

The Graduate School of Education  
The University of Melbourne

# UNESCO Observatory Multi-Disciplinary Journal in the Arts



Guest Editors

*Mike White*

*Margret Meagher*

*Dr. Sarah Atkinson*

Volume 3 | Issue 3 | 2013

.....

International perspectives on the  
development of research-guided practice  
in community-based arts in health

# UNESCO Observatory Multi-Disciplinary Journal in the Arts

Volume 3 | Issue 3 | 2013

## EDITORIAL TEAM

### Guest Editors

Mike White  
Dr. Sarah Atkinson  
Margret Meagher

**Editor**  
**Associate Editor**  
**Designer**

Lindy Joubert  
Naomi Berman  
Rosie Ren

## ABOUT THE E-JOURNAL

*The UNESCO Observatory refereed e-journal is based within the Graduate School of Education at The University of Melbourne, Australia. The journal promotes multi-disciplinary research in the Arts and Education and arose out of a recognised need for knowledge sharing in the field. The publication of diverse arts and cultural experiences within a multi-disciplinary context informs the development of future initiatives in this expanding field. There are many instances where the arts work successfully in collaboration with formerly non-traditional partners such as the sciences and health care, and this peer-reviewed journal aims to publish examples of excellence.*

*Valuable contributions from international researchers are providing evidence of the impact of the arts on individuals, groups and organisations across all sectors of society. The UNESCO Observatory refereed e-journal is a clearing house of research which can be used to support advocacy processes; to improve practice; influence policy making, and benefit the integration of the arts in formal and non-formal educational systems across communities, regions and countries.*

ISSN 1835 - 2776

Published in Australia

Published by  
The Graduate School of Education  
© The University of Melbourne

The University of Melbourne, Parkville,  
Victoria 3010.



# International perspectives on the development of research-guided practice in community-based arts in health

## **Guest Editors**

*Mike White*

*Dr. Sarah Atkinson*

*Margret Meagher*

## **THEME**

Health has become a recurrent topic in discussion of the role of the arts in society, fuelled by a growing body of research into links between culture and flourishing. In community arts in particular there has been a widespread development of projects addressing health issues. This is a distinct area of activity operating mainly outside of acute healthcare settings and is characterised by the use of participatory arts to promote health. There are indications that this work is developing in response to health needs of communities in differing cultures and healthcare systems around the world, but so far there is little mutual knowledge or connection of the work at an international level.

This issue aims to draw together well-researched case studies of community-based arts in health projects from different parts of the globe. Each case study should explain the motivation for the work undertaken and its sensitivity to context and cultural diversity, the partnership structures and ethos developed in its delivery, and the research methodologies used. Submissions are particularly invited that reflect multidisciplinary knowledge of the application of arts development to health and flourishing communities from the perspectives of applied arts, public health, anthropology, social geography, education and other disciplines.

# The Bealtaine festival: towards a model for community-based arts contributing to healthy ageing for older people in Ireland? <sup>1</sup>

**Dr Áine Ní Léime**

*Irish Centre for Social Gerontology*

*School of Business & Public Policy*

*National University of Ireland Galway, Galway*

## ABSTRACT

This paper discusses the findings of an evaluation of an annual arts festival in Ireland, called Bealtaine which celebrates creativity in older age. It found benefits to health and well-being for older people and for communities from participation in Bealtaine. While there is increasing research evidence on the health impacts of community arts programmes, there has been little consideration in the literature of how major community arts programmes for older people are delivered. One of the aims of this paper is to outline the way in which the festival is organised, describing the partnership structures used to deliver the festival and the ethos and aims of the main festival co-ordinators. The level of satisfaction of local organising partners with the organisation of the festival and the impact of the festival on their own practice and on that of artists and facilitators is described. The question of whether Bealtaine might be regarded as an example of good practice is discussed. The implications of the findings for practice, policy and future research are considered.

## KEYWORDS

*Impacts, community arts programmes, communities, older people.*

## INTRODUCTION

There is evidence that participating in community arts programmes enhances physical and mental health for older people (Greaves and Farbus 2006; Cohen 2009). Both health professionals and programme providers are becoming increasingly convinced of the physical and psychological health benefits of such participation (Health Development Agency 2000, Smith 2002). International policy bodies recognise that health and quality of life in older people is influenced only partly by health-care systems. It is accepted that levels of independence, social relationships and access to the economic, social and cultural resources of society also affect health and quality of life (World Health Organisation 1997; United Nations 2002). It is important, therefore, to assess the impact of programmes designed to offer opportunities to older people to fulfil their creative potential and to participate in the arts. This paper assesses evidence from an evaluation of the impact for older people in Ireland of participating in arts programmes associated with the Bealtaine festival. Bealtaine is a national arts festival in Ireland that celebrates creativity in older people. The Bealtaine festival extends country-wide with organisers hosting over 3700 arts activities in 2012 including dance, singing, theatre, music and literary events in a variety of venues. This paper briefly outlines the benefits to health and well-being experienced by older people from participation; these are more fully elaborated in a recent paper (O'Shea and Ní Léime 2012). While there is increasing research evidence on the health impacts of community arts programmes, there has been little consideration of how major community arts programmes for older people are delivered (Mental Health Foundation 2011). Part of the purpose of this paper is to outline the way in which the festival is organised, describing the partnership structures used and the ethos and aims of the main festival co-ordinators. The level of satisfaction of local organising partners with the organisation of the festival and the impact of the festival on their own practice and on that of artists and facilitators is outlined. The question of whether Bealtaine might be regarded as an example of good practice is discussed. The implications of the findings for practice, policy and future research are considered.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

Most existing evaluations of festivals focus on the economic impacts of festivals on surrounding regions rather than on assessing social or health impacts on individuals (see Chhabra et al. 2003). There has been little investigation of the individual and social impacts of festivals on participants and on communities. However, one study has found that festivals can be inclusive and accessible and provide an opportunity for collective celebration; they can foster solidarity, identification and self-esteem among a particular group and help advocacy for the group (Morris Hargreaves McIntyre 2004). Participatory festivals can also encourage the development of skills and provide an impetus to prepare for public performance and/or exhibition. They may also encourage state bodies, voluntary groups and individuals to work together, thereby building social capital (Morris Hargreaves McIntyre 2004).

