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*An Age & Opportunity  
Initiative*

# CORK CULTURAL COMPANIONS

INNOVATING THROUGH ADVERSITY

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SCHOOL OF APPLIED SOCIAL STUDIES

University College Cork

2021



# UCC

University College Cork, Ireland  
Coláiste na hOllscoile Corcaigh

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## Executive Summary

This research provides an evaluation of two programmes offered as part of the *COVID-Proofing Cultural Companions* initiative within Cork Cultural Companions, which began in January, 2020. Cultural Companions aims to provide increased opportunities for older people wishing to engage with Ireland’s vibrant arts and culture scene (and arts organisations wishing to expand their audiences) but who have no one to go with. The scheme creates local and voluntary networks of older people interested in the arts and culture in order that they may accompany each other to arts events. It seeks to connect people with the arts and with other people and recognises that staying connected is good for physical and mental wellbeing.

The start of Cultural Companions coincided with the start of another kind – namely, the ‘new normal’ associated with COVID-19. The pandemic directly impacted upon the two central pillars of the new initiative – all live entertainment was cancelled, and the target age cohort of the initiative was obliged to self-isolate. *COVID-Proofing Cultural Companions* was established with the aim of exploring the Cultural Companions’ response to this situation – which involved seeking funding for and organising their own online events.

This report begins with an overview of ageing in Ireland and identifies issues important to the goals and activities of Cork Cultural Companions. It then examines the experience of five participants and four facilitators and organisers of two of these events – Tea and Ballet and Clay Modelling. Through participant observation and semi-structured interviews, the research explores the contribution of the arts to resilience in times of crisis. Participants reported how the events allowed them to feel a sense of connection, control, freedom, and escape in an oppressive context marked by restriction, fear, and uncertainty.

The study highlights how the arts and the social are mutually reinforcing. Participants in the Clay Modelling, involved in online learning of the method in their homes, noted the loss of the social aspect of being able to check with a teacher or others in a class. The Tea and Ballet, on the other hand, did not involve participants in an activity. Instead, it featured the history of the ballet, Giselle, as presented by a former ballerina from her home. The evaluation of the event highlighted how the social connection, although online, was enriched through the sharing of a love of ballet.

The evaluation provides support for the ethos of the Cultural Companions initiative – namely,

that a meaningful shared experience of a cultural event translates into more meaningful social connections. The evaluation of the Clay Modelling highlights, however, that events are not equal in this regard with those requiring the development of a practical skill more likely to work better in person than online. Nonetheless, the study illustrates how the online events served as a stepping-stone, attracting members to the activity who would not otherwise have attended in person due to the lack of confidence that comes with social isolation. In some cases, the research highlights how the online event led participants to seek out the experience in person.

The study explores how the events were a positive experience for organisers and facilitators, as well as participants. They emerged through creative collaboration between a diverse network of community supports which Cultural Companions, as an initiative, was able to bring together. This emphasised the shared belief of the organisations and individuals involved that the arts had something significant to offer in a time of crisis, particularly for an age cohort who were designated as high risk within it.

While the focus of Cultural Companions is to address social isolation, the evaluation illustrates that not all the participants who joined Cultural Companions identified as being socially isolated. This suggests the potential for broadening engagement in terms of reaching those who would specifically identify as being socially isolated in line with the programme's central aim. It would also be beneficial to identify strategies to engage men in the events and programmes. Building up a picture of the needs and interests of members through a database would support planning and ensure events remain relevant as membership expands. Involving members within the design of events and programmes may also improve ownership and engagement.

Facilitating events both online and in-person is responsive to the diverse needs of older adults, some who prefer to join online. The evaluation illustrates the importance of careful facilitation to allow everyone a chance to speak, whether in online or live events. Supporting access to technology that lends itself well to participation also needs to be maintained. The evaluation suggests a need to extend the reach of the initiative so that it includes all those who would benefit from it, thus ensuring that Cork Cultural Companions continues to make a valuable contribution to the wellbeing of older adults across Cork city and county.

## SECTION ONE: Research Context, Goals & Methodology

### Introduction

The following section describes the research context and the research objectives. The research presented in this report was undertaken to map out how Cork Cultural Companions adapted to the COVID-19 pandemic, to evaluate its capacity to mitigate social isolation among older adults, and to inform future planning.

### Development of Cork Cultural Companions

Cultural activity is at the heart of Cork city and Cork county. Being able to participate in arts and cultural activities within our communities benefits our health and wellbeing. An important objective of the Age Friendly initiatives in both Cork city and Cork county, as discussed in this report under Section 2, is supporting older adults to participate in their communities. However, many older adults encounter barriers that prevent them from fully participating in the cultural life of their communities. A Cork-based report, *Creative Enquiry – An Artist Residency and Older People’s Engagement Project*, identified reasons why some older adults do not attend arts and cultural events. A key issue for many older adults is not having a person to attend the events with. In response, Cultural Companions is an Age and Opportunity Initiative that operates across Ireland. The aim of Cultural Companions is to address the issue of social isolation among older adults (those aged 55 years and over) by facilitating their engagement in arts, heritage, and cultural opportunities, and by providing volunteer companions for encouragement and support.

Cork Cultural Companions was established shortly before the COVID-19 pandemic in January 2020 and is coordinated by Muintir na Tíre. It is made possible via a multi-agency approach coordinated through a Steering Group.<sup>1</sup> Agencies on the Steering Group not only provide funding but also access to networks and resources to support programme implementation. The initiative seeks to alleviate social isolation and the barriers faced by older adults who wish to participate in arts activities. This is achieved by connecting people who wish to attend cultural events but who lack a ‘companion’ to go with. Unlike other social events, the initiative does not simply bring people together randomly; instead, it seeks to more deliberately link people who share similar cultural and arts interests. In this way, there is the shared experience

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<sup>1</sup> This steering group includes representatives from Creative Enquiry, Cork City and County Council, Cork City Age Friendly Programme, Healthy Cities Cork, the HSE, Cork City Library, Cork City Partnership, the Cork City Culture and Creativity Team.

of an event as an immediate point of reference to open discussion and connection. Furthermore, being accompanied to an arts venue may give people more confidence to attend events in the future.

### **COVID-Proofing Cultural Companions**

COVID-proofing Cultural Companions was imperative due to the increased restriction and isolation experienced by older adults during the global pandemic. *COVID-Proofing Cultural Companions* is an arts-based research and development initiative in Cork city and county under *Creative Communities* funded by the Government of Ireland *Creative Ireland* initiative. Cultural Companions aligned with pillar two of *Creative Ireland*, that of enabling creativity in every community. It has sought to collaborate with community groups and cultural venues to deliver arts and cultural activities through digital platforms and creative methodologies. The purpose of innovating in this way is to facilitate inclusive access to cultural events for older audiences in a time of COVID-19.

*“Harnessing the creative potential of our people and communities is a cornerstone of the Creative Ireland Programme. Participating in creative and cultural activities has a positive impact on people’s health and wellbeing. It also supports social cohesion and builds a sense of belonging and pride of place. All over the country, people are working together to transform their communities, their lives and their environment.”<sup>2</sup>*

By resourcing venue-based Cork city organisations, venues were able to re-imagine their means of delivering intergenerational services. The roll out has been further supported by Cork City Council and community partners. Together, they have sought to meet the challenge of implementing *Creative Enquiry* in ways that are ambitious, engaging, imaginative and localised while also accommodating necessary health and safety measures.

