

The voice of the Voluntary Arts

## Older People and Voluntary Arts Steps to Meaningful Participation

This briefing aims to help local volunteer-led arts groups ensure that participation by older people in their activities – whether as creators of artwork, set designers or organisers – is meaningful and of the highest possible quality. It is adapted from the Age & Opportunity publication *Guidelines for Working with Older People in the Arts* (see *Further Resources* for more information).

“We have come to recognise that individuals can experience a sense of well-being, of confidence, of transformation, even, through participating in the arts. We have also noticed that high-quality arts opportunities available over a sustained period of time seem to offer the most beneficial experience.”

Catherine Rose, Chief Executive of Age & Opportunity

Meaningful participation is the vision at the heart of the guidelines. Older people have diverse abilities, experiences and preferences when it comes to the arts. As a result, there needs to be real choice in the range of arts activities available to them, along with the opportunity to be actively involved in the planning, implementation and evaluation stages of these activities. For older people's participation to be truly meaningful, good practice must extend to taking a creative journey at a personal or group level, with opportunities for reflection, self-expression, learning, and change.

The *Guidelines* are drawn from Age & Opportunity's experience of co-ordinating **Bealtaine** – a unique festival celebrating creativity in older age (all art forms) across the Republic of Ireland each May. The organisers include arts and cultural institutions, local authority arts officers, arts centres, public libraries, care centres, active retirement groups and local voluntary groups. **Bealtaine** has grown to a point where, in 2006, there were 1,000 events for older people organised by some 260 organisations.

### A. Steps to meaningful participation

If you are an organiser of an arts programme, *no matter what age you are*, you may find you include or exclude people based on assumptions that take no account of the individuals apart from their age. When older people come knocking on your door, you may assume that you know what they want, what they can achieve and what they may or may not bring to the arts programme. More often than not, like everyone else, you will be operating from prejudices, often unconscious.

#### Prepare to take the steps

Look at 'Older People – Some Facts' (*overleaf*).

Do any of these facts surprise you?

Create a checklist of beliefs about older people held by you personally and within the group.

For example:

- older people are sweet;
- older people prefer the past.

Do this in a non-judgemental way. We all have preconceptions about people based on their age. The problem with such generalisations is that they lead us to make automatic links between a particular age group and a particular characteristic, regardless of the individual.

Check to what extent older people are currently involved in your group:

- on the board or committee;
- as members of the staff (if you have any);
- among participating artists (if applicable);
- in the audience;
- in education, community or outreach programmes;
- in public consultation processes.

Start with the numbers then look more closely at the quality of the involvement. Are older people always seen as end users or do they have real power in planning and implementing the programmes?



## B. Three steps approach

The following steps have been identified as key ingredients in the planning, implementation and evaluation of successful projects. Some of these are based on general principles of good practice, desirable when working with all ages.

### Step 1 – Planning

When planning an arts initiative involving older people –

#### Do:

- consult all involved from the beginning;
- design your promotional material (i.e. leaflets, flyers, etc.) with a large typeface and easily legible characters for those with impaired vision and ensure it reaches places where older people are likely to access it (see *Further Resources* for reference to good accessible design);
- be aware of the language you use when describing people in your promotional material, and use images of people of all ages;
- if you plan to have a professional arts facilitator to work with the group, think about who has the skills that suit the age range. Invite this person to be involved from the planning stages, if possible;
- offer taster programmes of your art form to those who have not had much experience of it;
- ensure ongoing discussion that takes into account individual interests, experiences and needs;
- value the input of all participants;
- acknowledge the potential for mutual learning between the different age groups and/or any professional artists you may be working with.

#### Don't:

- exclude an art form without first exploring and discussing the possibilities. For example, working with a skilled facilitator may open an art form to a diversity of abilities;
- assume anything – a particular programme or artist may have worked well before but may not be right for a new group;
- ignore suggestions or complaints from those involved – consultation must be real, not token;
- feel disillusioned if plans aren't welcomed – it shows that the planning process is working and may help to improve the effectiveness of the programme;
- assume all responsibility for the organisational, administrative and artistic elements of the programme – tap into the skills of others.