Research on the impact of participation in the arts on the psychological and physical well-being of older people is relatively recent; there is a small but increasing body of evidence indicating that such participation enhances quality of life and well-being (Mental Health Foundation 2011; Flood and Phillips 2007). Reviewers have noted that a variety of methodological approaches have been used as is common for a new field of research. There has been a small amount of systematic longitudinal research using control groups and measuring both physiological and psychological outcomes. For example, an influential and rigorous study carried out by Cohen and colleagues in the U. S. using a control group found positive impacts on the physical health, self-esteem, and interpersonal relationships of older people from involvement in a community arts programme (Cohen et al. 2007). Dr. Gene Cohen, a leading scholar in this field coined the term “creative ageing” to describe the involvement of older people in the arts (Cohen et al. 2007). Much research focuses on psychological and quality of life impacts (Mental Health Foundation 2011). Psychological benefits included enhanced self-worth, gaining a sense of purpose, personal development and becoming more creative and confident (Fisher and Specht 1999; Perruzza and Kinsella 2009). Gains to self-esteem are thought to derive partly from achieving mastery over a particular activity (Rodin 1989). This sometimes leads participants to take up deeper engagement in the arts. Participation may also reduce loneliness and isolation (Newman, Curtis and Stephens 2003; Cohen et al. 2007).

Social benefits are also derived from participating in arts programmes, including widening of social networks and feeling connected with others (Glass et al. 1999; Cohen 2009). A review of community-based arts projects found that such programmes had beneficial social impacts leading to increased trust and capital formation; it brought different groups together, encouraged cross-cultural community understanding and improved participants’ organisational skills (Newman, Curtis and Stephens 2003). Programmes which promote active social contact, encourage creativity and use mentoring are likely to positively affect health and well-being (Greaves and Farbus 2006).

Different art forms including music, intergenerational, drama and dance programmes - all components of the Bealtaine festival - are associated with particular impacts. A recent quantitative randomised control study found higher levels of quality of life, reduced depression and anxiety levels for participants in a singing group relative to a control group (Clift et al. 2010). A Canadian community-based

intergenerational visual arts programme fostered social inclusion by expanding older people's connections with younger members of the community and provided a sense of belonging and collective identity (Moody and Phinney 2012). Benefits in terms of increased cognitive skills, self-expression, personal development and social connectivity have been observed for participants in drama programmes (Pyman and Rugg 2006; Noice and Noice 2009). A qualitative study of community-dwelling older people who participated in a dance workshop resulted in a stronger sense of identity and personal growth as well as enhanced physical well-being (Thornberg, Lindquist and Staffan 2012). A Swedish study found that merely attending arts events (visits to the cinema, theatre, concerts and live music performances, museums and art exhibitions) had positive effects on the maintenance of health and was associated with longevity (Bygren, Konlaan & Johansson 1996; Johansson, Konlaan and Bygren 2001).

Older people in care settings have also been impacted positively by participating in arts programmes. Some studies have found that arts programmes can have a profound effect on the quality of life of older people in residential care and positive impacts on health, psychological well-being and autonomy (Russell 2007; The Baring Foundation, 2011). Residents with dementia find new ways of expressing themselves and their capacity for resilience is enhanced through engagement with arts programmes (McFadden and Basting 2010). Research on quality-of-life for residents in care homes in Ireland found that older people in care homes are not well-provided with meaningful creative activities and that this has a negative impact on their quality of life (Murphy et al. 2006).

Relatively little attention has been paid in the literature to the ways in which the delivery and organisation of arts programmes is achieved and how this may (or may not) contribute to the personal and social impacts for older people (although see Angus 1999 and Basting 2009, for examples of studies of community arts in health practice) and of the delivery of art and health practice. However, while this is typically not the main focus of research, nevertheless a limited amount of community arts studies identify elements that constitute good practice in the delivery of arts programmes. For example, certain features of good practice for community arts projects have been identified. These include having clear objectives, connecting with participant needs, developing equitable relationships between partners, flexibility of approach, pursuit of quality, securing sustainability, good planning and joint evaluation (Jermyn 2001; Cutler 2009; Moloney & McCarthy 2006). Partnerships between national or local state agencies, arts organisations and older people and the encouragement of autonomy and participation appear to be important factors in achieving good practice in the delivery and sustainability of arts programmes (Moody & Phinney 2008). Such partnership means that the festival reaches a wide variety of people including people in care homes, hospitals and in the community. It ensures that funding comes from a variety of sources including annual arts, health and local authority programmes budgets and is not totally dependent on the often slender resources of arts organisations or of older people themselves. The partnership with Active Retirement Associations which have 23,000 members facilitates the involvement of large numbers of people who define and organise their own activities. The combination of a hands-off approach with encouragement, support, guidance and inspiration facilitates broad participation and encourages both inclusiveness and quality.

## THE BEALTAINÉ FESTIVAL

The Bealtaine festival celebrates creativity in older age and takes place annually throughout the month of May in Ireland. It is co-ordinated by Age & Opportunity, a state-funded, not-for-profit organisation whose main aims are to promote the increased participation of older people in Irish society and more positive views on ageing. The objectives of the Bealtaine festival are to:

- Promote recognition of people's capacity to grow and be creative in older age and to ensure that this is reflected in policy and practice.
- Develop opportunities for older people to participate meaningfully in the arts as artists, organisers and critics
- Develop and articulate a national policy for the arts in older age that acknowledges the potency of the arts to transform lives.

