



Older people and the arts: health and wellbeing through creative engagement

A Time to Shine learning report
November 2021



Time to
Shine



Introduction

The value of arts projects to improve people's lives and benefit their health has been well understood for some time¹. This report looks at the range of activities used and the ways in which they benefited people. It also offers top tips to help you get the most from creative activities to reduce social isolation and loneliness.

Many Time to Shine delivery partners used arts and other cultural activities as a hook to encourage involvement, or commissioned arts organisations to deliver specific activities. At least 25 of the 105 projects we commissioned between 2015 and 2021 used one or more art forms, including dance, singing, crafts, video and radio programme production. Time to Shine specifically commissioned a 2-year arts project in the first commissioning round, under the theme of 'Cultural activities'.

[Young at Arts](#) was delivered by LEAF, (a consortium of arts organisations headed by Yorkshire Dance). The project offered older people across Leeds, including those living in care homes, the opportunity to get involved in a wide range of art forms including dance, poetry, singing, and film-making. For some Time to Shine delivery partners - Yorkshire Dance, Performance Ensemble, Fall into Place Theatre - the arts are their main purpose. For others arts are just a part of what they do. Community groups often use arts-based activity as a hook to attract new members, responding to local people's interests to create peggy-rug making sessions at Health for All or a knitting group at Toast Love Coffee.

What did Time to Shine projects do?

Arts organisations were part of the co-production process which created Time to Shine and they were keen to be involved in the programme. They identified a wide range of ways in which the arts could be used to reduce social isolation and loneliness. They talked about learning new skills or rediscovering old ones, increasing confidence, telling people's stories, bringing the generations together, helping people to cope with bereavement and providing a sense of purpose, joy and fun. All these factors and more bubbled to the surface, either as part of a formal arts-based project, or as part of a short art-based activity.

[The role of arts in improving health & wellbeing](#)¹ divides the arts into four types of arts activities:

- performing arts including making music, dancing and acting
- visual arts, design and crafts such as drawing, clay modelling, photography and sewing
- literature including reading, creative writing, and other literary activities
- culture including going to museums, galleries, exhibitions, concerts, the theatre, community events, and cultural festivals

Time to Shine delivery partners worked across the range of these activities.



With so many projects using the arts as a hook we cannot report on all activities. Instead, this report aims to focus on learning about using the arts as a way to improve health and reduce loneliness.

¹ Evidence Summary for Policy - The role of arts in improving health & wellbeing Report to the Department for Digital, Culture, Media & Sport April 2020

Performing arts

As the sphere with the most obvious connection to improving older people's health and wellbeing, generally involving both physical activity and working in groups, there was a range of projects which incorporated dance, performance and singing. Others used video story-telling and radio broadcast as their medium.

- [D Dance](#) brought Bollywood dancing to a rural, predominantly White suburb in South Leeds. They used the novelty of the activity (for the area) and the input of a professional dancer to draw people in, and deliberately nurtured the social aspects to help create friendships and support across the group. Prior to Covid-19 the group planned to become self-funding, with contributions to room hire, tuition and refreshments paid by those taking part.
- [Ascendance](#) is a charitable dance company which ran specialist workshops as part of Time to Shine, specifically to support people with movement disorders. They ran classes where people were able to benefit from the physical effects of the dance, and which were carefully constructed to offer opportunities for people to form friendships and provide each other with peer support.
- [Lychee Red](#) enabled older Chinese residents of Leeds to get together. Part of the project saw members coming together to sing as a choir. There was a lot of nostalgia for this singing and the group also enjoyed the chance to perform together at other older people's events. Singing together, all wearing their red choir t-shirts, really solidified the group. They also gained a lot of pleasure from being able to share aspects of their culture with other older people in Leeds.
- Fever Dosti, a [Radio Asian Fever](#) project, trained 26 older people to produce and run community radio programmes aimed at the older community. It was an important part of Radio Asian Fever's desire to engage all parts of their community so it could serve the widest cross section of the South Asian communities in Leeds. They saw age being no barrier for those who wanted to engage in cultural activity and the project gave people skills and confidence.



Visual arts

Visual media and arts and crafts were perhaps less well represented than performance as stand alone projects. Within Time to Shine projects they featured more often as a hook to increase engagement than a freestanding artistic programme.