### Older people – Some Facts

- The EU definition of older is anybody over the age of 50.
- People often consider the nominal retirement age of 65 as the gateway to older age.
- Older people are a diverse group, as different from each other at 80 years as we are at 28.
- In the Republic of Ireland only 5 per cent of people over 65 live in residential care. Of the 95 per cent living in the community, 75 per cent are self-sufficient.
- In the UK approximately 5 million people over 50 are involved in voluntary activity.

### Step 2 – Implementation

When implementing an arts programme involving older people –

#### Do:

- check whether the venue can meet the individual needs within the group;
- check that the facilities are suitable for the chosen art form;
- check whether venue staff are aware of the possible needs of older people;
- if applicable, look for a skilled artist to facilitate participants to challenge themselves appropriately both personally and artistically;
- ensure there is sufficient time to build an atmosphere of trust in the group;
- encourage people to explore their own experiences in the context of the art form;
- encourage people to explore the processes involved in the art form;
- respect all contributions;
- acknowledge the potential for transformation through the arts, and create time and space to foster and articulate this.

#### Don't:

- look at access modifications as a luxury – they will benefit everyone;
- make assumptions about interest and creative abilities on the basis of age;
- choose an artist with a facilitation approach more suitable for children than for adults;
- forget to allow time and space to build strong trust relationship in the group;
- assume that the artistic programme has to be nostalgic or easy;
- patronise or pity older participants;
- underestimate the potential for learning and change regardless of age.



### Step 3 – Monitoring and Evaluation

In the area of arts and older people, it has been more common to highlight the personal and social benefits of participation than to focus on artistic outcomes. If you are planning an evaluation, don't forget to examine the artistic impact of the programme.

#### Do:

- incorporate the evaluation process from the beginning;
- involve older people at all stages;
- choose your information gathering methods with sensitivity;
- ask permission before recording contributions;
- consider artistic outcomes as well as social and personal outcomes;
- consider the impact on everyone involved (not just older people);
- celebrate achievements;

- make the evaluation report available to those who participated;
- feed back the findings on an ongoing basis to all involved in order to develop the programme.

#### Don't:

- impose the evaluation process – if people are not clear about the purpose they may fear they are being judged or criticised;
- assume that everybody will be able to read and fill out a questionnaire;
- assume that everybody can hear and contribute equally in an oral feedback session;
- feel threatened by difficulties that emerge – this is the first step to addressing them;
- focus exclusively on the negative aspects;
- relegate the report to the top shelf to gather dust – use it as a development tool.

### Benefits of Participation

#### Benefits for participants:

- Personal fulfilment.
- Creation of meaning – exploring art forms can help construct meaning for the future – particularly important in older age when the future is so often forgotten or denied.
- New/improved skills or a deeper understanding of an art form, even if physical strength diminishes.
- New friendships – working from personal experience can create powerful connections among a group.
- Celebration of aspects of life which may have gone unheralded otherwise.
- New ideas and ways to express these.
- Dignity and self-esteem – of particular value for some given a society fixated by youth and physical ability.
- Empowerment to take possession of their own imaginative world and to assert the ability to make creative decisions. In institutionalised situations where autonomy over personal space and time is not available, engagement in the arts may help to restore a sense of individuality.

A growing body of research demonstrates improved mental and physical health by virtue of being involved in the arts.

#### Benefits for the art sector:

- Alternative perspectives – arts groups may understand the value of involving younger voices to broaden their perspective, but fail to recognise the value of older voices.
- Older artists are a valuable resource – they continue to develop their art form throughout their lives.
- Other skills – older people include retired arts administrators, managers, woodworkers, dress-makers, accountants, and lawyers, and others who could contribute to the development of the local arts scene, if invited to do so.
- New audiences – many retired people have more time to invest in creative interests than those in full time employment. Aside from numbers, older people have the potential to provide honest feedback as an audience being less likely to care whether a piece is considered fashionable or not.
- Economic and political benefits – some older people have money and time available for areas of particular interest. Others may offer valuable advocacy experience at a political level.
- Evidence of inclusivity is often a criteria for publicly funded programmes.

**The Right to Participate** in artistic and cultural life is enshrined in the Declaration of Human Rights.

Article 27 states that 'everyone has the right freely to participate in the cultural life of the community, to enjoy the arts'.

There is legislation in the UK and Ireland to ensure that people are not discriminated against on the basis of age.