Inclusiveness is also a major aim of the festival. The Bealtaine festival was initiated partly as a response to the fact that there was very little investment in the arts when the current cohort of older people in Ireland were young and they had very little access to the arts. A study indicates that older people generally are less likely than younger people to attend arts events in Ireland (National Economic and Social Forum 2007). Currently, there is no specific policy in Ireland in relation to older people and the arts.

The festival encompasses many art-forms and includes both long-standing professionally-facilitated arts programmes and one-off events linked to local organisations. Bealtaine has steadily increased in scope since it began in 1996 and has expanded dramatically in recent years. The impetus for developing the festival came from Age & Opportunity, local groups of older people, the Irish Museum of Modern Art, public libraries and the Eastern Health Board which had been organising 'Active Age' weeks for a number of years. These came together to organise a country-wide festival in 1995. By 2007, when the evaluation of Bealtaine was conducted, there were over 50,000 older people (defined by Age and Opportunity as 55 and over) who participated in over 1,200 different events. According to the most recent annual report from Age & Opportunity, estimated participation had increased to over 115,000 people participating in 3,700 events by 2012. There were 535,393 people aged 65 and over in Ireland in 2011.

In terms of organisation, Age & Opportunity works in partnership with various participating agencies to develop the festival programme each year, employing a part-time artistic director and overseeing much of the planning and publicity. Age & Opportunity is not directly involved in the organisation or provision of local or national events, although it commissions a small number of major events designed to inspire organisers. The festival is run on a limited non-guaranteed budget which depends on the discretion of various state budget holders and on once-off grants from private and philanthropic benefactors. The total budget has risen to around €100,000 in recent years but is likely to be affected by government cut-backs during the current economic recession. While the overall goal is to inspire both activity and participation, there is a tension between maximising the artistic quality of the work included in Bealtaine and achieving universal participation in the festival. In recent

years, the strategy has been one of developing a strong central artistic programme for Bealtaine, thereby attracting greater funding support from arts organisations and a higher profile for older people within the arts generally.

Age & Opportunity works in different types of partnership with a wide range of organisations to run the festival; this helps to ensure both high quality and a widespread dissemination of events. The partner organisations include National Cultural Institutions, local authority Arts Offices, libraries, Health Services Executive organisers and Active Retirement Associations (a large network of voluntary organisations run by and for older people). The national cultural institutions typically organise their own programme of events. Age & Opportunity announces a unifying Bealtaine theme each year and reminds all organisers on its list to prepare for the festival. It also provides supports on a Bealtaine website including guidelines for organisers of events and programmes. Age & Opportunity works closely with some Bealtaine partners, particularly those represented on the Bealtaine steering group, and those who organise their own Bealtaine programme. The relationship with some organisations may be mediated through local authority arts officers or other central organisers (for example, regional arts centres). These groups (typically Active Retirement Associations) may have very little contact with Age & Opportunity and may arrange their own events – Age & Opportunity has little control over the content or quality of such events. This is in keeping with one of the aims of Age & Opportunity – to promote autonomy among older people. However, it is challenging to maintain a certain level of artistic quality while simultaneously encouraging independence. Age & Opportunity strives to encourage artistic quality in their own core programme by employing professional artists, developing long-term programmes and inviting highly-regarded international artists to give master-classes and exemplary performances.

## METHODS

Drawing upon Matarasso's work, the strategy adopted for the research was to use a multi-perspective approach (similar to a social audit) which assesses whether the festival is achieving its stated aims and ensures that the perspectives of all stakeholders are taken into account (Matarasso 1997). One benefit of this approach is that the focus is on the long-term impacts of the festival rather than the short-term outcomes (the artistic product) (Belfiore 2002). This is considered important when assessing the impact of creative programmes where it has been theorised that the process of creating and the strengthening of personal identity involved appears to enhance psychological and even physical well-being (Fisher and Specht 1999; Flood and Phillips 2007). The research elicited participants' subjective assessment of impacts on individual older people by assessing self-expression, personal development, critical appraisal, quality of life, social networking and community engagement. These domains were identified from a number of sources in the international literature and after consultation with the steering committee established to guide the research. For example, quality of life is defined by the World Health Organisation 'a person's perception of his/her position in life within the context of the culture and value systems in which they live and in relation to their goals expectations, standards and concerns' (World Health Organisation 1997). Cohen identified self-expression

and engagement with the community as important domains of impact on older people (Cohen et al. 2006; Cohen et al. 2007) while Matarasso identified personal development and social networking as areas of impact (Matarasso 1997, 1998) of community arts projects. The steering committee wanted to explore whether participation impacted on critical appraisal.

The evaluation (completed in 2008) used mixed methods including a survey of all of the 435 organisers of the festival (with a 43 per cent response rate, N = 187), a separate survey of members of Active Retirement Associations (N = 253) and interviews with 26 people, including older participants, artists, organisers and members of the Bealtaine steering group. The questionnaire was piloted to ensure that the domains were meaningful to participants. The main questions in the questionnaire had tick-boxes and Likert scales for participants to complete and there was an option for respondents to elaborate on questions.

Data were collected in the following ways:

Context interviews were conducted with four members of the Bealtaine steering committee – a local authority arts officer, two members of national cultural institutions and a member of Age & Opportunity.

A postal questionnaire was sent to all local organisers of festival events in Ireland. Age & Opportunity provided researchers with their list of organisers. The questionnaire incorporated questions on the type of organisation, nature of funding, satisfaction with Bealtaine, impact of Bealtaine on the participation of older people in national and local arts programmes and on policy; whether Bealtaine stimulated them to provide events for older people; whether Bealtaine led them to have greater links/cooperation with other local organisations; whether all groups of older people are included; whether Bealtaine promotes more positive attitudes to ageing; impact on individual older people in certain domains in relation to social interaction, quality of life and well-being.