- Toast Love Coffee, a pay as you feel community cafe, commented that any creative activity was a good way to attract new users but could be hard work **“Anything with a creative, celebratory theme has worked very well and fulfilled a real gap in our community. Usually to go to a non alcoholic or family friendly event you have to go out of the area, which many cannot afford to do.”** They went on to offer a range of creative activities as their volunteers offered to share skills
 - » a volunteer aged 86 ran an intergenerational Knit and Natter group each week
 - » photography classes by an older volunteer happened on walks with editing sessions in the cafe afterwards
 - » other groups used the space as a venue for classes like poetry writing
- The Great Outdoors Project at [TCV Hollybush](#) planned to involve older people in environmental activity, gardening and conservation work. Through experience they found that the opportunity to do creative woodwork (building out of recycled timber), whittling sticks, and willow weaving were all popular hooks for those who were not yet quite sure about getting involved in outdoor activities.



Literature

This was the art form used least by Time to Shine’s delivery partners, perhaps reflecting the fact it doesn’t always lend itself as easily to group work designed to reduce social isolation. However, three creative projects used writing effectively. Postcard Cafe from the [LS14 Trust](#) used [Postcrossing](#) to help members send and receive postcards and improve their digital skills. [Fall Into Place Theatre’s](#) Pens to Pals project facilitated the exchange of letters between schools and local care homes. Both use the idea of sharing a story through a letter or postcard to link someone to another individual. [Words for Wellbeing](#) ran poetry reading groups in a range of venues, and were able to train volunteers who have continued the process. Poems encouraged reminiscence and conversations within diverse groups.



Culture

A number of projects found cultural activity was very much appreciated for the culture or for the company. As one participant commented “Sometimes it’s boring going to the museums but I go for the social side. It’s the social gathering that is important.”

[Little London Arts](#) organised trips for older people who lived in a deprived urban area close to the city centre. They enabled people to visit places which would be hard to get to under their own steam (by public transport or car), and often organised educational opportunities like guided tours. When the project asked people what they valued the most they did say they enjoyed the social activity, but also the chance to spread their wings: “*visiting places I have never been before*”; “*going to places I would find difficult to get to and meeting new people*”, and “*going to places you wouldn’t necessarily go to or know about.*” Some people clearly enjoyed the challenge and stimulus of the unfamiliar in the company of others.

South and East Leeds Friends at [Leeds Mind](#) set up an activity group as part of their project, where mostly younger older adults visited the central library, museum, art galleries and other cultural spaces. For these adults recovering from mental ill health, group visits were a good hook which boosted confidence in getting out and about, and because they were spaces that were free to visit people felt able to revisit independently.

Cara at [Leeds Irish Health and Homes](#), working with older people from the Irish diaspora, found that film and music reflecting that culture were very popular, and provoked a great deal of pleasure, discussion and reminiscence. They set up an Irish film club, and as they talked to participants they began to pull together the story of the Irish in Leeds - moving from passive consumption of culture to story gathering. This investigation of their stories enabled the organisation to understand more about the experiences of some of their members as they grew older in Leeds.

The Arts and older adults with learning disabilities

As more adults with learning disabilities are living to an older age two different organisations, who generally engage young people or working age adults with learning disabilities in arts projects, were interested in doing work with older adults. They both have a business model that needs activities to be funded by participants using private funds or personal budgets. They used the Time to Shine funding to undertake some ‘market testing’.

[Purple Patch Arts](#) undertook work in different areas of the city to see if they could engage sufficient older adults to run a series of art-based classes. [Pyramid](#) co-produced their activities with adults with learning disabilities, some of whom were nonverbal, to ensure the art based projects they were offering did properly reflect people’s choices around arts participation.

Both organisations identified funding constraints in their work with older adults which meant the projects were not viable in the longer term. A large proportion of older adults with a learning disability have no formal diagnosis. Without that diagnosis they have no personal budget (used to pay for activities and the support they need to attend), and were unable to pay for the activities. The conclusion was that older people with learning disabilities who don’t have a formal diagnosis are as excluded from engagement in the arts as they are from other things. It turns out choice has more to do with financial constraints than lack of interest.

Covid-19 and creative ways to stay in touch during lockdown

Following the well-publicised lead of some national arts organisations, Time to Shine delivery partners realised that they could stay connected with their members through the delivery of art and craft packs. These supported people by offering a reason to visit, kept people from boredom, and as more people were able to get online the provision of simultaneous craft activity via Zoom. This shared activity, involving a mix of banter, chat and creativity, proved very popular.



Insight from a delivery partner

[In Mature Company](#) grew from the [Young at Arts](#) project mentioned in the introduction to this report. Using that experience and lessons from another project in Sheffield, [Yorkshire Dance](#) decided to take dance artists and live music into care homes to engage with residents, focusing on platonic touch. (They wanted to consider the effect of non care-based touch as many residents received touch only through care.) The Young at Arts work showed that traditional evaluation techniques were challenging to use in care home settings, specifically with many residents with dementia, so a more suitable method was identified.