### **Cork Cultural Companions Membership Activities**

Since its establishment in January 2020, membership of Cork Cultural Companions has grown to 146. Cork Cultural Companions works across sectors and has engaged with a wide range of arts venues, community organisations and initiatives along with support from Cork City Council Arts Office. Cork Cultural Companions has facilitated a diverse range of events and programmes. Figure One logs the activities and estimated number of people in attendance across different communities including nursing homes in the county.<sup>3</sup>

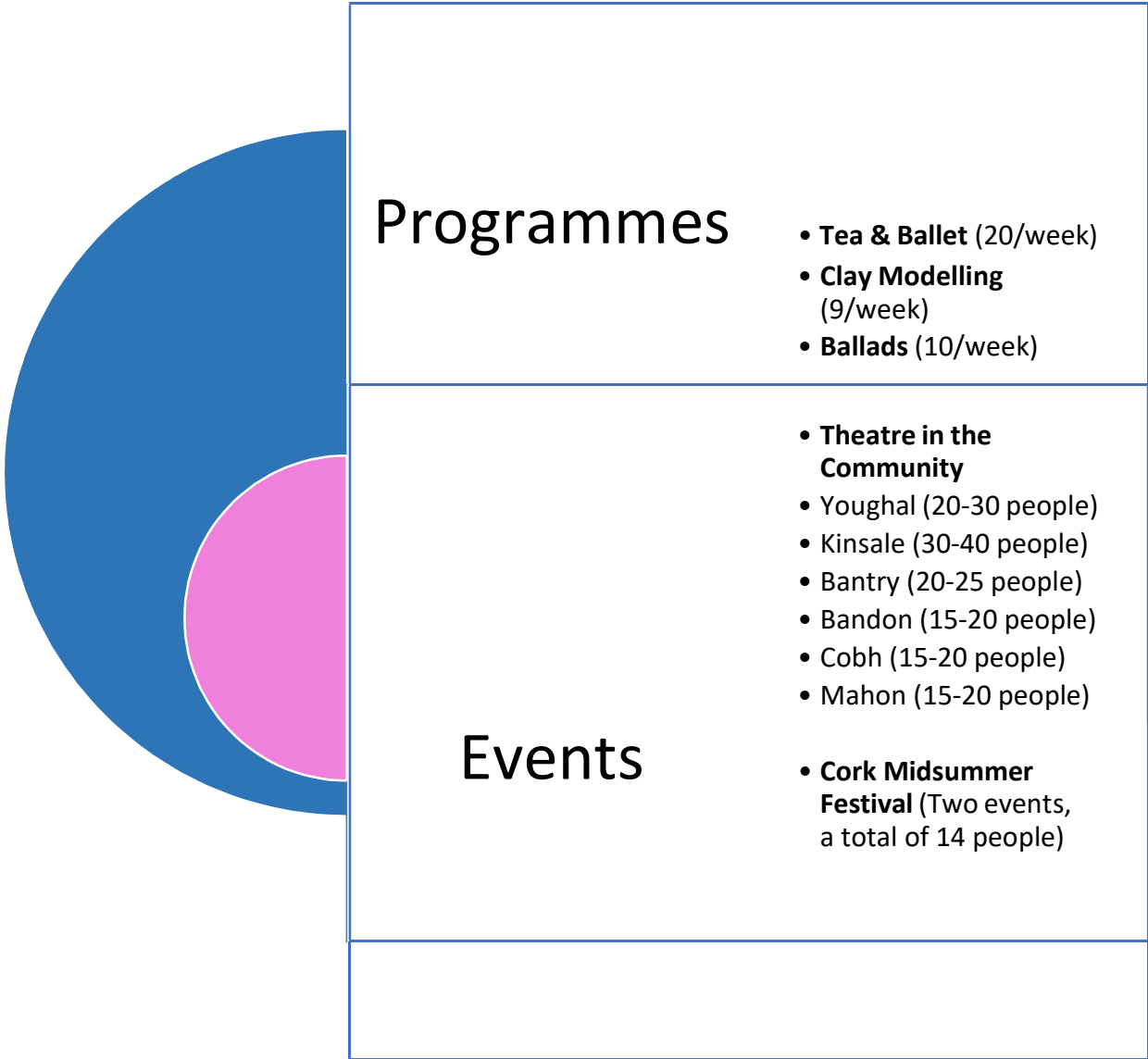
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<sup>2</sup> Creative Ireland, <https://www.creativeireland.gov.ie/en/creative-communities/>

<sup>3</sup> Details obtained from Cultural Companions’ Coordinator on 2<sup>nd</sup> December 2021. Some of the activities took place after data collection had been completed, and so have not specifically been evaluated.



Figure 1 Summary of Activities in 2021



**Research Aim & Objectives**

The study aimed to provide an evaluation of the *COVID-Proofing Cultural Companions* initiative in Cork City and County. The importance of tracking innovation and adaptation is important not only for evaluating what *has* been done but also for informing learning about what *can* be done in the future.

The researchers met with representatives from Cork Cultural Companions on commencement of the project to review and agree the research aims and objectives. The aims and objectives of this study were:

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### **Aims & Objectives**

- 1.** To examine the impact, acceptability and reach of the Cultural Companions initiative aimed at socially isolated older people who are experiencing restrictions on their social and cultural engagement.
  - 2.** To assess the views of participants who have engaged in selected events to determine whether they feel it has been beneficial to their wellbeing and whether they would be interested in similar events in the future.
  - 3.** To explore the feasibility and sustainability of Cultural Companions during the pandemic and to share key lessons about impact, improvements, reach and sustainability to continue to develop the initiative beyond the period of Covid-19.
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## **Methodology**

### ***Literature Review***

The first step in carrying out the research was to conduct a review of the relevant research literature and policy. The review provides:

- a) A profile of ageing in Ireland and the wellbeing of our older population.
- b) Social isolation, loneliness and interventions based on arts and cultural engagement including delivery through digital technologies.

International research was integrated with research carried out in Ireland in an effort to draw out key issues relevant to the development and implementation of Cork Cultural Companions. The literature review was also used to inform the design and analysis of the evaluation study.

### ***Generating New Insights***

The second step was to carry out an evaluation of the programmes. Two approaches were used: participant observation and individual qualitative interviews.

### ***Participant Observation***

One session of each event was attended by a researcher with the knowledge and consent of the participants, organisers, and facilitators. This direct experience of the events allowed a more qualitative understanding of how they were run, how it felt to partake in them as a

participant, how engaged the participants were, and the technical requirements which each programme involved.

### ***Qualitative Interviews***

Interviews were completed with:

a) Participants from the programme of activities available during the research period (March-July). These were Tea and Ballet and Clay Modelling.

b) Facilitators and organisers of programmes/activities during the research period. Interviews were carried out online between May and July 2021 via the Microsoft Teams platform. The qualitative interviews provided in-depth accounts of the programme experience, with each interview lasting on average 90 minutes. This allowed time for participants to reflect on their experiences of engaging in the activities and their impact on them. For the facilitators who were interviewed in this research, it was an opportunity to discuss the process and collaborations required to bring these activities together. In total, nine in-depth interviews were conducted, five with programme participants and four with facilitators/organisers. Given the focus of the research and the relatively small numbers of people participating in activities and of programme facilitators, an in-depth qualitative study was selected to yield a rich understanding of Cork Cultural Companions. The interview data were analysed through thematic analysis [1]. To enhance rigor, each researcher independently analysed the data and identified core themes [2]. The researchers then had a series of meetings to corroborate meaning and integrate the analysis into the findings as presented in this report.

### **Research Ethics**

Before commencing the data collection, an application was made to the Social Research Ethics Committee, University College Cork and the study was approved on 23<sup>rd</sup> March 2021 (Log 2021-027). Participants were provided with information about the study and consent forms were obtained from all participants prior to commencing interviews.

