



# Arts and Creativity in Later Life: Implications for Health and Wellbeing in Older Adults

Executive Summary

Institute of  
Public Health



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## Executive Summary

**This executive summary is based on a report<sup>1</sup> detailing the findings of a systematic evidence review, prepared by the Institute of Public Health for the Public Health Agency.**

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# 1. Introduction

This executive summary provides an overview of a systematic evidence review, produced by the Institute of Public Health, to develop a better understanding of what the evidence tells us about the role arts and creativity plays in older people's health and wellbeing.



*“Participation in the arts has significant implications for the promotion of positive health, and for the prevention, or mitigation, of ill health in later life, for both the public health and arts and creativity agenda.” (McQuade and O’Sullivan, 2021)*

## 2. Background

Northern Ireland's ageing population is growing, and one of the greatest successes of public health is that people are living longer than ever before. Over the last decade, the proportion of the population aged 85 and over in Northern Ireland has increased by 30% and grown at a rate five times higher than the population as a whole (NISRA, 2019a). Having cognisance of the fact that the population is benefitting from living longer lives, there has been a growing emphasis within policy and programmes on how we can best promote health and wellbeing and active ageing in later life.

In the WHO scoping report on the role of the arts, Fancourt and Finn (2019) asserts that being involved in arts and creative activities can be a way of alleviating, or preventing, the deterioration of health and can offer opportunities for social engagement and interaction with others. However, data from the Continuous Household Survey in Northern Ireland, shows that participation in the arts is relatively low. In 2019/20, one third of all adults (33%) participated in an arts activity at least once within the previous year. Those aged 16-24 were typically more likely to have participated than other age groups. Generally speaking, participation in the arts seems to decrease with age beyond the 35-44 age group; adults aged 65 years and over have consistently been the least likely group to participate (NISRA, 2019b).

Despite the general acknowledgment of the role that arts and creativity plays and its contribution to older adults' wellbeing, thus far, there has been limited evidence examining the impact of participation in arts and creativity on the health and wellbeing of older adults. Previous research has concentrated predominantly on arts and creativity interventions as a form of therapy, for older adults with diagnosed health conditions or diseases, or have centred on one sole art form (e.g., only dance or music). There has been little empirical investigation which systematically reviews the evidence and examines active participation in arts and creativity in different arts and creativity forms, identifying the impact on older adults, across both physical and psychological health and wellbeing domains.

### 3. Aim

The specific aim of this systematic evidence review was to develop a better understanding of the evidence that exists in relation to the role of arts and creativity programmes for older adults and to examine the effects of participation in arts and creativity and its impact on older people's health and wellbeing.

The systematic evidence review sought to address the following four questions:

1. How does participation in arts and creativity impact on older people's health and wellbeing outcomes?
2. Does the evidence suggest that certain art and creativity-based activities differ in effectiveness compared to others in supporting better health outcomes?
3. What information does the evidence in this field suggest should be collected as a way to measure and assess programme benefits and design?
4. What is the evidence that funding arts and creativity programmes for older people provide a return on investment?



## 4. Methodology

A mixed methods, systematic review was employed. 14 relevant, electronic journal databases, grey literature and article reference lists were searched using the pre-defined search strategy, over a five-year period. The databases searched were: EMBASE, Web of Science (Social Sciences Citation Index), PsycINFO, Allied and Complimentary Medicine (AMED), ART Bibliographies Modern (ABM), Design and Applied Arts Index (DAAI), Applied Social Sciences Index and Abstracts (ASSIA), Library and Information Science Abstracts (LISA), International Bibliography of the Social Sciences (IBSS), Health and Medical Collection, Scopus, Cumulative Index to Nursing and Allied Health (CINAHL), PubMed, and Cochrane Library. Studies were eligible for inclusion if they examined the effect of arts and creativity interventions on the health and wellbeing of older adults. Identified search terms related to participation in arts and creativity (e.g., actively involved in making, or creating art) for therapeutic health and wellbeing in older adults (50+ years). In this review, arts and creativity was defined as, "Any creative or interpretive expression (whether traditional or contemporary), in whatever form" (Arts Act, 2003). Empirical research articles that contained quantitative, qualitative, or mixed methods study designs were included.

In total, 6101 records were returned for screening and 1483 duplicates were subsequently removed. The reviewers carried out an independent screening of over 4611 individual titles and abstracts to determine eligibility of each of the studies for inclusion within the review, with irrelevant records removed thereafter. A further independent screening of individual, full-text articles (n=315) was conducted. As a result, 73 studies were identified for inclusion within the review. A critical assessment of the methodological quality of eligible studies was employed using the Mixed Methods Appraisal Tool (MMAT) (Hong et al., 2018).