Postal questionnaires were sent to one randomly selected Active Retirement Association (ARA) in each county in Ireland. The ARA secretary was asked to distribute the questionnaire to all of its members and to ask them to complete it and then collect all completed questionnaires and return to the research team. Completed questionnaires were received from 14 of the 26 counties; a total of 253 completed questionnaires (approximately one third of the amount distributed) was received. Questions for this short questionnaire included demographic details, nature of involvement in Bealtaine and impacts on themselves in relation to self-expression, personal development, critical thinking, quality of life, expanded social networks and involvement with the community. Qualitative interviews were conducted with older participants in various arts programmes, organisers of events and facilitators of arts programmes and artists. These face-to-face interviews enabled participants to elaborate on answers and give a more detailed and nuanced picture than was possible from questionnaire data alone. Purposive sampling was used to select interview participants. The aim was to include participants in a range of art forms, (for example drama, music, visual arts) and types of programmes (long-term, once-off events, taster sessions) and to include rural and urban participants. Participants were recruited through gate-keepers such as programme facilitators or local authority arts officers. Different types of organisers and facilitators were

interviewed including directors of national cultural institutions, local authority arts officers, organisers working in the Health Service Executive (HSE), dance, drama and creative writing facilitators and visual artists. The interviews covered similar issues to the questionnaire and offered an opportunity to gain additional insights. Standard ethical procedures were followed: respondents were assured that participation was voluntary and that confidentiality was assured. All interviews were recorded and transcribed and content analysis was used to draw out the themes of relevance to the stakeholders. Quotations from the interview data are used to illustrate themes from the quantitative data.

## FINDINGS

This section presents findings on the impact of the festival on the well-being and quality of life of individual older people from the perspective of both participants and organisers. It outlines organisers' and interviewees' levels of satisfaction with Bealtaine and organiser's views on the best aspects of the festival and on what needs to be addressed to improve the festival. The impacts of participating in the festival on individual older people from the perspective of both participants and organisers are extremely positive. It enables self-expression and personal development, increases community engagement and expands social networks. Older participants generally are more positive in their perceptions of the festival than organisers. Participants are directly involved in events and programmes, while organisers are at a remove from the experience; impacts are subjective and difficult to gauge from a distance. Some organisers are concerned that the events are of high quality, while many participants derive enjoyment from the events irrespective of quality.

### *Self-expression*

Participants (87 per cent) and organisers (68 per cent) believe that Bealtaine facilitates self-expression among older people. Interviews reveal that participants discovered latent talents in terms of writing, dance and the visual arts and were given opportunities to develop them. For example one woman reported that she had found a new way of perceiving the world around her and was stimulated to express this through the medium of painting:

*'I think you look at the area around you differently as well...you look at it with an artist's eye. You're all the time saying, I'd love to paint this or sketch that'. (Interview with participant in inter-generational project).*

These impacts were linked mainly to long-term professionally-led programmes, but also to peer-led groups and once-off taster sessions or workshops which led participants to seek out further engagement with creative programmes.

### *Personal development*

A very high proportion (89 per cent) of participants agreed that participation in Bealtaine encouraged their personal development in terms of enhanced learning and organisational skills, confidence in their own opinions and open-mindedness. Interview data revealed that some participants gain confidence in their skills from the

affirmation they receive; one man who attended a Bealtaine 'taster session' writer's workshop said he had written before but had never had the confidence to expose his work to public view. He received positive feedback in the Bealtaine workshop and this encouraged him to join a writer's group, to deepen his engagement and to regard himself as a writer. He gained in terms of both artistic and personal development. A participant in a long-term visual arts programme (IMMA) felt that he had become more open-minded about what constitutes art .

A large proportion of organisers (59 per cent) also perceive the impact of Bealtaine on the personal development of older people to be strong or very strong. They observe that participants learn new skills, discover hidden talents, and gain confidence and enhanced independence. They specifically mention dance, drama and visual art programmes as enhancing personal development. A Bealtaine organiser in a hospital found that after a number of years of being involved with the festival, the residents in a long-stay care unit had developed from being passive recipients of entertainment provided to becoming actively involved in choosing forms of creative activity they wished to pursue. They now interacted with staff on a more equal basis.

### *Critical Appraisal*

A majority of participants (70 per cent) reported that participating in Bealtaine had encouraged them to think critically about the arts. Interviews with participants suggest that being part of comprehensive professionally-led programmes particularly encouraged the development of a critical perspective. For example, one participant said that since joining a professionally-run weekly dance club, her perspective on dance has changed; she now appraises how a dance piece is choreographed and constructed whereas previously, she did not have the experience or skills to do so.

A smaller proportion of organisers (31 per cent) felt that Bealtaine encourages critical appraisal among participants. Those who do so mention that older participants are encouraged to discuss art and to communicate their opinions, to make suggestions and that they learn to give and take constructive criticism. Almost one third of organiser respondents said the festival had a neutral or weak effect they explained that once-off events are unlikely to help develop a critical perspective.

### *Quality of life*

A high proportion of participants (86 per cent) agree with the statement that 'participation in Bealtaine has improved my quality of life'. They mention physical, psychological and social benefits. Some specifically state that their health and energy levels have improved. Evidence from the interviews emphasise the positive psychological effects of the festival. Some participants emphasise the well-being brought about by actually producing a work of art and suggest that it gives them a sense of meaning, purpose and achievement. Others state that having the opportunity to share their talents publicly enhances their quality of life. Over two thirds (67 per cent) of organisers believe that participating in Bealtaine had a strong impact on the quality of life of older participants in terms of giving meaning and purpose to life, reducing loneliness, combatting depression, increasing social interaction and being proud of their achievements. Both organisers and participants suggest that having an opportunity to publicly celebrate their artistic achievements knowing that other older people throughout the country were doing the same enhanced participants'

self-esteem. Organisers of once-off events are less likely to agree that attending a single event affects quality of life. Overall, both participants and organisers strongly believe that participation in the festival has a very positive impact on quality of life.