## Report Structure

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**Section Two** provides a profile of ageing in contemporary Ireland and an overview of issues relevant to the objectives of Cork Cultural Companions.

**Section Three** presents the findings of the study. It examines the impact and acceptability of Cork Cultural Companions based on the experiences of the older adults who participated in the activities. It also explores feasibility and identifies enablers and barriers to developing and delivering activities online.

**Section Four** identifies key learning that has arisen from innovating during the pandemic and considers the sustainability of initiatives developed during this time. This section draws out the report conclusions and makes recommendations for Cork Cultural Companions to consider in planning for the future.

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## **SECTION TWO: A Profile of Ageing in Ireland**

This section presents an overview of important issues for ageing in Ireland in 2021. It begins with a profile of ageing in Ireland by looking at demographic trends, the living conditions of older adults in Ireland, their health and wellbeing, and the levels of participation by older adults in their communities. This provides important context for Cork Cultural Companions because it speaks to the diversity of needs, situations, and environments that Irish older adults live in. Reflecting the objectives of Covid-Proofing Companions, specific attention is paid to loneliness and social isolation along with the approaches used to address these problems. Because our social worlds have pivoted to online communication since the start of the COVID-19 pandemic, the opportunities and barriers faced by older adults when using technology are examined. This section ends with a brief outline of policies and initiatives aimed at supporting older adults to live well. This provides an important policy context and will assist Cork Cultural Companions to chart future directions as we continue to live with COVID-19.

### **Living Longer**

One of Ireland's greatest achievements is that most of us can expect to live into our 80s and beyond. Women who are 65 years are likely to live for a further 21 years, while men at 65 years have a life expectancy of 18.3 years [3]. The number of people aged 65 years and over is estimated to stand at 742,300, accounting for approximately 15% of Ireland's population [4]. This is projected to increase to between 1.53-1.6 million by 2051 [5]. There are important differences in life expectancy across the population: people with higher levels of education are more likely to live longer while life expectancy is lower among Irish Travellers [6], people with intellectual disability [7], people in manual labour [6] and/or living in a deprived area [6]. There are also regional differences in the spread of older adults across the country. The average age of people living in Cork city is 39.1 years and is slightly lower in Cork county, at 37.1 years. However, the number of people aged over 65 years and over is increasing more quickly in Cork county compared with Cork city [8]. As the profile of our population structure gets older, there is an ever-increasing role for initiatives, such as Cultural Companions, in supporting the needs of older adults.

## **Living Conditions**

Over a quarter of people aged 65 years and over (26.7%) live alone [9]. Reflecting life expectancy differences by gender, more women live alone than men [9]. Most older adults live in their own homes in the community, with only 3.7% living in nursing homes [9].

Some older adults live in poverty. In 2018, just over one in ten people over 65 years (11.4%) were at risk of poverty, but the risk is higher for people who live alone [10]. When we look specifically at adults aged 65 years and over who live alone, this increases to 17.6% [10]. Similarly, the *Survey on Income and Living Conditions* found close to one in ten people who are retired experience enforced deprivation (9.4%), meaning they cannot afford expenses such as adequate heating, a meal with meat/fish every second day, the cost of replacing worn-out clothes or furniture, or having friends over for a drink or meal [11]. Therefore, it is important to be aware of, and responsive to, the needs of older adults who do not have the means to pay for arts and cultural activities.

Nearly 300,000 people aged 70 years and over have a full driver's licence but this declines with age [12]. While many hold a driver's licence, older adults often have safety concerns especially when driving at night which may affect the extent to which they use their car [13]. Limited access to transport especially in rural areas and particularly, low levels of evening bus services, do not adequately facilitate older adults going out independently. Furthermore, fears for personal safety often prevent older adults from leaving their homes at night especially in rural areas [14]. Transport, accessibility, and confidence when going out are important considerations when creating opportunities for older adults to engage in arts events across the county.

## **Health and Wellbeing**

Most older adults in Ireland experience good health and report that they have a high quality of life. Women on average have 69.3 healthy life years while men on average have 67.9 years. This is higher than the European average [15]. However, there are important differences across the population: Irish Travellers, people with a lower educational level, people who work in manual labour and/or live in a deprived area are more likely to have chronic health problems in later life. Older adults with chronic health problems are less likely to be positive about their quality of life. Importantly, older adults who have a high level of social engagement including volunteering rate their quality of life more positively [16]. The Irish

Longitudinal Study on Ageing [hereafter TILDA], a study that tracks ageing over time across a representative sample of adults over 50 years in Ireland, indicates that most people have good cognitive health as they get older [16]. While there is an increase with age in chronic health problems such as falls, arthritis and hypertension, frailty is not inevitable and can be prevented or delayed through positive health behaviour strategies, for example exercise, diet, and social engagement [16].

Wellbeing is shaped by our environments and our life experiences [17]. Wellbeing extends beyond our economic and health status because subjective factors also play an important role in our wellbeing. These include our positive and negative emotions, the quality of our relationships and the extent to which we have a sense of purpose in our lives [18]. These subjective factors are impacted by the inequalities that some people face. Research from the UK indicates that people with the poorest wellbeing self-report as being in poor health, out of work with long-term illness, middle-aged, single (including separated, widowed, divorced), living in rental accommodation and as having very low levels of education [19]. While middle-age tends to be a particular point of lower wellbeing, these life experiences and circumstances can shape trajectories and impact wellbeing in later life. Interventions aimed at improving wellbeing need to take account of a person's life histories, circumstances and the adversities they face. It is important to consider how arts engagement can improve wellbeing by influencing emotions, relationships, and a sense of purpose or meaning in life, as well as how to ensure arts initiatives reach those most at risk of poor wellbeing.

### **Community Participation and Connectedness**

While often under-recognised, older adults play an important role in communities across Ireland. Many older adults provide care to parents, partners, grandchildren, and neighbours. Volunteering in community initiatives is common and is linked with lower rates of depression and higher quality of life [16, 20]. Of note, a review of European studies found that being engaged in social activities within the community was associated with higher levels of wellbeing [21]. While engagement in activities is high in people aged 65-74 years, participation in community activities reduces with age [21].

Social cohesion refers to the extent of solidarity and connectedness among groups in a community [22]. Living in neighbourhoods with a high level of social cohesion is associated with more positive health behaviours [23], and better mental health in later life [24]. This

suggests that initiatives aimed at strengthening social ties within communities can have benefits for the individuals who live in them. It also points to the importance for health and wellbeing of involving older adults as volunteers in community programmes, and not just as recipients. Identifying the ways in which Cultural Companions actively involves older members in the planning and/or delivery of activities, along with considering how these activities build a sense of belonging in communities, can help us to understand its role in supporting wellbeing in later life.

### **Access to Digital Technology**

Access to the internet and digital technologies is important when considering older adults' social engagement and participation in community and society. Nationally, most adults have a smartphone and internet access, but rates of digital access reduce sharply with age and in more rural areas [16]. The number of older adults who have never used the internet remains high. A recent study by the Central Statistics Office found 21% of 60–74-year-olds have never used the internet and this number rose to 50% in people aged over 75 years [25]. Of those who do use the internet, six in ten (59%) people aged 60 -74 years reported that they use the internet daily while only three in every ten (28%) people aged 75 years and over reported using it daily [25]. This pattern of technology usage was mirrored in a Cork survey carried out during the COVID-19 pandemic in December 2020 which also showed a reluctance on the part of many older adults to join social activities online [26]. However, it is possible that both internet usage and receptiveness to online social events have changed in the last twelve months.

