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**Supporting creative ageing through the arts: The impacts and implementation of a creative arts programme for older people.**

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## Supporting creative ageing through the arts: The impacts and implementation of a creative arts programme for older people

### Abstract

#### *Purpose*

This paper reports on an independent evaluation of a three-year 'creative ageing' programme, focusing on the impacts for participants and factors promoting successful delivery of sessions.

#### *Design*

Artists provided feedback through reflective journals and questionnaires, while the views of care staff and participants were also captured in a standard format at the end of each arts session. Thematic analysis of the qualitative data identified common themes.

#### *Findings*

Twenty-three arts projects were delivered across a range of settings and through diverse art forms including dance, drama, music, visual arts and poetry. They reached nearly 2,200 participants who recorded over 8,100 session attendances in total. Participation in high quality creative experiences improved wellbeing for older people, as well as increasing social interaction and reducing isolation. Several factors facilitated successful implementation and delivery of the activities, particularly the need to hold planning meetings with staff to provide guidance around participant numbers and suitability, minimising disruption of the sessions, and the supportive role of staff during the sessions. Opportunities for reflection enabled artists to address potential challenges and adapt their practice to meet the needs and preferences of participants and to the complexities of diverse settings.

#### *Originality*

Previous research has largely focused on the impact of activities in a single setting. This study supports the role of creative arts in increasing social interaction as an attempt to tackle isolation and loneliness, both for older people living in the community and for those living in a communal setting such as care homes and supported living schemes.

### Introduction

The negative effects of social isolation and loneliness have long been recognised as an issue for older people, with efforts to address this issue being incorporated into the 'National Service Framework for Older People' nearly twenty years ago (Department of Health, 2001). Several reviews have assessed the impact of interventions aimed at reducing social isolation, acknowledging the detrimental impact that it can have on health and wellbeing (Dickens *et al.*, 2011; Landeiro *et al.*, 2017; Findlay, 2003; Cattan *et al.*, 2005). There have been calls for the benefits of such interventions to be recognised more widely, especially as our population ages more rapidly than anticipated (Mental Health Foundation, 2011; All Party Parliamentary Group on Arts, Health and Wellbeing, 2017; Harrop and Jopling, 2009).

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3 Participating in creative arts activities such as music, drama and dance can have positive  
4 impacts on the mental and physical wellbeing of older adults, including enhanced  
5 communication, increased attention and improvements to expression, mood and memory  
6 (Coaten, 2011; Young *et al.*, 2016; Särkämö *et al.*, 2014). The Mental Health Foundation  
7 stated that: *“it is evident that engaging with participatory art can improve the wellbeing of*  
8 *older people and mediate against the negative effects of becoming older”* (Mental Health  
9 *Foundation, 2011, p.4*). A report from The Baring Foundation illustrates the role that arts  
10 programmes can have in terms of tackling loneliness and improving wellbeing for older  
11 adults, including those living in care homes, as it is easy to assume that people living  
12 communally are less lonely (Cutler, 2012).  
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17 Arts-based activities have become an increasingly popular intervention for older people in a  
18 range of settings, and a growing number of artists are developing the skills needed to adapt  
19 their practice to settings that can be unpredictable and complex (Evans *et al.*, 2019a). More  
20 and more UK care homes are offering opportunities to participate in meaningful activities  
21 for their estimated 500,000 residents, with the overarching aim of providing *“emotional,*  
22 *creative, intellectual and spiritual stimulation”* (National Institute of Health and Care  
23 Excellence, 2013).  
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26

27 However, despite growing interest in the role of creative arts in promoting wellbeing for  
28 older people, there is limited research exploring how arts activities are implemented, or the  
29 experience of the artists delivering arts practice. One broader study that did include this  
30 topic in their findings identified several key factors that can influence successful  
31 implementation (Broome *et al.*, 2017; Broome *et al.*, 2018). These included the confidence  
32 of the artist practitioners, the physical environment, staff policies and practices, and initial  
33 planning meetings between artists and key personnel.  
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37 This paper reports on the implementation and impacts of a ‘creative ageing’ programme  
38 delivered by an arts centre in the UK from 2016 to 2019. The programme had three key  
39 aims:  
40

- 41 1. To improve wellbeing for older people and their carers through participation in high  
42 quality creative experiences;
- 43 2. To cultivate opportunities for older people to maintain wider social networks and  
44 reduce social isolation through participatory arts projects;
- 45 3. To develop specialist skills in the local community to provide varied and sustainable  
46 age-appropriate activities in older people’s settings.  
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50 Projects delivered as part of this programme involved a variety of art forms including dance,  
51 drama, music, visual arts and poetry. They were hosted in a range of settings such as care  
52 homes, community centres, schools, a hospital ward, and a community farm.  
53

