something or colour something. When you see someone else do it you feel inspired in the group." – Feel Good Group participant