Geographical location and socioeconomic status are well known barriers to using digital technologies and online communication [27-28]. These factors reflect variation in the quality of broadband access across the country especially in rural areas, and the high cost of internet for people living on low incomes. It is often people who would most benefit from digital technologies that are the least likely to have access to these technologies [29]. A less visible barrier to technology adoption by older adults is ageism. Ageism refers to negative understandings of old age which often result in negative stereotypes of older adults and discrimination [30]. Sometimes these stereotypes impact how an older adult sees themselves in negative ways, a process called internalised ageism [30]. Notably, technology is often not designed with the older user in mind, for example it may not sufficiently take account of



difficulties with vision, manual dexterity, or cognition [29]. A recent report from European researchers highlighted the need to tackle ageism in the design of technologies and policies about technology-delivered services [31-32]. It also identified a need to address internalised ageism that impedes some people from learning how to use technology, and advocates for strategies to empower older adults in the use of technology.

The benefits of digital technologies during the COVID-19 pandemic are nonetheless well documented in recent research. Digital technologies have been used as a means of increasing social connectedness and alleviating the psychological and physical consequences of prolonged social isolation [27, 33-34]. Video communication platforms such as Zoom have helped to connect older adults with friends, family, and community activities [33]. Research has also identified the potential benefits of technology for accessing shy or reclusive older adults [33]. While these have been very useful tools for keeping connected during a pandemic, many older adults still prefer face-to-face social interaction rather than socialising through a smartphone or tablet device [28]. When developing programmes and activities online, it is important to identify both the opportunities and the barriers to participation when events are delivered online. Specifically, it is useful to consider who might experience greater difficulty with accessing and participating in online events, and the steps that can be taken to reduce these barriers.

### **Loneliness and Social Isolation**

There is increasing public concern in Ireland and internationally about social isolation and loneliness among older adults, and this has been amplified throughout the COVID-19 pandemic. While related, there are differences in how social isolation and loneliness are defined, and in the effects that each can have on older adults. People can be isolated without feeling lonely, and some people may not be isolated but still experience loneliness. Social isolation arises from deficits in the structure of our social networks, for example having few people in our social circle or having very little meaningful contact with other people. Loneliness arises when there is a gap between what we would like from our relationships, and our actual experiences of interaction with other people [35-37]. Loneliness has social, emotional, and existential dimensions. This means that the experience of loneliness incorporates the absence of meaningful relationships that meet our need to 'belong' to a community or group along with the experience of feeling completely alone when faced with

difficult experiences [38]. People do not need to experience all dimensions of loneliness to be negatively impacted by loneliness.

When considering the effects of loneliness, it is important to differentiate between situational loneliness and chronic loneliness. Situational loneliness is a temporary experience that may occur after stressful life events such as bereavement or retirement, while chronic loneliness is a long-term experience where the person is unable to develop and maintain satisfying relationships [39]. Loneliness impairs cognitive skills in older adults including memory [40]. Chronic loneliness increases the risk of mental health problems such as depression and anxiety [41]. It is associated with increased risk of health problems including physical inactivity, high blood pressure, poor sleep, poor immune stress responses, higher suicide risk and dementia [42-51]. Chronic loneliness also increases the risk of premature death [39].

Most older adults do not experience social isolation or loneliness but for some older adults, it is a serious issue. Six per cent of older women and seven per cent of older men were identified as socially isolated in TILDA, the Irish longitudinal study on ageing [52]. An estimated 12 per cent of older people across Europe are lonely most of the time, and a further 29 per cent experience loneliness some of the time [53]. Loneliness varies across the lifespan. In a European-wide study, people aged between 30-60 were the least likely to be lonely; loneliness was higher for people under 30 years and those over 60 suggesting a relationship with changes over the life course [54]. The risk of loneliness is higher for people living in urban areas [55], lower socio-economic groups, and people who are single or living alone [49].

Interventions to address loneliness are wide-ranging. Befriending programmes are one of the most common community responses in Ireland. Befriending facilitates non-directive social interaction with another person or group [14]. Some programmes build friendship skills and mentoring to support the person to build connections within their community. Other interventions rely on technology to facilitate social interaction [56-57]. A recent review of research found community arts programmes also play an important role in addressing loneliness by supporting people to build social connections and develop a meaningful role within their communities [58]. It is increasingly clear from the research that interventions need to facilitate the development of meaningful relationships, and not just opportunities to interact with other people. To do this well, interventions need to be tailored to the individual, flexible to their needs and circumstances, and be non-stigmatising [59]. One of the challenges

for intervening is reaching people who are lonely. People who are lonely may find it particularly hard to engage in interventions that seek to reduce their loneliness [29]. When designing arts programmes or events aimed at people who are lonely, it is important to consider the mechanisms that can help to reach those most in need of support.

### **Arts and Cultural Activities and Spaces**

Arts and cultural engagement can improve wellbeing in later life. Arts can bring personal meaning, a sense of mastery, self-acceptance, and joy to older adults' lives [60-64]. It can also build self-confidence [62]. Participation in arts and craft activities, if these activities are meaningful and chosen by the older adult, have been found to sustain a sense of interest and purpose in life [64]. A study, which looked at participation in dance, found the arts improved emotional wellbeing by enabling the expression of feelings, both positive and negative. These were found to psychologically assist with the physical and emotional challenges of ageing itself [65]. These findings highlight the need for the arts activity to align with the interests of the older adult, and so affirm the goal of Cultural Companions to connect people with events of specific interest to them.

Engagement in arts activities can have health benefits including the prevention of depression or loneliness [66]. Additionally, such engagement has been found to reduce the use of health services. A study from California found that involvement in cultural programmes provided by professional artists, such as painting, pottery, dance, music, poetry, drama, and oral histories led to enhanced cognitive performance and improvement in health [66]. This study also found a reduction in doctor visits, medication use, depression, and loneliness for those who participated in the arts activities. While these studies point to promising evidence on the benefits of arts participation for healthy ageing, a recent review highlighted the need for further research to enhance understanding of its impact on health outcomes [67].

Participation in arts activities can also build relationships and a sense of belonging within communities [68-69]. A large study in the UK found engagement in arts events such as live music, live theatre or watching films at cinemas increased feelings of social connectedness, social opportunities, a sense of belonging and collective understanding [70]. Participation in arts events and venues can be particularly beneficial for people who are socially isolated or lonely. However, it is also important to note that some people face barriers to participation in the arts [71]. People aged over 55 years, who have limited social networks and do not have

access to good transport are more likely to be excluded from arts activities and events [61]. In a recent Irish study, it was noted that over half of older adults are involved in creative activities or hobbies either in their homes or in their communities but that this reduces with age [93]. Participation was lower for people with lower levels of education and/or lower income, people living in rural areas, and people with health problems [93]. Additionally, the arts itself can be perceived as exclusionary and as reflecting privilege by social class [63]. While research suggests the arts can exacerbate social exclusion, it also shows that where access is facilitated through community arts programmes, social inequalities can be reduced [63, 69]. This signifies the importance of identifying and addressing barriers to the arts including understanding perceptions of the arts within diverse communities, when developing programmes and other opportunities for older adults through Cultural Companions.

### **Impact of the COVID-19 pandemic**

The COVID-19 pandemic has had a major impact on older adults both directly and indirectly. Older adults are at greater risk of serious illness and death: in the early months of the pandemic, 92 per cent of deaths in Ireland were among the over-65 age group [72]. The pandemic has had a toll on the wellbeing of older adults who have had to manage the general anxiety caused by the pandemic, which was particularly acute for the group highlighted as being most at risk from it [28]. Older adults have had to deal with the grief of losing peers in a time marked by an inability to say goodbye or attend funerals along with limited access to social, emotional, and physical comfort from friends and family [72].