54 The arts centre commissioned an independent evaluation of the programme by a university-  
55 based research team. Approval for the evaluation was given by a university ethics  
56 committee.  
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## 59 **Research Design**

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3 The impacts of the projects for participants were explored through reflective journals  
4 completed by artists after each session and questionnaires completed by artists at the end  
5 of each project. In these tools they reflected on their experiences of delivering the project  
6 and how the arts projects had impacted on participants. Additionally, at the end of each  
7 project staff members in the host settings were invited to provide feedback on how they felt  
8 the sessions had gone and any changes that they had noticed in participants as a result. To  
9 capture feedback directly from participants, a final evaluation activity used a standard  
10 booklet format to record comments made about the arts sessions. Demographic and  
11 attendance data were also captured to measure the reach of the programme.  
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15  
16 Data were collected by the arts centre staff, with analysis and reporting being carried out by  
17 the university research team. Descriptive statistics were used for the quantitative data while  
18 thematic analysis identified common recurring themes in the qualitative data. It should be  
19 noted that all illustrative quotes presented in this paper use pseudonyms.  
20  
21

## 22 Findings

23  
24 This paper draws on information captured from all 23 projects within the creative ageing  
25 programme, including feedback from 46 participating artists and 20 staff. Pseudonyms are  
26 used when presenting quotes from participants. Between them the artists delivered 970  
27 activity sessions to 2,200 participants, with over 8,100 individual session attendances being  
28 recorded. Available data indicated that approximately 75% of participants were female, the  
29 majority were aged 85+ and nearly all were White British. A wide variety of art-based  
30 activities were delivered through the projects including dance, drama, music, poetry, visual  
31 arts, ceramics, heritage-based work, football themed workshops and creating magazines.  
32 Despite this diversity in terms of art form and project host settings, the themes presented  
33 here were cross-cutting, suggesting that learning from the Creative ageing programme is  
34 applicable to artists across a diverse range of skills and expertise.  
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### 39 *Impacts of the Creative Arts Sessions for participants*

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41 The atmosphere generated within the sessions was positive, with participants reporting that  
42 they were *“comfortable and relaxed”* and *“there is a lovely community spirit within the*  
43 *sessions”*. Irrespective of the art form being used, one of the attractions for participants was  
44 being occupied and stimulated, both physically and mentally, with one participant saying  
45 that it is *“good when you’re doing something, keeps your brain ticking over. Otherwise one*  
46 *day merges into another”*. The process of physically creating a tangible end product was also  
47 appreciated, with one participant saying *“I like doing things with our hands, creating*  
48 *something”*. Artists also found that *“physical stuff [was] most successful, wordy less so”*.  
49 Some participants had difficulty reading lyrics from song sheets and abstract ideas did not  
50 necessarily work well, particularly for participants with dementia or other cognitive  
51 impairments:  
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56 *“Betty said she doesn’t like collage and doesn’t seem to take so well to the abstract*  
57 *activities. Something more pictorial would suit her”.* (Artist, visual arts)  
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3 Participants appreciated the chance to try a new activity, whether that was through a  
4 familiar medium such as music or a completely new activity like ceramics. Both provided an  
5 opportunity to go beyond the routine of everyday life. However, offering something that  
6 was very unfamiliar did create some challenges. For example, some participants appeared  
7 not to like musical choices that were less traditional and more 'punk'. Artists therefore  
8 needed to strike a balance between offering new experiences and repeating the same  
9 content.  
10  
11

12  
13 One of the key impacts seen across the whole Creative ageing programme was the generally  
14 high level of engagement from participants, including those who were reported as being  
15 isolated and non-communicative in everyday life, "*Caroline is normally really shy, so it was*  
16 *great to hear her singing*". In some sessions, engagement was obvious and overt:  
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18

19 *"The residents in the room were engaged and interested in the project. There was a*  
20 *sense of being actively busy, productive and a feeling that everyone was looking*  
21 *forward to continuing this project"* (Artist, poetry)  
22

23 *"Liz was singing and devising her own movement sequences really enjoying being in*  
24 *the moment"* (Artist, dance)  
25  
26

27 In other sessions the engagement was more subtle or started slowly and increased as the  
28 projects progressed:  
29

30 *"When mirroring one of the dancers her whole face lit up and she was so focused. It*  
31 *felt that we had truly connected with one another as we danced. This was*  
32 *particularly special as the lady doesn't say very much at all."* (Artist, dance)  
33  
34

