

The Developing Role of the Arts for Older People.

A report by Kerry Rooney
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Introduction

My name is Kerry Rooney. I am the Artistic Director of Kaleidoscope, a performing arts organisation based in Northern Ireland. For the last five years Kaleidoscope has been involved in creating opportunities for older people to become more actively involved in the arts. We now deliver one of the UK's largest arts for older people programmes.

Over the last number of years we have witnessed a significant expansion in the area of arts for older people. This is due to a number of circumstances. Firstly the increasing number of older people who are fit and active and wish to explore their interests which include the arts. The second is perhaps a growing awareness of the need to provide more and better opportunities and services for older people to enjoy the sort of creative and social experiences that many younger people take for granted. And thirdly the funding opportunities created by organisations and agencies like The Big Lottery, The Arts Councils and The Baring Foundation which have enabled organisations like Kaleidoscope to develop arts programmes for older people.

Across the UK the arts are playing a key role in improving the lives of literally hundreds and thousands of older people. Last year Kaleidoscope alone worked with over 1,500 older people in Northern Ireland.

Now in 2015 we have reached an important juncture in the development of the arts for older people. A network of individuals and organisations working in the field of arts for older people has begun to emerge. There is greater communication and cooperation across the whole of the UK and a cross fertilization of ideas leading to better standards of work and greater innovation. There is also a growing body of research and evidence which supports the value of the arts for older people, not only in terms of enhancing the lives of individuals, but in helping entire communities and our society as a whole.

As the field of arts for older people continues to develop and grow there are also a number of significant challenges to be faced. Finding the necessary resources to continue the work is an ongoing issue. Many of the funding programmes which up to now had supported arts work with older people are coming to an end. We do not know if these programmes will be extended or if the funding organisations responsible for them will instead seek to support work with other groups.

The purpose of this report is to explore the future of the arts for older people, to look at the contribution which the arts can make in improving the lives of older people and to examine the possible role which the arts can play in helping to address some of the challenges created by our changing society. My aim, in writing it, is to stimulate debate and discussion and to promote positive action.

An Aging Population

The UK, like the rest of Europe and North America, has an aging population. Improvements in living standards as well significant advances in medical science and healthcare have meant that people are now living much longer than previous generations and the statistics indicate that this trend is due to continue.

There are now more older people living in the UK than ever before. Statistics show that there are currently 11 million people in the UK over the age of 60 and 3 million of those are over the age of 80. The UK has now reached a point where there are more people over State Pension age than children. By 2020, the Office for National Statistics (ONS) predicts that people over the age of 50 will comprise almost half (48%) the adult population. By 2025 almost one third of the UK's entire population will be over the age of 65.

The changing nature of our society forces us to examine how we look at the subject of aging, how we view the role of older people in our society and how we deal with many of the issues facing older people. I, like many others, believe that the arts for older people can play a vital role in meeting many of the challenges created by our aging population and also in transforming the role older people play within our society.

Arts for Older People

What do we mean when we use the term "Arts for Older People"? Surely the arts are open to all. Well, some forms of art and artistic experience are open to all. You can walk through the National Gallery in London and experience some of the finest works of art in the world. You can go to your local theatre and buy a ticket to see a play or go to a concert or to your local library or to the cinema. There are lots of ways in which everyone can enjoy the arts.

When we talk about the arts for older people we are really talking about specific arts provision for older people. We are referring to arts events, programmes and activities that are specifically aimed at engaging older people. The art form in question may be anything from dance to drama to digital photography. It may involve passive participation like listening to music or enjoying an art exhibition or it may involve some active involvement like participating in a painting workshop or singing with a choir.

So why do we need to have arts provision specifically for older people? Well, there are a great many reasons. The arts have a significant role to play in improving and enriching the lives of older people. The arts can also play a key role in helping the UK to overcome many

of the challenges which are created by the aging population. And also because in order for the arts themselves to continue to grow and flourish in this country there must be a reaching out and embracing of older people as both patrons and creators of art.

