

Creative Journeys

The role of participatory arts in promoting social relationships
for older people in care home settings

Executive Summary



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Creative Journeys: The role of participatory arts in promoting social relationships for older people in care home settings

Key messages from the research

- Participatory arts activities impact positively on the relationships between residents, between residents and care home staff, and residents and relatives;
- Participatory arts activities have the potential to break down boundaries between those living in care homes and the wider community;
- The arts have unique qualities that engage residents and enable them to express themselves creatively, build on their strengths and abilities as well as make meaningful contributions to their relationships and their communities;
- The development of relationships is dependent on both the creative processes and the culture of the care homes;
- Participatory arts organisations had shared values/approaches and the project facilitated a rare opportunity for collaboration, with promising implications for joint working in the future.



Introduction

Creative Journeys, is a broad portfolio of participatory arts and cultural activities for older people living in care homes throughout Essex, it began in 2015 and was established and led by Essex County Council Culture and Community Engagement Team. This summary provides an overview of research undertaken by the Anglia Ruskin University team in relation to this project in partnership with an independent research group led by and for older people called the Older People's Research Group, Essex (OPRGE), who assisted with data collection and analysis. The research funded by Arts Council England (2016-18) explored the role of participatory arts and culture within residential care home settings in developing and maintaining social relationships between older people, between older people and care staff, and between care homes and the wider community.

Programmes of participatory arts activities were delivered by Green Candle Dance Company, who create bespoke programmes to enable participation in dancing delivered by a professional dancer and a musician; Age Exchange, who specialise in reminiscence arts through the creative exploration of memories; and Sinfonia Viva with Orchestras Live who bring orchestral experiences to residents by playing music, singing together and composing an original piece of music that is performed with a live professional orchestra.



Background

Although surrounded by other people, poor health and cognitive impairment may limit opportunities for older people living in residential care to communicate and interact with the other residents they live with and they may experience social isolation and loneliness as a result. Finding ways to help older residents develop and maintain social relationships between peers, with care home staff, and with the wider community is key to addressing such loneliness and social isolation and enhancing the lives of older people in care home settings. Participatory arts and cultural activities contribute to the overall sense of well-being of older people. Research exploring the health and well-being impacts of participatory arts and cultural experiences has also found that there are relational benefits of participation, with improvements to personal and immediate relationships and also societal or broader relationships. However, there is little research that has specifically studied the impact of such arts participation in residential care settings. Therefore the aim of the research was to explore the impact of participatory arts and cultural activities in building relationships for older people in care home settings, and there were three main research objectives:

1. To explore if/how participatory arts activities may enhance social relationships between older people, older people and care home staff, and care homes and the wider community.
2. To investigate the factors that enable or impede the sustainability of participatory arts activities in developing and maintaining relationships.
3. To examine the potential interaction between participatory arts activities and relationships in reducing loneliness and social isolation, and the promotion of well-being.



Methods

Following an extensive review of the literature, the research was conducted in two main stages. In stage one, case studies of professional arts organisations were conducted in three care homes in Essex. In each care home, structured and unstructured observations of the sessions were undertaken and interviews conducted with residents, staff and relatives. The residents were also asked to complete well-being measures and measures of relational bonding at the beginning and end of the programme. Three month follow-up interviews were also conducted with residents and staff participants.

Informed by the findings from the above, in stage two the wider care context was explored with a survey sent to all the care homes in Essex to identify the arts and cultural activities provided in individual care homes and the challenges faced by homes in providing such activities. The issues raised in the survey were explored further in interviews in three other care homes for a more in-depth understanding of the longer term impacts of provision of arts and cultural activities in residential care settings. In addition, through the steering group meetings it was evident that the arts organisations found commonalities and differences in their approaches and valued the shared learning experience of meeting together. A focus group was therefore conducted with the organisations to further explore their common practice and how they facilitate creativity and relationship building for and with older people.