## Organisations

- **Voluntary Arts Network** (including Voluntary Arts Ireland, England, Scotland, Wales and Link) for information and resources to help you organise your volunteer-led arts activities.  
[www.voluntaryarts.org](http://www.voluntaryarts.org) – T: 029 20 395 395  
[www.vaireland.org](http://www.vaireland.org) – T: 028 (RoI-048) 4483 9327  
[www.vaengland.org.uk](http://www.vaengland.org.uk) – T: 0191 230 4464  
[www.vascotland.org.uk](http://www.vascotland.org.uk) – T: 0131 225 7355  
[www.vaw.org.uk](http://www.vaw.org.uk) – T: 01938 556 455
- **Bealtaine, Age & Opportunity**, Marino Institute of Education, Griffith Avenue, Dublin 9 – festival celebrating creativity in older age – T: 01 805 7709  
E: [info@olderinireland.ie](mailto:info@olderinireland.ie) or [www.olderinireland.ie](http://www.olderinireland.ie)
- **Gwanwyn, Age Concern Cymru**, Tŷ John Pathy, 13-14 Neptune Court, Vanguard Way, Cardiff CF24 5PJ – festival celebrating creativity in older age – T: 029 2043 1555  
E: [enquiries@accymru.org.uk](mailto:enquiries@accymru.org.uk) or [www.accymru.org.uk](http://www.accymru.org.uk)
- **Arts and Older People Network**, c/o Community Arts Forum, Northern Ireland – network of older people and arts initiatives – T: 028 9024 2910 or [www.caf.ie/AOP.asp](http://www.caf.ie/AOP.asp)
- **University of the Third Age (U3A)** – self-managed learning co-operatives for older people – [www.u3a-info.co.uk](http://www.u3a-info.co.uk) or [www.ageaction.ie](http://www.ageaction.ie)
- **The Royal National Institute of the Blind (UK)** and the **National Council for the Blind (RoI)** have produced guidance on how to produce good, accessible design – [www.rnib.org.uk](http://www.rnib.org.uk) or [www.ncbi.ie](http://www.ncbi.ie)

Contact your national Arts Council or representative body for older people for further information about initiatives supporting and involving older people and the arts.

## Further Resources

- **Recruit, Retain, Reward, Recognition** – briefings by VAN/ Experience Corp celebrating voluntary artists and Volunteers Week – [www.voluntaryarts.org](http://www.voluntaryarts.org)
- **The arts and older people: a practical introduction** – Age Concern England 'How To' guide – [www.ageconcern.org.uk](http://www.ageconcern.org.uk) (to order)
- **Tear up your tick boxes – a guide to the creative evaluation of participatory arts projects** – Voluntary Arts Wales – [www.vaw.org.uk](http://www.vaw.org.uk)
- **Growing old disgracefully: a project report for 1999** by S. Duffen – The National Institute of Adult Continuing Education, England and Wales (NIACE) – [www.niace.org.uk](http://www.niace.org.uk)
- **Research into Lifelong Learning, the Arts and Older People** – Scottish Arts Council (2002) – [www.scottisharts.org.uk](http://www.scottisharts.org.uk)

### About the Guidelines

This briefing is adapted from the **Age & Opportunity Guidelines for Working with Older People in the Arts: A resource for Bealtaine Organisers and Others involved in the Arts and Older People** authored by Orla Moloney on behalf of Age & Opportunity, 2006, and launched in 2007, ISBN: 1 900576 565.

The guidance is based on their experience from the Bealtaine Festival (see *front page*). The full publication goes into detail about each of the steps, provides information about the context in the Republic of Ireland, and offers further perspectives on involvement. It has a strong emphasis on professional artist-led participation.



**Age & Opportunity** is the Irish national agency working to challenge negative attitudes to ageing and older people, and to promote greater participation by older people in society.

Information contained here may go out of date and you are therefore advised to check its currency. Updated information may be available on the VAN website: [www.voluntaryarts.org](http://www.voluntaryarts.org)

**Disclaimer:** Reasonable precautions have been taken to ensure the information in this document is accurate. However, it is not intended to be legally comprehensive; it is designed to provide guidance in good faith at the stated date but without accepting liability. We therefore recommend you take appropriate professional advice before taking action on any of the matters covered herein.

**Do you need this publication in an alternative format? Contact T: 029 20 395 395 E: [info@voluntaryarts.org](mailto:info@voluntaryarts.org)**

### VOLUNTARY ARTS NETWORK



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