35 *"Piri was very hard to engage and she firmly kept her hands hidden beneath her*  
36 *blanket whenever I offered her anything! [...] Despite this, she did look at me, make*  
37 *eye contact and even give a big smile at intervals throughout the session which is an*  
38 *improvement on a few weeks ago."* (Artist, music)  
39  
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41 The creative projects were also reported to promote social interaction. This was often  
42 through participants having conversations with each other, stimulated by the arts activities:  
43

44 *"Some rich conversations were had over the table and singing and the conversations*  
45 *continued even when people went back to the seats."* (Artist, visual arts)  
46  
47

48 This positive impact was also noted by staff members, with one care home activity co-  
49 ordinator commenting: "*how nice it was to see the residents chatting to one another instead*  
50 *of sitting in silence*". (Care staff, dance)  
51

52 The activities also prompted conversations between the participants and the artists, with  
53 one artist saying that "*a number of the participants talked to me and shared stories about*  
54 *things they had knitted and sewn, and about their work, families and interests*". The  
55 example below illustrates the longer-term impact of taking part for one individual, while  
56 also indicating the importance of finding the right form of activity that can act as the key to  
57 wider social interaction:  
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*“Arthur spent his first six months at [name of care home] in his bedroom refusing to participate in any group activities, but since he joined the dance group he has really come out of his shell and is joining in other activities”. (Care staff, dance)*

Despite the positive impact on social interaction, some artists expressed concerns that projects could be upsetting for some participants. For one artist, this related to the creative process being experienced by a participant:

*“It was a real challenge to buoy her up and to find a way to celebrate her satisfactorily; to find the right words to somehow acknowledge her obvious frustration and sense of being overwhelmed, and at the same time offer her some solace and cheer. She clearly appreciated us being with her, and yet we were also, inescapably, a stimulus to her, highlighting her own deterioration by simply being there and interacting with her”. (Artist, drama)*

However, for the vast majority of participants the Creative ageing experience was one of enjoyment, boosting confidence and self-esteem as well as giving people a sense of pride in their achievements. This was seen across different art forms:

*“I’m a lorry driver and builder, I didn’t know I could paint” (Participant, poetry)*

*“The gentleman that I danced with was absolutely thrilled that he had the opportunity to dance” (Artist, dance)*

*“Jane used the sewing machine and was very pleased, she’d said she wouldn’t be able to” (Artist, visual arts)*

Some participants expressed surprise at their own achievements while others felt that the sessions exceeded their expectations:

*“Did I really do that? It’s rather lovely” (Participant, visual arts)*

*“I feel really proud of what I’ve done. I thought I was going to be bored but I wasn’t” (Participant, visual arts)*

Another impact noted across the Creative ageing programme was its promotion of positive reminiscence:

*“I used to sew, I made clothes for children” (Participant, visual arts)*

*“you reminded me of all the places I visited in the UK” (Participant, poetry)*

*“My mother played the harmonium. This reminds me of that” (Participant, music)*

### **Successful Implementation of Arts-Based Sessions**

Reflective journals completed by artists after each session highlighted some of the key factors that promoted smooth delivery of the sessions and increased the effectiveness of arts-based activities.

### Planning Meetings

Most artists working in care homes found it useful to meet with staff members prior to the sessions, to discuss the project and confirm practical arrangements. This enabled the artists to address any concerns raised by staff and ensure a common understanding of the project:

*“There seem to be a lot of staff, each with different ideas about what they want the attendees to do” (Artist, music)*

Meeting care home staff in advance also provided an opportunity to establish ground rules for the projects, for example in terms of who would be suitable to attend sessions, and the size of the groups involved. However, despite these initial meetings some artists still encountered issues. For example, after agreeing a maximum group size with staff, artists reported that they ended up with more people than expected and staff were bringing in new or additional participants in later weeks. Larger groups could make it more difficult for artists to engage or connect with individuals in larger groups, especially when some participants needed more individual input:

*“Having 24 people was both brilliant and also brought complexity – in that getting around everyone and giving the attention everyone needed was not possible” (Artist, dance)*

Artists also reported that having smaller groups or one-to-one sessions for participants with profound disabilities or dementia tended to work better as they were able to dedicate more time and attention to them, rather than expecting them to engage as part of a larger group.

While some artists felt that it was better to *“have a slightly smaller, more intimate group which will help residents feel more relaxed”*, others found that small groups had their own problems, especially if the participants did not ‘gel’ with each other. Overall, group size was an ongoing issue for artists which required a degree of adaptability, particularly if they could never be sure how many participants would be present for each session.