Health is likely to have been impacted by the disruption to health care services caused by the pandemic [27]. There is concern that ageism has increased since the beginning of the pandemic and that this has had a negative impact on older adults' physical health and cognition [73]. Furthermore, opportunities to participate in the community and interact with others have been greatly reduced. Some older adults have struggled to maintain relationships while feeling safe [49]. Loneliness has increased during the pandemic particularly for women and older adults living alone [74]. There is some variation by level of education: people who have a third level degree are less likely to have experienced loneliness [74]. A positive development is that interventions to prevent loneliness can be adapted to accommodate social distancing measures and so continue to be an important tool in tackling this issue [75].

Due to lengthy venue closures and limited access to arts activities, arts initiatives have needed to find new ways of reaching older adults, particularly those most at risk of loneliness, while managing public health risks.

### **Supporting Ageing in Ireland**

In recent years there has been increasing recognition that ageing can be a positive experience where people continue to flourish in later life if they live in supportive environments. At an international level, 2021 marked the start of the *UN Decade of Healthy Ageing 2021-2030*. The World Health Organization [hereafter WHO] *World Report on Ageing and Health* published in 2015 shifted the focus of ageing policy on to healthy ageing. This is defined as “*the process of developing and maintaining the functional ability that enables well-being in older age.*” [76] Wellbeing in older age can be understood as being able to be and do what we value in life [77]. The concept recognises that it is the interaction between our environments and our intrinsic capacity that shapes our functional ability in later life. Functional ability incorporates the ability to “*meet basic needs; learn, grow and make decisions; be mobile; build and maintain relationships; and contribute to society*” [78]. Our social and physical environments can both enhance our functioning and restrict it.

Recognition of the key role played by the environment in determining the ageing experience underpins the WHO Age-Friendly initiatives which have been adopted across Ireland through Age Friendly Ireland [79]. This has been implemented at local level through the local authorities including Cork city [80] and Cork county [81]. The WHO Age-Friendly Cities Framework seeks to improve eight areas that influence the ageing experience. These are: community and health care, transportation, housing, social participation, outdoor spaces and buildings, respect and social inclusion, civic participation and employment, communication, and information [82].

With the *National Positive Ageing Strategy* signalling a new direction in 2013, there has been a move in Irish health and social policy to incorporate positive understandings of ageing. Over the last decade, there has been far greater recognition of the need to create supportive environments that promote social inclusion and enable people to age well in Ireland. National Goal One, ‘Participation,’ outlined in the strategy aims to support involvement of older adults in all aspects of cultural, economic, and social life in their communities [83]. Initiatives, such

as Cultural Companions, that seek to facilitate older adults' engagement in arts activities and events represent national efforts to implement the strategic goal of participation.

### **Key Messages from Existing Research for Cork Cultural Companions**

The profile of ageing in contemporary Ireland outlined here raises several important issues for the design and implementation of *COVID-Proofing Cultural Companions* in Cork. These are summarised in Figure 2, page 21.

**Figure 2 Key Messages for Cork Cultural Companions**

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### **1. Health, Wellbeing, the Arts & Cultural Participation:**

While many people experience good health and wellbeing in later life, some people are at far greater risk of poverty, poor health, and lower wellbeing. These include people who live alone, the Irish Traveller community, people with limited education, people who work in manual labour and/or live in a deprived area, and people with disability or chronic illness. Research indicates that participating in arts and cultural activities can improve health and wellbeing. The arts can bring personal meaning, a sense of mastery, and joy to older adults' lives. It is important that programmes identify mechanisms to engage people most at risk of poor health and wellbeing.

Staying connected with other people, participating in our communities, and having a sense of purpose can improve health and wellbeing in later life. To ensure arts activities are meaningful, it is important that older adults are given the opportunity to contribute to the design and delivery of programmes and events.

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### **2. Loneliness & Social Isolation**

While social isolation and loneliness are common, some people experience chronic loneliness which can result in serious harm to mental and physical health. It can be difficult to engage people who are chronically lonely, partly because of the stigma associated with loneliness.

There are a wide range of interventions for loneliness. Most of these promote opportunities and skills to socially interact and build meaningful relationships and roles within communities. Effective interventions need to be tailored to the individual, flexible to their needs and circumstances, and be non-stigmatising. Arts initiatives have potential to reduce loneliness. Arts programmes can increase social connectedness, social opportunities, and a sense of belonging in communities. Poverty, transport, and perceptions that the arts are exclusionary can act as barriers to participating in arts and cultural activities. It is important to identify measures that address these barriers when designing arts and cultural programmes.

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### **3. Delivering Programmes & Events through Technology**

Many older adults do not use the internet due to lack of access to technology, skills or motivation. Efforts to improve uptake of technology need to empower older adults and involve them in the design of programmes or activities that are delivered through technology. The COVID-19 pandemic has made it harder for older adults to maintain their wellbeing. Loneliness has increased among older adults especially women. While many people prefer in-person social interaction, technology can be effectively used to connect people with the arts and with other people.

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## **SECTION THREE: Experience and Impact of Programmes**

### **The Programmes**

#### **Tea and Ballet**

Tea and Ballet was a Zoom-delivered programme, held every Monday over a six-week period between March and April, with a break for the Easter Bank Holiday. The idea arose out of discussions between the Cultural Companions Coordinator and the Firkin Crane School of Dance in Cork city. It was funded by a nationwide Challenge Fund offered through Creative Ireland and applied for by the Cultural Companions Coordinator, in conjunction with the Community Arts Officer at Cork City Council Arts office. The programme was developed by a former professional ballet dancer who is currently a dance mistress in ballet schools and in higher education.

The initial idea was that the event would be held in January 2021 at a studio in the Firkin Crane. It was to feature a 'live' entertainment component which would incorporate tea and a chat at the end. Following an easing of Covid restrictions in December 2020, however, the incidence of the virus spiralled, and the country was, once again, subject to a full lockdown. As a result of this, and with the technical advice of a design and development consultancy in Cork, the event was moved online.

What emerged was a technically complex series of six one-hour sessions, featuring the ballet, *Giselle*. This was a Zoom event for participants hosted by the facilitator, speaking informally from her home. The facilitator would either be seated in an armchair or would move to a pre-appointed place in her living room to demonstrate the meanings of hand movements.

The view of the facilitator in her home was interspersed with clips from an amateur recording of the ballet, in which she had played a leading role, being performed live at the Cork Opera House. These clips were operated from the Firkin Crane. Fifteen minutes was allocated at the end of each session for participants to ask questions and make comments. Numbers attending the event remained steady over the six weeks at around 20 participants per session.

#### **Clay Modelling**

The clay modelling programme involved two online workshops, each lasting for one hour. Participants were also sent links to *YouTube* video clips which outlined the method of clay modelling. These video clips aimed to guide the participant on the clay techniques which



enabled them to work on their clay at home in their own time. The workshops were held in May 2021 and were designed and facilitated by a potter who has an Arts and Pottery Centre. The programme was funded by the Community Resilience Fund, offered through *Healthy Ireland*.

Again, the event emerged organically through creative networking in response to an ever-changing context of Covid restrictions. The Cultural Companions Coordinator used her network to identify a suitable facilitator for clay modelling. The programme which emerged involved enlisting the help of local libraries. Kits containing clay and equipment were delivered to the homes of participants and the completed pieces were collected and returned to the pottery by local libraries. Given the logistics involved, the event was limited to ten participants. Nine attended the first workshop, of which five returned to showcase their pieces and discuss the experience of creation in the second workshop.