The review included studies from over 18 separate countries, with a cumulative sample of 7263 participants, ranging from 50 to 94 years of age. Dance was the most common form of creative arts exposure and was reported in nearly half of studies in the review in total (n=34). This was followed by music and singing (n=26), visual and creative art (n=10), and drama and theatre studies (n=3).



## 5. Findings of the evidence: Impact of arts and creativity on health and wellbeing

In summary, the review has ascertained that participation in group arts and creativity interventions can help improve physical, psychological, and social health and wellbeing outcomes in older adults. The evidence was classified as 'strong,' 'promising,' 'preliminary,' or 'inconclusive' in accordance with What Works Wellbeing, GRADE and CERQual guidance. An overview of the findings is presented below:

### Impact of dance on health and wellbeing in older adults

- There is some relatively strong evidence<sup>2</sup> which suggests that participation in group dance on a regular basis can help enhance balance and mobility, improve lower body physical strength and flexibility, increase aerobic capacity and endurance, and an increase in time spent in physical activity.
- Promising evidence<sup>3</sup> suggests that dance is associated with improvements in body composition, lipid and inflammatory profiles, as well as improving cognition and brain function.
- Preliminary evidence<sup>4</sup> provides slight indications that dance can help improve independence in daily living activities and reduce the fear of falling.
- In relation to older adults living with diagnosed health conditions or diseases, preliminary evidence suggests that dance can help improve mood, alleviate depression, and enhance cognition in older adults living with amnesic mild cognitive impairment. It can also help alleviate depression, improve self-esteem and satisfaction with life in older adults living with age-related, macular degeneration.
- Initial preliminary evidence also indicated that tailored dance could help improve balance, mobility and gait in older adults living with Parkinson's disease, but the evidence is inconsistent<sup>5</sup> and further research is required.

### Impact of music and singing on health and wellbeing in older adults

- Promising evidence suggests that participation in group singing and music classes on a regular basis is associated with improved cognitive function, quality of life and improved affective states, and can help preserve a sense of wellbeing in older adults.
- Some initial, preliminary evidence suggests an association between group singing and enhanced respiratory function.
- There is also some initial evidence to show that music and singing can help improve resilience and reduce loneliness. However, at present the results are inconsistent and more evidence is needed in this area.
- High quality, qualitative evidence also suggests that participation in group singing and music activities can provide older adults with enhanced wellbeing, development of new skills, positive relationships, a sense of belonging and increased social networks.

2. Strong evidence is regarded as being high quality evidence – confidence that the evidence shows a positive impact in older adults. This criterion was determined from the What Works Wellbeing guidance on evidence and is in accordance with GRADE and CERQual guidelines.

3. Promising evidence is regarded as being moderate quality evidence – encouraging confidence that there is a positive impact in older adults, but need to explore further.

4. Preliminary evidence – there is only a small indication of some impact in older adults, the evidence is limited, and need to explore much further.

5. Inconsistent evidence – the evidence was mixed and inconclusive to show an impact in older adults.



### Impact of visual and creative arts on health and wellbeing in older adults

- Preliminary evidence suggests that visual and creative arts can help to reduce feelings of loneliness and improve a sense of community and social connectedness, enhance perceived health status and the ability to cope with pain experiences.
- High quality, qualitative evidence suggests that participation in visual and creative art group programmes can help improve cognitive abilities, acquisition of new skills, sense of autonomy, feelings of enjoyment, and provides opportunities to develop new relationships and social connections.
- With regards to older adults living with diagnosed health conditions, promising evidence shows that visual and creative arts programmes, like creating watercolour paintings and art making, can help improve wellbeing in older adults living with dementia. Some initial, preliminary evidence suggests that visual and creative arts programmes can help improve daily living activities and quality of life in older adults living with dementia.

### Impact of drama and theatre on health and wellbeing in older adults

- Initial, preliminary evidence shows that participation in drama and theatre classes on a regular basis can help provide emotional wellbeing benefits for older adults. However, the evidence on the impact of drama and theatre on health outcomes is limited and inconsistent and therefore, more research in this area is warranted.



## Summary Overview - Impact of Arts and Creativity Activities on Physical Health and Wellbeing Outcomes

Types of arts and creativity	 Dance	 Music & singing	 Visual arts	 Drama & Theatre
Improved balance & mobility	★★★			
Improved muscle strength & flexibility	★★★	★		
Improved cardio-respiratory fitness & endurance	★★★			
Improved physical activity	★★★			
Improved body composition	★★			
Improved independent living	★		★	
Reduced risk of falling	★			
Improved brain function	★★			
Improved quality of sleep				
Improved respiratory function			★	

★★★ Strong – confidence that the evidence shows a positive impact in older adults. ★★ Promising – moderate confidence that there is a positive impact in older adults, but need to explore further. ★ Preliminary – there is only a small indication of some impact in older adults, the evidence is limited, and need to explore much further. ★ Inconsistent evidence – the evidence was mixed and inconclusive to show an impact in older adults.