A final aspect that arose relating to the planning phase was the need for artists and staff to understand how sessions fit with other activities being offered to participants, as this could have an impact on engagement. In one day centre it was noted that:

*“Lots of other activities were going on at the same time. This made it difficult to get everyone in the group to be involved” (Artist, poetry)*

Other activities could also mean that participants were not fully engaged with the artists’ sessions. For example, one artist reported that some participants were tired after doing physical activities prior to their session, resulting in low energy levels:

*“A number of them take part in the movement and music session the day before, which then means they are much more tired the following day” (Artist, dance)*

### Strategies for Session Delivery

Many of the individual projects involved in the overarching programme took different approaches in terms of the duration of each session and the number of sessions delivered.



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3 Also, some projects ran all of the sessions for a single group of participants while others had  
4 a different group of participants each time. In this context, it was important for artists to  
5 consider what was achievable within a session and within a project. For example, working  
6 with the same group of participants over time worked well for some artists as it made it  
7 possible to establish relationships with the participants and build on their skills and  
8 preferences.  
9

10  
11 While not always possible for some art forms, having a tangible end product such as a film,  
12 book or picture appeared to work well for some projects by providing participants with  
13 something to work towards something and to see their progress over time, as well as having  
14 an enjoyable experience 'in the moment'. Flexibility and adaptability were key to making  
15 sessions successful. For example, artists needed to deliver sessions that catered for different  
16 levels of ability and disability. Artists also found it useful to have a certain amount of  
17 flexibility within their sessions to enable participants to engage in different ways:  
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21 *"Everyone approached the work in their own way. Some people were interested in*  
22 *handling the materials, others concentrated on making quite elaborate designs"*  
23 *(Artist, visual arts)*  
24  
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26 As one artist summed up: *"I have noticed that you can't really go into the session with a set*  
27 *plan – things change and alter to suit participants"*. (Artist, visual arts)  
28

29 Artists suggested that sessions tended to be more successful when helpful staff members  
30 were present. However, this was not always possible, and several artists reported that when  
31 staff were busy with other work they were not able to help support participants.  
32 Additionally, some artists felt that the sessions were not considered a priority by some staff  
33 and managers:  
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37 *"Unfortunately, this has been the same throughout the project and has felt very*  
38 *much 'them' and 'us', drawing a clear line between what is activity and care"* (Artist,  
39 *dance)*  
40  
41

42 However, having staff in a session was not a guarantee of success, as *"the care staff were*  
43 *quite disruptive, chatting away in the corner"*, and multiple comments from artists indicated  
44 that staff did not always support participants. For example, staff were seen to talk over  
45 participants instead of engaging with them and doing things for participants rather than  
46 helping them. Some staff assumed that participants would not be able to do some activities  
47 without giving them a chance to try. In one session an artist saw a member of staff disagree  
48 with a male participant's choice of pink material, but was able to intervene and enable the  
49 participant to make their own choices. If the artist had not acted positively, such behaviour  
50 would continue unchecked. One artist reflected on this type of situation:  
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53  
54 *"I felt frustrated and sad for the residents. I have become acutely aware how easy it*  
55 *is for people in a care home setting to lose their freedom and independence"* (Artist,  
56 *visual arts)*  
57  
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59 On a more practical level, artists found that they often had to contend with their sessions  
60 being disrupted for a variety of reasons. These disruptions were particularly noted in care

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3 homes and included staff, relatives and other residents interrupting sessions, residents  
4 being taken out of sessions for appointments, and external noises from building work or  
5 other activities:  
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7  
8 *"I found it hard to bring the room together as there was a lot of distracting noise*  
9 *going on outside and lots of people coming and going in the room with tea and*  
10 *cakes" (Artist, music)*  
11

12 Some sessions took place in spaces that were *"quite public with people coming and going"*  
13 or a *"thoroughfare to a bedroom and toilet"*. Room size was also an issue, with larger spaces  
14 making it difficult to engage a whole group and smaller spaces being cramped, especially for  
15 activities requiring equipment or tables. The artists adapted wherever possible and tried to  
16 focus on the positives, saying the *"room is a bit small [...] but at least it's private and we're*  
17 *not being disturbed"*. Lighting levels and room temperature could also impact on sessions.  
18 For example, being too hot was felt to have an impact on the energy levels of the  
19 participants and could also cause musical instruments to go out of tune.  
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21

### 22 *The Value of Reflective Practice*

23  
24 The artists valued the opportunity to reflect on their experiences of being involved in the  
25 project as a way of adapting their practice to maximise the benefit of their sessions. For  
26 example, one artist was able to recognise the need to move beyond their own taste in terms  
27 of session content:  
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30  
31 *"[resident] likes folk music, so I would like to overcome my generic dislike of the*  
32 *genre and find some tunes she knows and I can enjoy singing and playing."* (Artist,  
33 *music)*  
34  
35