### The Participants

The evaluation captured in-depth feedback from five participants, four of whom had attended both events. Their details are provided below.

**Table 1 Programme Participants**

Pseudonym	Age	Location	[Former]Occupation	Household Composition	Socially Isolated	Prior Experience of Activity
<b>Audrey</b>	69	Cork city	Formerly worked with husband in own business.	Lives with husband.	No	Attendance at ballets since childhood. No prior experience of pottery.
<b>Catherine</b>	70	Cork city	Former librarian and employee of semi-state bodies.	Lives with husband with limited mobility.	Yes	Regular attendance at ballets. Studied ballet for 4 years as a child. Started pottery classes just prior to pandemic.
<b>Maggie</b>	59	Cork city	Volunteer for a local/national community groups/charities. Returned to	Lives alone. Has a neurological disorder resulting in	Yes	Attended the Clay Modelling event only.

			education to complete degree in recent years.	restricted mobility.		No prior experience of pottery.
<b>Joanne</b>	65	Suburbs of city	Former schoolteacher and worked in retail.	Lives alone.	No	Culturally active but interest in ballet had waned. Had worked in craft retail but had no prior experience at clay modelling.
<b>Julia</b>	74	Cork city	Retired doctor.	Lives with husband.	No	Studied ballet for 11 years. No prior experience of pottery.

As can be seen from Table 1, participants who took part in the evaluation were all women and lived in an urban area. They were aged between 59 and 74 and had a good level of education and/or professional careers. Four of the five participants attended both events. Maggie was unable to attend the Tea and Ballet due to her limited internet access and the fact that it was held over six weeks. Two of the four who had attended Tea and Ballet had studied ballet in childhood (Catherine and Julia). All had attended live performances of ballet. Only one participant (Catherine) had prior experience at clay modelling: she had just started an in-person pottery class which had then been cancelled due to the pandemic.

Three of the participants highlighted their extensive network of family, friends, and neighbours. Two, however, (Catherine and Maggie) self-identified as isolated. Catherine had moved back to Cork four years ago. Due to her husband's poor health and loss of mobility, she was no longer able to attend events with him and had found it difficult to make friends in Cork.

Maggie lived alone and noted her difficulty in making friends. This had been accentuated during the pandemic, with the loss of a Meetup group she had joined and the closure of cultural activities, such as art exhibitions. Her interaction with a work colleague had also been restricted. Maggie's mobility was somewhat compromised due to a neurological disorder.

**Table 2 Programme Facilitators**

<b>Pseudonym<sup>4</sup></b>	<b>Occupation</b>	<b>Experience of the Activity</b>
<b>Amelia</b>	Former ballerina. Now ballet mistress at the in a ballet school and in higher education.	50 years' experience as a ballet dancer and teacher.
<b>Peter</b>	Kinsale Pottery and Arts Centre	Has been teaching pottery in Kinsale for over 20 years.

The evaluation captured in-depth feedback from the two programme facilitators. The facilitators of both events had significant experience in their fields. Amelia had been performing ballet since the age of 10. Now retired from performance, she teaches ballet at a ballet school and in higher education. Peter has been teaching at his own pottery for twenty years. The extent of their experience and knowledge lent the events a high degree of credibility and professionalism.

**Table 3 Programme Organisers**

<b>Pseudonym<sup>5</sup></b>	<b>Occupation</b>	<b>Involvement</b>
<b>Aileen</b>	Coordinator, Cultural Companions since January 2020.  (Previous background in organising literary festivals, community work and theatre)	Was pivotal in defining, securing funding for and marketing both events. She also spearheaded contacts with cultural venues, libraries, councils, and the Cultural Companions Steering Group, as well as locating, and liaising with, participants.
<b>Clara</b>	Firkin Crane	Contributed to the creative discussion of ideas which eventually became Tea and Ballet.

<sup>5</sup> Although programme organisers/facilitators waived their right to anonymity in the consent forms they were asked to sign, pseudonyms have also been used for facilitators and organisers. This is not only for the sake of consistency, but also to promote the generic nature of these events in ways which support their potential adaptation by other Cultural Companions groups nationwide, using different facilitators and organisers.

As the Coordinator of Cultural Companions, Aileen's role was central to both events. Her networking with cultural venues, city and county councils, local libraries, and the organisations which make up the Cultural Companions Steering Group meant that the events represented a significant collaborative and creative effort. She sourced the funding and facilitators for the events, as well as taking part in media interviews and organising an online launch of Cultural Companions as part of the marketing of the events. Throughout the long periods of lockdown, Aileen actively engaged with the Cultural Companions members and managed to expand the membership within a highly restricted context. Her engagement with Cultural Companions members particularly in regard to their interests informed the type of events and programmes developed in 2020.

Clara at Firkin Crane was involved from the outset in the initial talks as to how the Firkin Crane could assist with the Cultural Companions initiative. She also contributed to discussions as to how these ideas could be adapted in response to the ever-changing context of the pandemic.

The evaluation of the events as a resounding success was unanimous. Given the unique context of the pandemic, however, the evaluation enabled particular insights into the role of the arts in promoting wellbeing and addressing social isolation, something which is central to the Cultural Companions initiative. It is also an opportunity to identify the factors that influenced how these programmes came about in an effort to distil key learning. This enables a sharing of learning across the Cultural Companions network and can inform the development of Cork Cultural Companions into the future.

## Study Findings

### Resilience through the Arts

The onset of the pandemic coincided with the commencement of the Cultural Companions initiative. While the pandemic meant that the live cultural events which were the cornerstone of Cultural Companions ceased, the feedback from participants provided insights into the ways in which online access to the arts contributed to the resilience of individuals, enabling older adults to sustain their wellbeing and keep socially connected during a time of crisis.

### *A Sense of Connection*

The events took place at a time when those over 65 were advised to ‘cocoon’ or eliminate their in-person contact with others, as far as possible. Several participants highlighted that, although mediated through technology, they valued the sense of connection with people which the events facilitated given their highly restricted context. Maggie, for instance, noted:

*“It’s nice just to kind of have that contact with people.”*

And Audrey observed:

*“When I discovered the Tea and Ballet, I was just totally hooked...because that was sociable. We chatted beforehand.”*

Clara at the Firkin Crane who attended each session, noted that many of the participants had treated Tea and Ballet like a social occasion:

*“...there was a little bit of... ‘I must get myself together and make a nice appearance.’ So, there was that kind of a feel-good factor...”*

### *A Sense of Escape*

Participants noted that they had been able to remove themselves from the reality of a pandemic and be transported elsewhere for that brief period of time each week. This was highlighted by Catherine in her evaluation of Tea and Ballet:

*“I loved the clips. I thought that was beautiful, yeah. I mean, I can get lost in it. I just go into dreamland when I’m looking at it.”*

Julia, too, noted that the arts represented for her:

*“[s]ome place that you can go to get out of yourself, out of your humdrum life. That gives you a sense of magic.”*

Given the oppressively constrained context of lockdown, participants noted how the events had given rise to a sense of freedom. Maggie, for instance, highlighted that

*“...you couldn't make a mistake with it [the pottery] as such, because it was your inspiration that was going into it...”*

### **A Sense of Control**

The events allowed the participants to regain a sense of control in a pandemic situation where the control of every aspect of their lives had been taken out of their hands. This was articulated by Audrey:

*“it [her pottery piece] was such a disaster. But it didn't matter. Whereas when you're...at school or something like that, you get scolded for doing things wrong....But this was just mine and it didn't matter what it looked like.”*