#### *Social and community benefits*

A high proportion of participants (95 per cent) agreed that 'participating in Bealtaine means that I have got to know people I wouldn't otherwise have met'. Those involved in inter-generational projects have met young people in their local areas, whom they would not otherwise have met; some people have made friendships with others who have similar interests e.g. members of art or writer's groups. Some of these friendships are local, while others are country-wide.

#### *Community involvement*

There was a very high positive response (87 per cent) among older participants to the statement that 'participation in Bealtaine has increased their level of involvement in their community'. Some people joined community groups, resident's committees and actively fundraise for these organisations or are more aware of what is happening in the community. One member of a Bealtaine long-term writer's group says that being part of the group gave her the confidence to set up a creative writer's group in her local community centre. Intergenerational programmes involved members of the local community and participants got to know younger people in their area as well as volunteers, artists, children and other community members through such programmes. Many organisers (55 per cent) also felt that Bealtaine facilitated greater engagement with the community. This was particularly important for older people in long-stay care facilities where people who were previously isolated found opportunities to interact with the surrounding community. One organiser in a hospital described the interaction between the residents and the surrounding community in preparing for Bealtaine events as follows:

'I suppose it has broken down the walls of the hospital.... it has opened it up and it has involved everybody especially the community'. (Interview with Bealtaine organiser in a hospital).

Other organisers mentioned exhibitions and other events held in day care centres and nursing homes which enabled meetings between people living in long-stay care and those living in the community. It appears that Bealtaine has helped to break down barriers between groups that were cut off and their local community.

The following section outlines the views of organisers and artists/facilitators in relation to their level of satisfaction with the organisation of the festival and the quality of events. It also presents their views of the impact of Bealtaine on arts practice and policy in Ireland. This gives insights into the degree to which Age & Opportunity are achieving their aims of inclusiveness, promoting meaningful engagement with the arts and impacting on national and local arts policy and practice.

#### *Satisfaction with operation of Bealtaine*

Organisers reported high levels of satisfaction with the operation of Bealtaine with 88 per cent being satisfied or fairly satisfied with the operation of Bealtaine. Those who were not satisfied wanted more funding, would prefer if the festival lasted for

longer than a month, wanted Age & Opportunity to organise regional meetings for the sharing of ideas and wanted more regional events as highlights of the festival.

### *Artistic quality*

Most organisers (85 per cent) were satisfied with the artistic quality of the events and programmes. Only 14.4 per cent felt the quality was 'fair' and only one organiser felt the quality was poor. It was generally felt that professionally-conducted arts programmes were of high quality. Members of the steering committee were concerned about the quality of events, but recognised that it was difficult for smaller organisations with few resources to ensure high quality. Even when artistic quality was poor from an objective point of view, events were still valued by participants because they provided social benefits, a sense of accomplishment and acted as an introduction to deeper engagement in the arts.

Most organisers (69 per cent) said that participating in Bealtaine had led to additional networking between organisations and to increased social cohesion. Links have been formed between national cultural institutions and local organisations; for example the National Gallery reports that community and older people's groups have joined their network after encountering it through Bealtaine. Many links have been formed at local level. Active Retirement Associations have linked with each other; organisers in health-care settings have formed relationships with local authorities, libraries through organising joint events.

### *Impacts on arts practice at national and local level*

At national level, just less than a third (30 per cent) of organisers felt that Bealtaine had a strong or very strong impact on the profile of older people in the arts at national level. In support of this they mentioned being aware of events such as exhibitions at the Irish Museum of Modern Art, or at the National Gallery of Ireland and the Irish Film Institute's national programme of screenings and a billboard poster campaign advertising Bealtaine. While 16 per cent felt Bealtaine had a weak impact and 15 per cent felt it had a neutral impact, a large proportion of organisers (39 per cent) answered 'don't know' to this question. Many of these were organisers from rural areas or from older peoples or community groups who perhaps were not familiar with programmes at the national arts institutions, most of which are Dublin-based.

Over half of the organisers (55 per cent) felt that Bealtaine had a strong/very strong impact on the profile of older people in local arts programmes. This was confirmed by an analysis of local authority arts programmes which found that there was a variable impact on practice in local authority arts offices. Nine local authorities had extensive Bealtaine programmes, while eleven had a medium level of activity (5-10 events); five had small programmes (1-5 events) and nine had no Bealtaine activities. Interviews confirmed that Bealtaine had a very strong impact in some areas. In some local authority areas, Bealtaine has become a regular feature of their programming. As one arts officer put it:

'It is now a fixed feature of our annual programming, we would prioritise around it... May is given over to Bealtaine every year'. (Interview with Local Authority Arts Officer).

Arts Officers in counties where there were small or no programmes cited funding and staffing difficulties or other priorities as barriers to providing Bealtaine events. In counties where Arts Officers are particularly interested in working with older people and have autonomy and budget and staff support, Bealtaine programmes flourish.

In some counties, arts centres and/or libraries are the main co-ordinators of the programme in an area. In some areas a number of these organisations (and others such as Active Retirement Associations and long-stay care venues) work together to produce a programme and this tends to produce sustained, artist-led programmes that are disseminated throughout the county. Similarly in some areas, hospitals and day centres provide programmes and link with other local organisations. In interviews, organisers attributed successful programmes to the presence of the following factors: committed individuals in key positions; good co-operation between local organisations and adequate resources and autonomy on the part of the main organisers.

#### *Impact on practice of organisers/facilitators*

A majority of organisers (79 per cent) agreed that Bealtaine had stimulated them to provide arts events for older people that they would not otherwise have done. These included collaborative inter-generational and drama events and participatory workshops and visual arts exhibitions. They also reported replicating successful projects. They mentioned the specially-commissioned larger events with international artists as inspirational to them. One visual artist who had facilitated programmes at national and local arts venues for a number of years said:

‘The existence of the festival creates expectations and these expectations increase every year’. (Interview with visual artist working in IMMA and in day care centres)

indicating that the existence of Bealtaine provides a focal point to inspire organisers to come up with exciting arts projects every year.