Improving Lives

Everyone involved in working in area of arts for older people understands that the arts can have a profound and significant impact in improving, enhancing and enriching the lives of older people. The ways in which the arts can help to improve older people's lives are myriad.

Involvement in the arts can help older people to become more mentally, physically and socially active. Participation in arts activities can help to improve and restore diminished confidence and self-esteem. The arts can also help older people to become more involved in their local community and reconnect with the world around them.

Through participation in the arts older people can learn new skills and make use of their existing ones. The challenge of learning helps to maintain a host of cognitive abilities which can often diminish with age like memory, concentration, mental dexterity and creativity.

Getting involved in the arts can help older people to make new friends, form important social bonds, develop their support network and break the cycle of isolation and social exclusion which affects a great many people as they get older. It can also help older people to overcome the challenges created by the changes and transitions in their life from retirement to coping with illness or bereavement.

The arts are also vital in helping to give older people a voice and a much needed opportunity to express themselves. The arts can help older people to express their own emotional and personal experiences. This can be a hugely rewarding experience for older people as well as an important opportunity for reflection and healing.

The arts can also give older people a platform on which to express their wider views, attitudes and experience and to inform and educate those around them about the issues and experiences which effect older people's lives.

There is no doubt that the arts have a unique capacity to enhance the lives of older people and unlock the door to another world of understanding, opportunity and experience. The great challenge we face in continuing to provide more arts opportunities for older people is that we live in a world of limited resources and difficult choices. At a time when budgets are stretched to breaking point the arts can be seen as a luxury rather than a necessity. In order for us to establish the arts for older people as an integral part of our approach to aging we

must demonstrate the benefits that arts for older people can have not only in improving the lives of older people but in reducing the pressure on budgets and other services for older people.

Mainstreaming

In order for the arts for older people to survive and continue to grow it must become part of mainstream provision for older people. We cannot continue to rely upon relatively small amounts of funding from organisations like The Big Lottery or The Arts Council. These funding streams have been absolutely fundamental in helping us to develop the whole area of arts for older people and without them we would not be where we are today but they are, by their very nature and design intended to be seed funding aimed at helping to grow ideas and develop new ways of working.

We have now reached a point where we must look to more long term strategies in order to sustain and develop the arts for older people. We must move the arts for older people onto the government's agenda for older people and make it a significant part of the government's long term strategy.

On the face of it, this seems like a pretty significant challenge. As we all know, government resources are stretched to breaking point and so it is extremely difficult to imagine any government department seeking to allocate money from already insufficient budgets to support the development of more arts work with older people.

There is however a way to transform this situation. In order to put the arts for older people at the top of the government's agenda we need to demonstrate to government that arts for older people can in fact reduce the pressure on departmental budgets by meeting government targets or providing the same or even greater benefits and services at a lower cost than the current service provision.

We Can Save You Money!

In order to convince the government to provide long term support for the arts for older people we need to frame the argument in such a way that appeals to their needs and makes practical sense. Most government spending represents a trade-off between public benefit and cost. We need to make the case that the arts for older people represents a significant public benefit with a comparatively low cost.

Each year the government spends a large percentage of its overall budget on older people. This is mainly within two key areas; *Benefits* and *Health and Social Care*. As the population ages public spending on older people is due to increase significantly. Government departments are increasingly attuned to the pressures created by the aging population.

The following quote is taken from a government report by Richard Cracknell entitled *The Aging Population - Key Issues for the New Parliament 2010*. "State benefits and the NHS accounted for just under half of government expenditure in 2009-10. With much of this spending directed at elderly people, their growing number will present challenges for providers of these particular services as well as for the public finances as a whole."

At a time when government is actively looking for strategies to cope with the challenges created by the aging population it is important that those who believe in the arts for older people make their voices heard and become part of that conversation.