36 Similarly, reflecting on sessions helped another artist to see how activities that they take for  
37 granted and find straightforward may be more problematic for novice participants:  
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39  
40 *"I wondered if the stamping was a bit complicated, too many stages? Assistance was*  
41 *needed. I did have some sponge stamps and using these meant that there was one*  
42 *less stage"* (Artist, visual arts)  
43

44 This could be even more of an issue when working with people with dementia or other  
45 cognitive impairments, who may have difficulty visualising what they are trying to achieve:  
46

47  
48 *"People took a while to get going, I think without an example the activity was a bit*  
49 *abstract".* (Artist, visual arts)  
50

51 This reflective approach was enhanced for artists through the opportunity to work with a  
52 mentor or a fellow artist during the projects to support planning, delivery and evaluation.  
53 They were able to share ideas, support each other, and reflect on what had and hadn't  
54 worked during sessions.  
55

### 56 **Discussion**

57  
58 The findings from this research show that activities based on creative arts can be beneficial  
59 for participants, particularly older people, across a range of settings. In this project  
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3 particular value was placed on the relaxed atmosphere, opportunities to try something new  
4 and the creative process.  
5

6 Responses indicated a range of ways in which the projects contributed towards the  
7 wellbeing of participants, including increased social interaction and elevated self-esteem  
8 through the ability to be creative. However, it was also noted that for some people taking  
9 part in activities could highlight the fact that they could no longer do some things, which  
10 could be distressing. Findings also suggest high levels of engagement among participants,  
11 including for those who didn't usually join in with activities. This supports previous research  
12 suggesting that participation in arts-based activities can lead to enhanced communication  
13 and increased attention (Young *et al.*, 2016; Särkämö *et al.*, 2014).  
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16 This research has also identified a range of factors and strategies that artist can us to  
17 maximise the effectiveness of their sessions. Planning meetings with staff are crucial to  
18 agree how the sessions will be run including who will take part, how many participants and  
19 staff should be in each session, and exactly where they will be held. This builds on existing  
20 findings from care home based research (Broome *et al.*, 2017; Broome *et al.*, 2018) and  
21 extends it to a broader range of settings including community centres, schools and  
22 hospitals. If the planning phase is given due consideration, session delivery can be a more  
23 enjoyable experience for all involved. While it is likely that artists will still have to be flexible  
24 in terms of reacting to unforeseen issues and the natural variations that occur within a  
25 group on a day-to-day basis, their preparation should give them confidence in their ability to  
26 remain in control of their sessions.  
27  
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29 It is hoped that these meetings can prevent some of the challenges that artists experienced  
30 in several settings, such as groups that are too large, disruption of sessions, unsuitable  
31 rooms and insufficient support from staff. Similar challenges have previously been reported  
32 by artists working in care homes (Evans *et al.*, 2019a)  
33

34 Finally, our findings confirm the value of reflective practice for creative artists working with  
35 older people across a range of settings, as highlighted in previous research that focused on  
36 care homes (Evans *et al.*, 2019b). In the current study, having structured opportunities for  
37 reflection through diaries enabled artists to adapt their practice to meet the needs and  
38 preferences of participants, including those living with dementia, and to the complexities of  
39 multiple settings.  
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## 51 **Conclusion**

52 Over the course of three years, the 23 arts projects evaluated as part of the Creative ageing  
53 programme reached nearly 2,200 participants who recorded over 8,100 session attendances  
54 across a range of art forms (including dance, drama, music, visual arts and poetry) and  
55 several different settings (e.g. community centres, schools, a hospital ward, and a  
56 community farm).  
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3 Analysis of feedback from the artists, staff and participants indicates that the programme  
4 achieved its overarching aims of improving wellbeing for older people through participation  
5 in high quality creative experiences. There was also evidence that involvement in  
6 participatory arts projects can increase social interaction and reduce isolation. In addition,  
7 the Creative ageing programme promoted the development of specialist skills and  
8 experience in the local community to provide varied and sustainable age-appropriate  
9 activities in older people's settings.  
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13 A range of factors were shown to promote the successful delivery of sessions, particularly  
14 the holding of planning meetings with staff. However, even with comprehensive planning,  
15 artists needed to be flexible in the delivery of their sessions in order to maximise the benefit  
16 for participants.  
17  
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19 These findings support growing calls to promote the role of creative arts activities in  
20 increasing social interaction as an attempt to tackle isolation and loneliness, both for older  
21 people living in the community and for those living in a communal setting such as care  
22 homes and supported living schemes.  
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