A majority (72 per cent) of organisers felt that Bealtaine was successful in promoting positive attitudes to ageing in society, one of the aims of Age & Opportunity. One of the reasons they gave for this view was their perception that older people had become more aware of their skills and talents and that this had led to increased self-esteem; secondly an interviewee from the Arts Council felt that Bealtaine achieved this by having events featuring high-profile older artists.

#### *Limitations of Bealtaine*

While respondents clearly reported a large number of positive outcomes associated with Bealtaine, they also identified a number of shortcomings. For example, they indicated that a number of groups and individuals were not well-represented among festival participants; they felt that people who did not have access to transport, particularly in rural areas, those who were confined to home, men, those who lived alone and those in residential care were less likely to participate in Bealtaine. There were also certain counties that did not have extensive Bealtaine programmes. Respondents recommended more local advertising, more funding and that Age & Opportunity should facilitate networking between groups.

Bealtaine has had almost no perceptible impact on arts policy at national level. This is partly due to the fact that the Irish government has repeatedly delayed the introduction of a long-promised national positive ageing strategy; it would be expected that recommendations regarding the arts and older people would form part of this strategy. There are some policies regarding older people and the arts at local authority level. Twenty (60 per cent) mention older people in their arts plan, while three mention social inclusion, but don't specifically mention older people. Eleven do not mention older people or social inclusion. A quarter of local authorities mention Bealtaine directly on their website. It appears that while there is policy in place at local level, there is still room for improvement.

## DISCUSSION

Bealtaine has had an obvious and visible impact on the involvement of older people in the arts throughout Ireland as participants and artists. It now touches the lives of 115,000 mainly older people in Ireland who are involved either as audience members or participants. They are engaged in long and short-term programmes, in professional and amateur productions and are featured in the programmes of many national and regional arts institutions and local authorities. The month of May is seen to 'belong' to older people now in the arts in Ireland. The impact is felt throughout the year through the long-term programmes.

The evaluation yielded positive findings in terms of the social and health gains to individual older people in the community and in care settings. The results confirm previous research findings in relation to individual benefits for older participants such as enhanced self-expression and personal development from engaging in arts programmes (Greaves and Farbus, 2006). While the mechanism by which such benefits translates into health gains is not yet fully understood, it appears that absorption in artistic endeavours, skills learnt and recognising and practicing talents enhances self-esteem and reduces anxiety and depression, thus promoting psychological health (Cohen et al. 2007). While the evaluation did not measure physical health, the limited number of international studies which have measured physical outcomes confirm that engagement in the arts enhances both physical and psychological well-being and health-related quality of life (Clift et al. 2012; Cohen 2009; Cohen et al. 2006). Participants report that they experience an enhanced quality of life from engagement in Bealtaine and attribute this to having something to look forward to, realising latent talents and having an enhanced ability to express themselves. This resonates with findings from previous research into the impact of participating in arts programmes (Brown et al. 2008; Thornberg, Lindquist and Staffan 2012).

A further contributory factor to enhanced quality of life was that participants expanded their social networks as a direct result of being involved in Bealtaine. The number of acquaintances and friends with similar interests grew; previous studies indicate that increased social networks enhance quality of life for older people (Cohen 2009, Moody and Phinney, 2012). Similarly, participants became more engaged in their local communities – through organising arts programmes or events, through participating in or attending them; this also developed their skills and contributed to personal development (Moody and Phinney 2012). It appears that individual and

social gains reinforce each other. Bealtaine results in enhanced social cohesion at national and local level echoing previous research which found that engagement in the community through arts promotes social inclusion and helps break down barriers (Lowe 2000, White and Robson 2003). In the case of Bealtaine, intergenerational programmes helped to integrate young people and older people in their communities and to forge links between those who lived in long-stay care and their surrounding communities. The existence of Bealtaine has provided libraries and day care centre workers with opportunities to promote social inclusion for previously isolated groups of older people. The increased social ties and connectivity are thought to be linked to the development of resilience which may partly explain why participating in Bealtaine leads to enhanced physical and psychological well-being (McFadden and Basting 2010).

The results support previous research in that Bealtaine reinforces a sense of identity and solidarity among older people (Morris Hargreaves MacIntyre 2004). It also helps enhance self-esteem by providing older people with an opportunity to celebrate and exhibit their skills, publicly. Older people have achieved a higher profile in society through Bealtaine. All of these findings suggest a rationale for public support for arts programmes such as those associated with Bealtaine because of its evident positive health and social gains. Currently, much of the emphasis on health spending is predominantly focussed on acute and curative services. These findings suggest that investing in the arts may contribute to promoting and maintaining health for older people and suggest that Bealtaine and similar programmes should receive continued public support.

The festival has become deeply embedded in some areas and has expanded each year so that it now extends to most areas in Ireland. One of the factors that seems to have enabled this growth is the flexibility of approach of Age & Opportunity. The different types of partnership it engages in enables different types of participation at an appropriate level for a given organisation. For example the 'hands off' connection with Active Retirement Associations promotes autonomy in older people but also offers support, both online and through key regional organisers. The link with Local Authority Arts Officers is extremely important since the latter may provide funding to employ professional artists both directly to provide their own programmes and may give support to local groups of older people. Age & Opportunity is not in a position to provide such support directly, since it has limited staff and financial resources. The partnership with national cultural institutions enables large scale innovative and exemplary performances to be staged at national venues and certain national institutions encourage their members and affiliated organisations to provide programmes throughout the country. Partnership with HSE organisers ensures that certain hard-to-reach groups such as care home residents and day centre attendees are included. Although this works well at the level of certain individual organisers, there is scope for greater engagement at higher levels in the HSE to ensure that such links are adopted more widely throughout the country. This unique multi-level and multi-faceted partnership approach has facilitated the embeddedness of the festival, together with a reasonably high but varied quality of events and its widespread dissemination and inclusivity. This partnership approach appears to have enabled Age & Opportunity to achieve many of its aims, particularly the increased amount of meaningful participation of older people in the arts and in society. The presence of older people in many national cultural institution annual programmes, local authority and library arts programmes offers proof of this.