Health and Social Care

One of the main areas in which arts for older people can make a profound impact is that of Health and Social Care. Every year the government spends a huge proportion of its overall Health budget on providing health care for older people. This includes everything from hospital treatment, to medicines, to long term care. As the proportion of the population over working age continues to rise the challenge which the aging population creates for the Health Service will also continue to grow. Long term treatment, medication and hospital care carry with them a significant cost, the more people accessing these services the greater the cost. There is a pressing need therefore to find new ways to treat many of the long term illnesses which effect older people.

There is a growing body of research which demonstrates the incredible impact which the arts can have in improving the health and wellbeing of older people. This research is being conducted by some of the leading universities and medical organisations in the UK. The arts are no longer being seen as a way for older people to pass a few pleasant hours but as a serious weapon in the fight against some of the most common illnesses and conditions that effect older people. The research shows that the arts can help to combat a wide spectrum of health problems from physical conditions like heart disease and stroke to mental conditions like insomnia and depression. The arts are also opening up new avenues in the treatment of complex conditions like Dementia and Alzheimer's. Prevention is of course better than cure and here too the arts have been shown to assist healthy people to remain healthy and active for longer, extending their active lifespan and keeping them out of hospitals and doctors' waiting rooms.

In the future the arts could be used to treat a whole range of conditions and illnesses which commonly affect older people. This would have a significant impact upon older people's quality of life and upon the Health Service.

A Prescription for a Better Old Age

The idea that a health professional could prescribe an older person a course of arts participation as an alternative to some other pharmaceutical or medical treatment may seem like a radical idea but not when we consider that similar prescription programmes using sport and physical exercise to combat conditions such as obesity are already being trialled within the Health Service. The idea is even more compelling when we take into account the weight of scientific and medical evidence on the subject which indicates that participation in art forms such as dancing, singing, music, creative writing, painting, photography, etc. can be just as effective and in some cases even more effective in treating many of the most significant health problems facing older people than the more traditional medical techniques and practices.

A movement toward a prescription for the arts could help to significantly reduce the number of medicines which older people need to take on a daily basis. In the UK, 80% of people over the age of 75 are prescribed at least one daily medicine and more than 68% are prescribed four or more medicines. That's an awful lot of pills at a very high cost to the Health Service. The arts have also proven highly effective in reducing the levels of comorbidity, (a situation in which one illness, for example heart disease, can trigger another illness such as depression) which is more common among older people than any other section of society.

Unlike pharmaceuticals which tend to be highly specific, "a pill for every ill", a course of arts participation could reduce the need for numerous different medications and have a positive impact upon an older person's mind and body. A patient suffering from depression could be prescribed dance classes which would reduce depression but also improve respiratory health and flexibility. Alternatively a patient suffering from respiratory problems may be prescribed a singing class which would enhance lung capacity but also improve memory. The connections between mind and body are even more far reaching as a recent research paper indicates that learning a new skill, any new skill, can reduce instances of falling among older people.

Even a small shift from pharmaceutical treatments toward prescribed arts activities could save the exchequer literally tens of millions of pounds each year as the relative cost differential between arts activities and pharmaceutical treatments, over even a short period

of time, is enormous. When we take into account the long term benefits which arts programmes can have in helping older people to remain active and self-sufficient the savings on things like long term care begin to add up to billions.

A Wider Impact

As well as delivering positive outcomes for individuals the arts for older people can have much wider impact on our society as a whole. The ways in which the arts for older people can contribute to our society are innumerable and as a practitioner I am learning about new ways all the time. Thanks to The Churchill Trust I have met individuals and groups from all over the UK and further afield who have helped me to understand the broader impact of the arts for older people is having on our society

Learning from Others

In 2014, with the support of the Winston Churchill Trust, I was given the opportunity to visit the USA to spend some time working with Stagebridge, an arts for older people organisation based in San Francisco. Stagebridge is America's longest running arts for older people programme as well as being one of the largest and most influential. Stagebridge was established in 1978 and has been developing and growing ever since. I had done a lot of research into Stagebridge prior to my visit. I had learned as much as I could about the organisation and its many different programmes. I decided that if any organisation can teach us about innovation and sustainability it's Stagebridge.