Overall, the study involved 62 participants: 27 residents, 24 staff members, 2 family members and 9 arts facilitators plus the online views from 27 care homes who completed the survey.



Key Findings

The findings across both stages of the research demonstrate the range and extent of arts activities in residential care homes, the impacts those arts activities have on the social relationships of the older people who lived there, and the mediating factors that facilitate or impede those impacts, and issues around sustainability.

Enhanced relationships between residents

Participatory arts had an impact on the relationships between residents through enhancing communication, shared experiences, and social connectedness.

- Communication and interactions between residents were enhanced through bringing people together for a purpose, encouraging creativity and collaboration, and also creating opportunities for new topics of conversation.
- The activities enabled residents to share past experiences and discover shared interests and histories, but also to share new experiences.

We got on quite well with one another, I think. We understood one another. They all had their stories to tell, and to me they were interesting. (Stage one resident)

- Residents felt socially connected with others through collective enjoyment and camaraderie, building a shared group identity.

Enhanced relationships between residents and staff

Participatory arts also had an impact on the social relationships between residents and staff again through enhancing communication and shared experiences, but also through changing the dynamics of the relationship by facilitating reciprocity.

- Residents became more informal and confident in their interactions with staff and the activities enabled new topics of conversation to develop through sharing experiences together and learning about individuals' interests and skills.

You get to learn so much information about their life, and what their story is. I think that helps when you're giving their care. So, you understand things more. It does influence how you perceive and give their personal care... because you've learnt so much about them in previous activities which is lovely. (Stage two staff member)

- Staff members also reported how they learnt new relational skills or techniques from the arts facilitator's approaches to the residents.

Enhanced relationships between residents and members of the wider community

Participatory arts had an impact on the social relationships between residents and their relatives similarly to relationships with staff, as well as connecting the care homes with the wider community in various and creative ways.

- The arts activities provided topics of conversation when relatives visited or called residents.
- Relatives who took part in the arts programmes shared experiences with their family member as well as other residents in the group. Events outside the care home such as a concert in a local park provided shared experiences with the wider community.

It's good because I feel like I've got to know other residents here as well. They see me five days a week, but I feel like I've got better relations with them now because of what we've done here in the [arts sessions] so it's been really nice. (Stage one relative)

- The arts also provided a way for residents to contribute to and have a role within their wider community. For example, at one home the residents knitted blankets as part of their knitting group to give to the homeless, and volunteers came into the homes to support different arts activities.

The creative processes as a mediating factor

The creative processes in the participatory arts group work involved residents in a collaborative process, building on their strengths and abilities, which led to more interactions and bonding. Arts facilitators were valued for both their artistic talent and skills in communication and facilitation.

- The arts activities were inclusive enabling residents to participate to the extent they felt comfortable with. There was also lots of fun and humour.

Oh well, I absolutely adored it. I loved it. They made me feel close, at home and at ease. It was kind, and generous, and thoughtful...They made you laugh as well. (Stage one resident)

- The approach of the arts facilitator – whether a professional artist or activities coordinator – was fundamental to the creative process and enhancing relationships. Particular attributes were highlighted, such as being passionate, positive, well organised, and flexible and responsive to the residents.

It's jazz...when it really works, it's giving people the space to come in at this level and someone to come in on the trumpet. You create in such a way that there is real freedom and the people are valued, that they feel they each have a voice, that voice is respected, and you go with the flow. (Arts Organisations focus group)

- The arts had the power to improve well-being, including enhancements in mood, enjoyment and enthusiasm. There was also plenty of laughter and playfulness during activities.
- The arts activities were often emotional as residents shared meaningful memories (happy and sad), as well as building new memories.
- Arts activities are inherently relational and enabled more reciprocal relationships in the care homes.