Two staff members were trained to use a technique called [Dementia Care Mapping](#) to carefully observe and record residents' responses during the sessions. There was a lot of learning along the way - much of it about practicalities of working within a care home setting, getting relationships with staff right, finding the best space and the most suitable time. Whilst project managers negotiated the practicalities the artists engaged with residents and the Care Mappers observed. They were able to prove that the arts activities were making a difference to residents' quality of life, and were able to reflect on their approach to understand which elements of their artistic practice produced the most positive results.

In 2020 the work of In Mature Company was completely halted by lockdown and the effects of Covid-19 on care homes.

Yorkshire Dance used the time to prepare their learning for dissemination through a [series of podcasts](#), an [animation](#) and [blogs](#). The local evaluation team at Time to Shine also produced an in-depth case study of In Mature Company.

As restrictions eased, the team were able to engage with residents outdoors during the summer of 2021. In a further development, dedicated support from the Leeds Care Quality team enabled Yorkshire Dance to form partnerships with other care homes and take the In Mature Company sessions online. Zoom sessions involving multiple care homes grew steadily in popularity as staff learned to use the technology and saw the effect on residents. Staff now have a different way of connecting regularly with their peers across the city through a fun activity rather than serious meetings. As a result, staff are reporting their own enjoyment of the sessions which is also leading to staff engaging with the work in new ways.

“Everyone would miss not having the sessions and would love them back. Service users could have danced all day and night, they say. I also think it is a really lovely, interactive and helpful session and have enjoyed taking part in it myself. It gets everyone involved and has a really positive impact.” *(Comments from a care home worker)*

The attitude to learning and their determination to use the opportunities presented by the chance to test and learn seems to have been rooted in creative practice.

Top tips to ensure creative activity enhances wellbeing

- Engaging people in arts activities can be good for people in terms of both physical and mental health
- The evidence shows it is most effective as a preventative activity ([The role of arts in improving health & wellbeing](#))
- Using some sort of performance to bind people into a group can be very effective - the [Aphasia Choir](#), the [Performance Ensemble](#) and [Lychee Red](#) all did this.
- You don't need to work in large groups to create strong and supportive social bonds. Smaller groups can work well and can help people to share difficult stories, as [Lippy People](#) discovered
- To make the most of social connections you need to be clear and deliberate about the social aspects of activities, specifically allowing time for them before or after class.
- Access to the arts has the same barriers as access to other activities - lack of confidence in learning new things, transport, accessible venues and money.
- You can use the arts and especially creative activities to grab someone's attention for the first time.
- Simple and understandable hooks - like whittling or basket weaving - can give people confidence to engage in more challenging or unfamiliar ways later on. Some people are inspired by learning new things and like to be challenged. You need to cater for different people by offering a range of experiences.
- Don't limit what you think older people might be interested in, many will be just as keen as anyone to seize some new technology - just ask!
- It is possible to set up self-funded classes even if an initial grant is needed to kickstart an interest. It also helps to be clear about the need to self-fund from the start.
- Social media can be really helpful to enable you to decide on an activity and time for classes. Health for All Connections used Facebook polls to help them do this.
- The practical challenges of working in care homes can be enormous, and each home will be different
- It is important to engage care home staff as their commitment and support is vital to give you access to residents



Resources

[¹Evidence Summary for Policy - The role of arts in improving health & wellbeing Report to the Department for Digital, Culture, Media & Sport April 2020](#)

[Tackling loneliness in older age the role of the arts](#) The Barings Foundation and Campaign to end loneliness

[Sharing Learning: Yorkshire Dance in Mature Company](#) (Yorkshire Dance April 2021)

[Case study of the In Mature Company project](#) (Time to Shine/University of Sheffield April 2020)

[Dementia Care Mapping: Finding Trends & Future Thinking - In Mature Company Year 1](#) (Yorkshire Dance, April 2019)

[Dementia Care Mapping: Evaluating Data & Finding Trends - In Mature Company Year 2](#) (Yorkshire Dance, June 2020)

Lychee Red Final end of project report (Time to Shine, 2017)

Young at Arts final end of project report (Time to Shine, 2017)

[Young at arts: reducing loneliness and social isolation through offering creative social opportunities](#) (Care Connect, 2017)

[Life, loss, learning and legacy: learning from men's experiences of bereavement](#) (Time to Shine, July 2020)

[CARA: connecting older Irish people in Leeds](#) - end of project report (Time to Shine, 2017)

['Extending the Hand of Friendship': Exploring loneliness among the older Irish community in Leeds through an exploration of the Cara Project](#) (Care Connect 2017)

[Developing Friendships Toolkit](#) (Time To Shine, 2019)

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