I spent several weeks working with Stagebridge learning about their programmes, meeting the older people who participate in the various classes, the tutors who deliver them and those responsible for running the company. It was a truly amazing experience, I was learning so much every day I could hardly take it all in. The Stagebridge programme is incredibly diverse and covers everything from drama, to singing, dance, storytelling, improvisation, creative writing and more. I was blown away by the standard of teaching the older people were receiving and the quality of the work that was going on.

Having spent so much time on the ground working with Stagebridge I soon realised the secret to their longevity and their success. It's possible to sum it up in a single word; INTEGRATION.

Stagebridge, as an organisation, is completely integrated into the community that surrounds it. The arts for older people programmes they offer do so much more than just help the older people they work with directly. They reach out into every aspect of the community from helping children in primary schools, to training health professionals, to working with

lecturers from the local university, to giving performances in their local senior centres and libraries. Stagebridge is a vital part of the community at every level.

This level of integration has helped Stagebridge to achieve sustainability and even develop and grow the work they do. By taking an innovative approach to what the arts for older people means and impact it can have within the community and society in general the company has managed to open up vital revenue streams that have been crucial in helping to support and develop the work.

I believe that in the UK we can learn a lot from Stagebridge and their approach. We need to look beyond the arts for older people as a service which improves the lives of a small number of older people to a huge and largely untapped reserve of opportunities to improve every aspect of our society.

Improving Educational Outcomes

One area in which the arts for older people can help deliver a wider impact is in helping to improve educational outcomes.

During my time at Stagebridge one of the programmes which fascinated me most was the *Schools Storytelling Programme*. Stagebridge work with some of the most under-resourced schools in the Bay Area to provide a programme of storytelling for students at primary school level. I was hugely impressed by what I saw; senior citizens from Stagebridge's Storytelling class would visit local schools each week and tell stories to the children. It seemed like a really wonderful example of the arts being used as a means of connecting young and old. However when I spoke to one of the principals of the schools we visited I was amazed to discover that the Storytelling programme has far more significant outcomes than just bridging the gap between young and old. I learned that the Stagebridge Storytelling Programme was contributing to a major national study on child literacy. The research showed that Stagebridge's storytelling programme was having a profound effect upon child literacy levels in the schools they were working in. The schools with the Storytelling programme were achieving much higher literacy levels among students than schools in similarly deprived areas which did not have the programme.

The Stagebridge Storytelling Programme is just one example. I found numerous examples from across the USA and Europe of how intergenerational arts programmes were delivering significant educational outcomes.

In the last few years the UK has fallen behind many other countries in both literacy and numeracy. In 2013 a major study by the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) showed how young people in the UK are falling behind their Asian and European counterparts in these key areas. Decisive action will need to be taken on the part of the UK government to prevent the UK from following the USA in sliding down the table for literacy and numeracy among its population. The research I have looked at indicates that the arts for older people may be a surprise ally to the government in tackling this issue. The UK must call upon its reserves of willing senior citizens to help create a better future for generations to come.

Bringing Communities Together

At a time when communities across the UK are becoming increasingly fractured and disconnected the arts for older people can play a vital role in helping to bring communities together, fostering positive relationships and promoting understanding and social cohesion.

In Northern Ireland we have witnessed a great deal of division within our communities over the last fifty years. Kaleidoscope's arts for older people programmes are helping to bring communities together and overcome some of the divisions of the past. Our programmes are helping to bring together older people from communities which have been divided and cut off from one another for many years. Through our performances, exhibitions and other public events we are also bringing the families and friends of those older people closer together helping to break down barriers and build bridges that will allow future generations to live together in peace.