Yet, there has been only limited success in terms of impacting on national arts policy. It has not been successful in terms of achieving the articulation of a national policy for older people and the arts as compared to the situation for other groups such as young people. This may be partly due to lack of will on the part of the government to make commitments that might involve increased expenditure for them during the current economic recession. There has, however been a certain degree of success at local policy level in the sense that the inclusion of older people in the arts and, less frequently, 'Bealtaine' itself are mentioned in some local authority arts policy documents.

While the current study contributes to the growing body of knowledge on the impact for older people of participating in community arts programmes produces there remains a need for further investment in research investigating the links between such participation and psychological and physical health. There is also a need to explore further the features necessary to deliver effective community arts projects.

The overall findings above suggest that Bealtaine (despite certain limitations) may be regarded as an example of good practice as a creative ageing event for older people. Indeed, there is evidence that arts and health organisations in other countries have begun to regard Bealtaine as a model of good practice for creative ageing. Age & Opportunity has been asked by Age Cymru to provide expertise to support the development of a similar festival in Wales which began in May, 2007. More recently, arts organisers and cultural organisations in Scotland, Australia, Finland and Portugal and artists in the U.S. have requested assistance from Age & Opportunity in developing festivals and arts programmes for older people. Some recent international interest was generated by a Bealtaine conference held by Age & Opportunity in Dublin in May 2012 to facilitate increased international dissemination and debate. The partnership approach, the ethos of quality and inclusivity, the use of inspiration from international artists and encouragement to a wide variety of partners to harness their own resources mean that for a relatively small budget, a sustained, vibrant festival celebrating older people has become a recognised and accepted piece of the arts landscape in Ireland. An enormous amount of voluntary effort from older people and staff in contributing organisations is essential to ensure the success of the festival. It appears that Bealtaine does offer an example of good practice which other countries could use as a model if planning a similar event. However, it should be noted that it would need to be adapted to take account of the institutional arrangements, the cultural and socio-economic conditions in the country concerned. It may translate well to countries of a similar size.

## **CONCLUSION**

The health and quality of life benefits to older participants resulting from Bealtaine provide a rationale for continued government support for the festival and its associated programmes. It appears that an investment in Bealtaine is an investment in promoting the health of older people. The significant community and societal benefits suggest that Bealtaine contributes to reducing social isolation and loneliness, breaking down societal barriers between old and young and promoting social cohesion. There remains a need for a national policy on older people and the arts

in Ireland to be articulated and implemented. The findings suggest that Bealtaine with its innovative multi-level partnership model should be recognised as part of Ireland's national health promotion strategy for older people. It appears that many of the features developed in Bealtaine may usefully be adapted by agencies working in the arts and ageing, who are interested in holding a collaborative arts festival for older people in other countries.

## **1NOTES**

The author acknowledges Professor Eamon O'Shea and Dr Kieran Walsh for their comments on the paper and Christine Delargy for assistance. Thanks are due to all who participated in the evaluation.

## REFERENCES

- Angus, J. 1999. *An enquiry concerning possible methods for evaluating arts for health projects*. Durham: The Centre for Arts and Humanities in Health and Medicine.
- Basting, Anne Davis. (2009) *Forget memory: Creating better lives for people with dementia*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press.
- Belfiore, E. (2002). Art as a means of alleviating social exclusion: does it really work? A critique of instrumental cultural policies and social impact studies in the UK. *International Journal of Cultural Policy*, 8(1), 91-106.
- Brenner, H. & Shelley, E. (1998). *Adding years to life and life to years. A Health Promotion Strategy for Older People*. Dublin: National Council on Ageing and Older People.
- Brown, C., McGuire, F., & Voelkl, J. (2008). The link between successful aging and serious leisure. *International Journal of Aging and Human Development*, 66(1), 73-95.
- Bygren, L., Konlaan, B. & Johansson, S. (1996). Attendance at cultural events, reading books or periodicals and making music or singing in a choir as determinants for survival: Swedish interview survey of living conditions. *British Medical Journal*, 313/7072, 1577-80.
- Chhabra D., Sills, E., & Cabbage, F. (2003). The significance of festivals to rural economies; estimating the economic impacts of Scottish Highland Games in North Carolina, *Journal of Travel Research*, 41, 421-27.
- Clift, S., Skingley, A., Coulton, S., & Rodriguez, J., (2012). A controlled evaluation of the health benefits of a participative community singing programme for older people (Silver Song Clubs). Canterbury: Sidney De Haan Research Centre for Arts and Health.
- Clift, S., Hancox, G., Morrison, I., Hess, B., Krutz, G. & Stewart, D. (2010). Choral singing and psychological well-being: quantitative and qualitative findings from English choirs in a cross-national survey. *Journal of Applied Arts and Health* 1 (1), 19-34. Doi: 10.1386/jaah.1.1.19/1
- Cohen, G., Perlstein, S., Chapline, J., Kelly, J., Firth, K. & Simmens, S. (2006). The Impact of Professionally Conducted Cultural Programs on the Physical Health, Mental Health and Social Functioning of Older Adults. *The Gerontologist*, 46 (6), 726-34.
- Cohen, G., Perlstein, S., Chapline, J., Kelly, J., Firth, K. & Simmens, S. (2007). The Impact of Professionally Conducted Cultural Programs on the Physical Health, Mental Health and Social Functioning of Older Adults – 2-year results. *Journal of Aging, Humanities and the Arts*, 1, 5-22.
- Cohen, G. (2009). New theories and research findings on the positive influence of music and art on health and ageing. *Arts and Health: An International Journal for Research, Policy and Practice*, 1(1), 48-62.