[M]aking art, being together and creating is a kind of innate human property... Art is one of the things that people do together... I think art is a sort of invitation to be human. It's an invitation to respond with raw emotion... to recognise something that you have in common with someone else... (Arts organisations focus group)

The care context as a mediating factor

The care home context was a mediating factor in the success or otherwise of participatory arts activities and their impact on the social relationships of residents. This spanned organisational issues, the environment, and the capacity and culture of the care home.

- Successful delivery of the arts activities required the arts facilitator and care home staff to work closely together for effective planning and preparation, especially around things like staffing levels, shift patterns, existing routines and the challenges of using communal spaces.

Actually, very quickly I found I was joining in with everybody, and actually it was really, really liberating... I think that was definitely an eye opening moment on how powerful this could be, because we all came together. (Stage one care manager)

- Strong leadership in the care homes and the willingness to take risks at management level was important, as well as staff attitudes towards the arts and the capacity of residents to participate in arts activities.
- The activities coordinators had a crucial role in supporting the effective delivery of the arts programmes as well as encouraging continued participation in arts activities. They were also central to creating a culture within the care home that is supportive of the arts.
- A lack of funding and instability in the care sector were detrimental to the opportunities to engage external arts organisations in delivering arts activities for residents.

Sustainability in delivering participatory arts in care homes

Ways of promoting sustainability included creating a lasting legacy, supporting care home staff to provide continued arts activities, and the potential for collaboration between arts organisations.

- Arts organisations always tried to leave something behind, such as music or a film, as a lasting memory of the arts programmes.
- Impacts that happen in the moment should also be valued, particularly when many residents are experiencing cognitive decline.

I think sometimes we do undervalue just that thing happening in that moment in time and how valuable it is to that person. (Arts organisations focus group)

- Activities coordinators were particularly important for providing continued arts activities, but they need the skills and support to do so.
- Through their experience as part of the research Project Management Group, arts organisations learnt they had a shared value base and collective knowledge, skills and experience that represented opportunities for new models of working.

The research also found a number of barriers to the impacts of participatory arts on the social relationships of older people in care homes, and these are set out in the findings.



Summary

These research findings have important implications for decision-makers and funders around policy. Firstly, funding for participatory arts in care homes is essential and worthwhile. Making a difference to the social well-being of residents and care home staff is likely to result in reducing the burden on the NHS of addressing the ill-health of residents and particularly the use of anti-depressants. It may also improve job satisfaction and thus staff retention in the care sector. Secondly, initiatives to promote and support partnership working across and within the care and arts sectors would strengthen the opportunities and possibilities for participatory arts in care homes and the impact they can have on social relationships.



Recommendations

The findings from this research point towards the following key recommendations for practice in both the care sector and the arts sector:

- To promote collective well-being and meaningful relationships in the care home community; arts practitioners should consider a relationship-focused approach, which builds on the strengths and abilities of all those involved in the activity.
- To recognise that all care home staff have an important role in the planning and delivery of participatory arts activities for residents, but should also have the opportunity to participate themselves and by doing so may learn new relational skills and approaches with residents.
- To be aware that activities coordinators have a key role in providing and supporting participatory arts activities in care homes. Recognition of this role to include job descriptions which acknowledge the core skills and qualities involved in this work, with training opportunities in participatory arts approaches.
- To ensure that arts organisations working with older people in care homes work with care homes to find ways to leave a positive legacy through providing resources or training of care home staff to increase sustainability.
- To promote opportunities for arts organisations to share learning and best practice for working with older people in care homes to enhance their approach, to explore possibilities for collaboration, and the potential for impact on social relationships within the home and the wider community.
- The development of a Participatory Arts in Care Homes Network that brings together care home staff with arts organisations and individual artists, as well as others who may have an interest in this area, would strengthen the potential for this work to make a difference.

With increased funding and opportunities for partnership working, participatory arts in care homes has the potential to make a valuable contribution to addressing the loneliness agenda and enhancing overall collective well-being of older people in care homes.



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