Our arts for older people programmes are also helping us to incorporate new communities into our society by breaking down barriers and promoting understanding. Northern Ireland, like the rest of the UK, is experiencing greater levels of migration from European Union countries as well as non EU countries. This creates an obvious challenge in terms of integrating these new groups and families into our communities. At Kaleidoscope we are using this opportunity to introduce art forms and other cultural traditions into our older people programmes. This process is helping to promote positive diversity, cultural sharing and community cohesion.

Older people can play an important role in helping the UK to deal with the challenges created by the changing nature of our society and our population. The arts have always been a means of bringing people together, of sharing cultures and learning about others in a positive way.

A Better World for Older People to Live in

The arts for older people can also help to create a better world for all older people to live in. I have come across numerous of examples of this but here are two from my own experience.

Recently my organisation Kaleidoscope was approached by the Police Service of Northern Ireland following a large number of “distraction robberies” targeting older people. These distraction robberies involved perpetrators tricking their way into older people’s homes, usually in pairs, claiming to be from utility companies or other services and then while one perpetrator would distract the victim the other would carry out the robbery. This particular type of crime was very worrying for both the police and the community because they took place while the victim was at home and vulnerable. Older people were becoming increasingly fearful in their own homes. The Police Service wanted to get a message out to older people about how they could protect themselves from this type of crime and so they approached us. A group of older people involved in our Acting Up programme devised a short play aimed at getting the message across to older people about how to protect themselves and also allay their fears about becoming victims of crime. The play toured community centres and visited older people’s groups across Northern Ireland. In the months following the project the police recorded a 70% drop off in distraction crime.

I came across another excellent example while on my Churchill Fellowship at Stagebridge. One of the programmes which Stagebridge deliver is aimed at helping student nurses and carers who are training to work with older people. A group of performers from Stagebridge would devise roleplay situations to demonstrate some of the experiences, positive and negative, they had had with medical staff. They would also create scenarios for the nurses to practice dealing with older people and then give feedback to the nurses on how their response had made them feel. I spoke to some of the participants from Stagebridge and they were really proud of the programme and the idea that they were helping to improve the treatment that older people receive in hospital. One of the nurses I spoke said the programme had helped her to realise that the older people were human beings with feelings and fears like everyone else.

Conclusion

There are innumerable ways in which the arts for older people can help to improve the lives of not only individual older people but of all older people. The arts for older people can also make our communities better places to live and help to tackle some of the most profound challenges facing our society.

The examples listed above are by no means exhaustive. Every time I go to one of the Churchill Fellows events I meet people from all over the country and learn about other organisations who are using the arts in innovative and imaginative ways to transform the lives of older people and help their communities. The examples I have given are however intend to reflect the breadth of the areas in which the arts for older people can make an impact. Health, Education, Community Development, Policing, these are all priority areas for the government and for our society in general.

If I could make a recommendation regarding the future of the arts for older people it would be that we, as an industry, need to be more strategic in putting forward our message. We need to share the value of our work not only with others working within this industry but with those who are in positions of power. It is absolutely vital that in areas of Health, Education, Policing etc. that the benefits of arts for older people are being taken into consideration. In order to do this we need to pool our collective strength.

A National Association?

In order for the arts for older people to continue to develop and grow we need to have an even greater degree of collaboration and cooperation among those working in this important field. We must move from a loose association of individuals and organisations toward some kind of unified force which will allow us to pool our collective knowledge and experience and lobby strongly on behalf of our shared objectives. A national organisation representing the arts for older people would bring with it enormous opportunities at national, European and global level. Such a body could have a significant role in developing the future of the arts for older people. A national association could help to influence policy at both UK and European level, support research and development, raise the profile of arts for older people, provide a national sign-posting service and offer support for individuals and organisations working in the field

There exists at present an opportunity to develop the network which has been established through the work of the Churchill Trust and the Baring Foundation into a national association for the arts for older people. As the work of Churchill Trusts in the development

of the area of arts for older people in the UK moves toward a conclusion this would perhaps be a fitting outcome.