- Cutler, D. (2009). *Ageing Artfully. Older people and professional participatory arts in the UK*. London: The Baring Foundation.
- Fisher, B. & Specht, D. (1999). Successful ageing and creativity in later life. *Journal of Aging Studies*, 13, 457-72.
- Flood, M. & Phillips, D. (2007). Creativity in older adults: a plethora of possibilities. *Issues in Mental Health Nursing*, 28, 389-411.
- Glass, T., de Leon, C., Marrottoli, R. & Berkman, L. (1999). Population based study of social and productive activities as predictors of survival among elderly Americans. *British Medical Journal*, 319, 473-83.
- Greaves, C. J. & Farbus, L. (2006). Effects of creative and social activity on the health and well-being of socially isolated older people: outcomes from a multi-method observational study. *The Journal of the Royal Society for the Promotion of Health*, 126 (3), 134-42.
- Health Development Agency, (2000). *Art for Health. A Review of Good Practice in Community-based Arts Projects and initiatives which impact on health and wellbeing*. London: Health Development Agency.
- Jermyn, H. (2001). *The Arts and Social Exclusion; A review for the Arts Council of England*. London: The Arts Council.
- Johansson, S., Konlaan, B., and Bygren, L. (2001). Sustaining habits of attending cultural events and maintenance of health: a longitudinal study. *Health Promotion International*. 16(3), 174-8.
- Lowe, S. (2000). Creating community; arts for community development. *Journal of Contemporary Ethnography*, 29 (3), 357-86.
- Matarasso, F. (1997). *Use or ornament? The social impact of participation in the arts*. Comedia: (SI), Stroud.
- Matarasso, F. (1998). *Poverty and oysters: the social impact of local arts development in Portsmouth*. Comedia: Stroud.
- Mayo County Council. (2002). *Creative Reverie: meeting the person as an artist*. Castlebar: Mayo County Council.
- McFadden, S., & Basting, A. (2010). Healthy Aging persons and their brains: promoting resilience through creative engagement. *Clinics in Geriatric Medicine*, 26, 149-161.
- Mental Health Foundation. (2011). *An evidence review of the impact of participatory arts on older people*, London: The Baring Foundation.
- Moloney, O. & McCarthy, A. (2006). *Between colours: Mayo County Council Artists' mentoring and Networking Programme*. Castlebar: Mayo County Council.
- Moody, E. & Phinney, A. (2012). A Community-Engaged Art Program for Older People: Fostering Social Inclusion. *Canadian Journal on Aging*. 31 (1) 55-64.

- Morris, Hargreaves McIntyre. (2004). *The impact of folk festivals*, The Arts Council of England.
- Murphy, K., O'Shea, E., Cooney, A., Shiel, A. & Hodgins, M. (2006). *Improving Quality of Life for older People in Long-Stay Care settings in Ireland*. Dublin: National Council on Ageing and Older People.
- National Economic and Social Forum. (2007). *The Arts, Cultural Inclusion and Social Cohesion*. Dublin: National Economic and Social Forum.
- Newman, T., Curtis, K. & Stephens, J. (2003). Do community-based arts projects result in social gains? A review of the literature. *Community Development Journal*, 38 (4), 310-22.
- Noice H. & Noice T. (2009). An arts intervention for older adults living in subsidized retirement homes. *Neuropsychology, development, and cognition Section B, Aging, neuropsychology and cognition* 16, 56-79.
- OCS Consulting. (2004). *Age & Opportunity: Evaluation of the Arts in Care Settings Project*, Dublin: OCS Consulting.
- O'Morain, P. & Leahy, A. (2007). *Creative Exchanges. Using the Arts to transform the experience of residents and staff in Care Centres for Older People*, Dublin: Age & Opportunity.
- O'Shea, E. & Ní Léime, Á. (2012). The impact of the Bealtaine arts programme on the quality of life, well-being and social interaction of older people in Ireland, *Ageing and Society*, 32 (5), 851-872.
- Peruzza, N. & Kinsella, E. (2010). Creative arts occupations in therapeutic practice: a review of the literature, *British Journal of Occupational Therapy*, 73 (6), 261-8.
- Pyman T. & Rugg S. (2006) Participating in a community theatre production: A dramatherapeutic perspective. *International Journal of Therapy & Rehabilitation* 13(12), 562-71.
- Rodin, J. (1989). Sense of control: potentials for intervention, *Annals of the American Academy of Policy and Social Science*, 503, 29-42.
- Russell, J. (2007) *Conversations in colour. Evaluation of an Arts for Health Partnership Programme 2005/6*, Cork: Arts for Health Partnership.
- Smith, R. (2002). Spend (slightly) less on health and more on the arts. Health would probably be improved. *British Medical Journal*, 325, 1432-33.
- The Baring Foundation, (2011) *Creative Homes. How the Arts can contribute to quality of life in residential care*, London, The Baring Foundation.
- Thornberg, K., Lindquist, I. & Staffan, J. (2012). Experiences of healthy elderly participating in a creative dance workshop, *Advances in Physiotherapy*, 14, 71-77.

United Nations. (2002). United Nations Principles for Older Persons. Available at [http://www.un.org/ageing/un\\_principles.html](http://www.un.org/ageing/un_principles.html)> [accessed 16 September 2010]

White, M. & Robson, M. (2003), *From ice to fire – arts in health for social inclusion*. Mailout: Chesterfield.

World Health Organisation (1997), *WHOQOL: Measuring Quality of Life, Programme on Mental Health and Prevention of Substance Abuse*. Geneva: World Health Organisation.