## Summary Overview - Impact of Art and Creativity Activities that Maintain or Improve Psychosocial Health and Wellbeing in Older Adults.

Types of arts and creativity	 Dance	 Music & singing	 Visual arts	 Drama & Theatre
Improved sense of general well being		★★★	★★★	★
Improved quality of life	★	★★★	★	
Improved self-esteem and self-efficacy	★			★
Improved life satisfaction	★			
Improved cognitive function	★★★	★★★		
Reduced fear of falling	★			
Reduced depression, anxiety, stress	★	★★★		
Reduced feelings of loneliness		★	★	
Improved social connections		★★★	★	
Improved sense of community			★	

★★★ Strong – confidence that the evidence shows a positive impact in older adults. ★★ Promising – moderate confidence that there is a positive impact in older adults, but need to explore further. ★ Preliminary – there is only a small indication of some impact in older adults, the evidence is limited, and need to explore much further. ★ Inconsistent evidence – the evidence was mixed and inconclusive to show an impact in older adults.

## 6. Considerations for Research, Policy and Practice

A number of considerations for research, policy and practice have emerged from the evidence presented within the review. These considerations are relevant to the overarching, strategic frameworks, and policy documents in Northern Ireland, including, but not limited to: Making Life Better, The Mental Health Strategy, The Active Ageing Strategy, and the forthcoming Strategy for Culture and Arts.

<b>Considerations for Research and Evidence</b>	
<b>Further evidence on arts and health</b>	Further research in a wider range of arts and creativity forms is required to develop further understanding of the evidence on the health benefits for older adults, particularly where there is a dearth of studies.
<b>High quality, larger scale studies</b>	More high quality, larger scale, robust, longitudinal research, and experimental intervention studies are required to track health outcomes in older adults to a much greater degree and to increase scalability.
<b>Standardisation of assessments</b>	More standardised and systematic assessments of programmes would advance meta-analysis and establish consistent treatment effects.
<b>Economic evaluations</b>	A review of the impact of economic evaluation of arts and creativity interventions is needed to determine the cost effectiveness and return on investment. This could support policy and decision-making regarding investments for future funding and commissioning of arts and health services.

<b>Considerations for Practice and Policy</b>	
<b>Greater recognition of arts and public health</b>	Greater recognition of the public health benefits of participation within arts and creativity should be promoted.
<b>Address barriers to participation</b>	Address barriers (social & economic) to participation in arts and creativity for older people by improving availability and accessibility to the arts for older adults.
<b>Co-design approach</b>	Implement a co-design approach with older adults and key stakeholders when designing and developing arts and creativity interventions.
<b>Sustainability</b>	Address the sustainability of arts and creativity interventions to ensure more long-term investment.
<b>Embedding structures</b>	Those implementing arts and creativity interventions would benefit from making health and wellbeing a fundamental and overarching focus for their work, embedding structures to contribute to successful health outcomes.
<b>Evaluation framework</b>	Ensure that evaluation is integral to arts and creativity programmes. The development of an evaluation framework and an evaluation toolkit are required to support those who wish to undertake an assessment of effectiveness, efficiency and economic evaluation of arts and creativity programmes.
<b>Training and support in effective programme design</b>	Training and support for the development and implementation of art and health interventions, in effective programme design and evaluation methods to inform and improve their services.

**Cross-sectoral and strategic partnership working**

Support cross-sectoral and strategic partnership working through arts and health to encourage progression of good practice and promote collaboration. For example, support collaborative working between primary care and social, community and arts sectors.

**Strategic Policy framework**

A strategic policy framework, setting the direction for participation and engagement in the arts, particularly for older adults within a health and wellbeing context.

In addressing the four research questions, this systematic evidence review found that participation in arts and creativity has a positive impact on older people's physical, psychological, and social health and wellbeing outcomes. Variability in the evidence hinders the ability to conclusively determine whether certain art and creativity-based activities differ in effectiveness compared to others in supporting better health outcomes. The evidence in this field demonstrates various objective and subjective ways in which to measure and assess programme benefits and design. However, a more standardised approach to programme design, data collection and evaluation is required. There is a dearth of evidence exploring whether or not funding arts and creativity programmes for older people provides a return on investment (Crealey and O'Neill 2021). However, the review indicated the dissatisfaction of short-term funding of interventions and the need for a more sustainable and integrated public health and arts approach.



## 7. Conclusion

The overarching message from this review is that arts and creativity interventions can have positive health impacts for older adults and for population health. This systematic evidence review demonstrates the importance of arts and creativity and how it can contribute to the health of older adults. The evidence shows that participation in group arts and creativity interventions helps to support the physical, mental, and social aspects of ageing. Taken together, these findings support the importance of participation in the arts for older adults and have significant implications, especially for the promotion of positive health, and for the prevention, or mitigation, of ill health in later life for both public health and the arts and creativity agenda.



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