Contradictorily, while the pandemic restricted older adults' lives, the isolation of the pandemic allowed space for introspection which gave rise to a sense of freedom. Individuals were able to spend more time discovering, or re-discovering, their interests. The events formed part of that process of self-discovery. This was noted by Joanne:

*“It [Tea and Ballet] reminded me of how much I liked ballet. They gave me a yearning to reconnect...with that side of stuff.”*

### **Sense of Gratitude**

All participants highlighted their gratitude. This was due not only to the recognition by others of their fear and need for light relief, but also to their sense of the collective effort which the events had entailed. Audrey said:

*“I'm so grateful. I know that a lot of hard work went into it....for me sitting here at home, for both of them, they were amazing they were life-saving.”*

The fluctuating levels of restriction, the loss of valued social contacts and activities, the conflicting information and the persistence of the virus gave rise to a frustration which the events helped to alleviate somewhat. Maggie, for instance, noted:

*“...it was very therapeutic because I was able to get out my annoyance on this bit of clay.”*

### **The Arts and the Social as Mutually Reinforcing**

The research highlighted how the arts and the social are mutually reinforcing. This is firstly through the generation of meaningful engagement. An art form which is meaningful resonates deeply with the individual; when this experience is shared with others who feel the same way, the resulting social engagement is also enhanced.

### **Meaningful Engagement with the Arts**

The research highlighted that these events were meaningful to the participants at the level of both hearts and minds. They were intensely personal, both viscerally and intellectually. But they were also intrinsically social given the desire to share the experience of a meaningful cultural encounter with others who were similarly affected.

That the meaning of an artistic form often comes from a long-standing innate connection to it was noted by many of the participants. Julia, who had studied ballet for 11 years described how she and her friend had journeyed to Russia by ship when she was 21. She recalled:

*"[during] my five days in Leningrad, I went to ballet every night....This was 1968."*

Catherine, too, noted her strong connection to ballet:

*"I was a bit of a dreamer, I suppose, when I was a kid. I visualised myself as a ballerina."*

And Audrey recalled:

*"the boarding school we were going to taught ballet. So, we [herself and her twin sister] had great visions of turning into ballerinas."*

In some cases, the connection can be a latent one. Joanne noted how her previous experience in craft retail had drawn on her instinctive appreciation of the aesthetics of the art form:

*"...when we were selling pottery and other art stuff - the things I like, it's all to do with shape. It's all to do with form. It's all to do with colour."*

Yet, she had never actually tried to create anything using clay herself. Her instant connection to the activity, discovered through the online programme, led her to visit the pottery soon afterwards to book an in-person workshop when restrictions were due to be eased.

### **Socially Connecting through the Arts**

Participants highlighted how this sense of connection to specific art forms translated itself into more meaningful interaction with others who shared the passion. Catherine noted how part of her enjoyment of the theatre was in the discussion afterwards. She said:

*"...I'd enjoy when you're at a play, you want to come out and...say, you know 'I didn't get this?' or 'what did you think?'"*

And Audrey highlighted the difficulty of sharing her passion for ballet with her husband who did not feel the same way about it as she did, and the joy of finding others who did:

*“it was the event but it was also the Cultural Companions because it's an art that I know [my husband] wouldn't be interested in. So, it was nice to do it with other people who wanted to be there, whether I was physically there or on Zoom.”*

The evaluation highlighted the way in which the arts and the social mutually reinforce and benefit from each other through the generation and exchange of meaning. This provided significant support for the whole idea behind the Cultural Companions initiative. Both Catherine and Julia found their experience of the clay modelling was hindered by the absence of social interaction. Catherine said:

*“Pottery was a bit of a challenge, I think, doing it at home on my own. I didn't enjoy it so much doing it in isolation [when compared to her previous experience of doing it as part of a group].’ And Julia noted: ‘I never knew if I'd taken the right amount of clay to actually work on it. So, like, if you were in the classroom, or in a studio, you could actually ask that question.”*

In this way, the social aspect enriched the experience of a practical activity, such as clay modelling, for these participants.

But it is not just that social interaction enhances the experience of the arts; the quality of social engagement is also enhanced through the arts. This relates to the sharing of something which is deeply meaningful with others, and the sense of goodwill and wellbeing that this generates. In this way, the arts open up the potential for meaningful interactions, permitting insights into the more profound aspects of the person. The special sense of camaraderie that was created, notably by Tea and Ballet, was commented on by participants, facilitators, and organisers alike. Audrey notes:

*“It [the Tea and Ballet] was like sitting on the edge of a bed sort of for the first three. And then, for the second three, it was just like sinking down into the softness of the pillows and being enveloped by friendship. It was really lovely.”*

The metaphor highlights the degree of intimacy that was achieved through sharing what was perceived as a profoundly enjoyable event even though participants were not even in the same room. This was also highlighted by Aileen, the Cultural Companions Coordinator, who said:

*“The group made it so special. You [could] feel the warmth from them.”*



And Amelia, the facilitator, noted:

*“As the weeks went on and we got to know each other, it did evolve into more of a meeting and a session and a chat rather than a lecture...”*

### **Social and Cultural Experiences Online**

The events occurred at a time when social and cultural experiences were increasingly moving online in response to the pandemic. The research highlighted how the online aspect served as both an enabler and a barrier in relation to access to social and cultural experiences.

#### ***Technology as an Enabler***

Some participants noted how the online access to the events served as a stepping-stone, allowing them to become somewhat accustomed to the activity and the group without requiring the same degree of courage needed to make that first physical appearance in an arts venue. Audrey, for instance, observed:

*“I'm quite shy. So, I actually left the meeting when the chat was starting for the first one....I wouldn't have done either of them if they weren't online. I wouldn't have gone up to Firkin Crane or somewhere to join in with that group. To walk into a room with them. I would now that I've met them.”*

Joanne also noted:

*“I don't think I would have done this or been involved if it hadn't been through technology ...I can be very reluctant to join a group. In person. You know, I stand at the door and wonder should I go in, shouldn't I go in. Or I make myself late and then make the decision that, 'look, I'm too late to turn up.”*

Participants noted that having cultural events online allowed them to reach more people because of their convenience. Audrey remarked:

*“You don't have to worry about driving, you don't have to worry about parking. You don't have to worry about what clothes you have to wear.”*

In this way, online events can benefit people who may have physical and/or emotional barriers to attending such engagements in person. As Audrey noted, this is especially the case for older adults: *“...there are a lot of people, older people, who don't really go out. Who don't want to go out at night, particularly.”*

The experience of being in an online audience and the realisation that online cultural offerings have particular benefits allowed participants and facilitators to re-imagine cultural events. They highlighted the potential for a blended approach for Cultural Companions' events into the future even when restrictions are fully lifted. This was noted by Amelia:

*“we could live stream it from the studio for those who don't feel comfortable enough to come in. And even who have time constrictions and all of that sort of thing. So, in a way, out of this whole limiting six people within a space has come this other possibility.”*

### **Technology as a Barrier**

Participants also highlighted barriers associated with online events, however. Some commented on how being online impeded interaction among the group, and with the facilitator. This was particularly noticeable in the pottery given that, as highlighted, it was a practical activity which benefitted from the direct interaction of a class. This point was also raised by Peter, the facilitator of the Clay Modelling Workshops:

*“I personally think that doing anything online is just not nearly as stimulating as doing it face-to-face.”*

Both of the participants who self-identified as isolated noted their particular difficulties in interacting online. This was due to the unfamiliarity with the technology and with conversing as part of a group in an online format, noted by Catherine:

*“I'm not used to Zoom and when I started the Tea and Ballet, I felt a bit intimidated by all of these voices....I was the voiceless one that was there.”*

Her lack of contribution was a particular source of regret to this participant given her love of ballet and the fact that she had seen Amelia dance live on stage. She said:

*“I saw her in 'The Playboy of the Western World.' Absolutely beautiful dancer”*

and noted:

*“I'm sure I'd have got more out of it if I had felt able to participate, but I didn't.”*

Maggie also struggled with participating in a larger online group given her fear of interrupting. She said:

*“I can just sit back and let them talk rather than butt in....Maybe if the person running it would say something like 'Maggie, we haven't heard from you for a while, is there something you'd like to comment on?’”*

It was clear, too, that technical equipment had not been designed with older adults in mind. Several participants highlighted problems with their eyesight. Julia noted:

*“it was trying to see it was my problem. Eyesight. I've got cataracts...”*

And Catherine said:

*“I found staring at my phone for an hour...just my eyesight because I need glasses...so you'd find the eye strain.”*

Access to technology was also a barrier to participation. Maggie noted her difficulties with broadband access and the expense of it. This meant that she had been unable to attend Tea and Ballet as it had been held over six weeks. She said:

*“my Internet isn't very good...I pay every month for a set amount. When that amount is gone, I'm stuck.”*

### **Impact and Acceptability**

Whatever their reasons for joining Cultural Companions, all participants were grateful that the events had happened and eagerly awaited news of future activities, be these live or online. They also had many ideas for future events themselves. Audrey noted:

*“I would love for the group of us to go down to him [Peter in Kinsale Pottery] and do a piece down there as well.”*

And Julia said:

*“The last one [of Tea and Ballet] I loved it and it was the end of the series and it was sad. So, that was why a lot of people there, when we were chatting, said '[Amelia], do another one.' So [Aileen] said they'd see what they can manage. Now whether that will be on Zoom...or whether that will be in person, I don't know. But, to me...at this stage, it wouldn't matter.”*

Joanne had already made plans to visit the next live ballet performance:

*“We've decided that next time there's a ballet in Cork, the three of us [her sister, niece and herself] are going.”*

The pandemic meant that Aileen reached out to the membership personally during their time of need – getting to know their interests, likes and dislikes - and participants are likely to remember that. As Catherine said:

*“I thought [Aileen] was fantastic for organising them in what was a very difficult time to organise anything. I haven't met her, obviously, but I think she's amazing to have done what she did.”*

The coordination and effort involved was also noted by participants. Audrey noted:

*“Cultural Companions put a lot of work into organizing it. We got the finished project. ... I'd say a lot of people attending...didn't realize how much work went on in the background. Whereas I would....And that was another thing. I so appreciated it.”*

The goodwill created was recognised by Aileen herself who says:

*“it was worthwhile to keep going [rather than waiting for the pandemic to be over] because it has given Cultural Companions an even stronger base.”*

## **SECTION FOUR: Key Learning for the Future**

In this section, we review the findings of the research and situate them within wider issues relevant to ageing in Ireland in 2022 and beyond. Conclusions and recommendations have been made for Cork Cultural Companions to consider as they look to, and plan for, the future.

### **Shared Commitment within a Community Network**

These events were the outcome of the combined efforts of a pre-existing, but disparate network, which was brought together through the work of the Steering Group and the Cultural Companions Coordinator, and the underlying idea of the Cultural Companions initiative. There was a shared vision among everyone involved that the arts had something significant and vital to offer within the context of the pandemic, even if considerable reinvention would be required. The network of arts, community and statutory organisations has been an invaluable resource and the pandemic has illustrated its potential for using the arts to benefit older adults in ways which add to their wellbeing and resilience. A belief in the ability of the arts to strengthen resilience to adversity contributed to a highly motivated mobilisation of forces offering a great diversity of skills.

A recent systematic review concluded that partnerships across organisations improve the effective implementation of interventions for healthy ageing [84]. Our findings are consistent with this review: the multi-agency approach embedded within the Steering Group, along with effective use of wider networks, allowed for a high level of innovation. The coordinator's background in theatre and organising literary festivals provided the necessary skill set and experience to facilitate innovation across the network. The events were the outcome of long discussions, resourcefulness in an ever-changing context, creativity, openness to ideas and the desire to deliver quality programmes which both entertained and connected people. What was delivered was something meaningful in both an artistic and a social sense.

### **Sustaining Wellbeing**

The accounts of participants clearly depict how the programmes helped to sustain their wellbeing during the pandemic restrictions. The programmes had an impact on important dimensions of wellbeing including the expression of positive emotions, learning something new, building social connectedness and belonging, reinforcing a sense of purpose and a sense of self, and building resilience. These subjective factors are well established as important to wellbeing and are also associated with better health in later life [19, 85-86]. In line with other

research [64-65], the benefits were most apparent when there was meaningful engagement with art forms that participants felt deeply connected to. Research with people living with chronic illness has found that artmaking helps to sustain a sense of identity in the face of illness [87]. The participants in our study indicated that participation in Tea and Ballet supported a continuity of identity over the life course: several participants described how they reconnected with childhood encounters with ballet. For others, particularly in relation to the clay modelling, participation was an opportunity to try out something new which built self-confidence. The activities gave rise to positive feelings of joy and a sense of release, even if metaphorical, from the pandemic restrictions.

A sense of freedom experienced through the arts programmes was expressed by many of the participants. This resonates with other research that highlights how the arts allows for free expression and builds a sense of belonging and connectedness with others [88]. A sharing of the experience with others was clearly expressed when participants described Tea and Ballet which was designed to have an explicit social as well as artistic function. While the Clay Modelling programme did not appear to generate the same sense of social connectedness, some of the accounts indicate that it was a very empowering experience. The ownership by the clay modelling participants of the process of creation contributed to their sense of control in a context characterised by its restriction and uncertainty. Like other arts-based programmes [89], these participants found pleasure and satisfaction in being challenged to learn something new. Their accounts also resonate with research that highlights the deeply subjective and immersive experience involved in a meaningful artistic experience [90]. Again, this relates to the escapism which the participants noted that the programmes made possible. This ongoing access to the arts, and to other people, was particularly crucial for the target age cohort of Cultural Companions who were the most at risk within the pandemic, not only physically but also mentally as a result of their enforced isolation.

However, there were also accounts that indicate variation in the extent to which the arts' programmes had a positive impact: in this study, some people experienced feelings of disappointment that they had not been able to participate in the way that they would have liked, perhaps due to low self-confidence. This suggests a need to be sensitive to the diversity of needs in a group and for ongoing review of how individuals are experiencing the programmes. As a qualitative study, rich and nuanced accounts emerged which conveyed a

diversity of experiences and in this way, it builds upon larger studies that have found statistical associations between arts engagement and better health and wellbeing [71].

### **Addressing Social Isolation and Loneliness**

It is clear from the research literature that it can be difficult to engage people who are lonely in interventions intended to alleviate their loneliness [29]. A specified purpose of *COVID-Proofing Cultural Companions* was to alleviate social isolation among older adults. Given the relatively small number of people who agreed to take part in the study, it is not possible to establish the extent to which older adults who participated were socially isolated. However, two of the study participants self-identified as socially isolated, a state which had pre-existed the pandemic. It is also possible, given the pandemic restrictions at that time, that more of the programme participants would have gone on to experience isolation had they not taken action such as joining arts' programmes. While the participants were women, it may reflect research that indicates more women than men experienced loneliness during this time [74]. However, it points to the need to consider ways of engaging men who are socially isolated or lonely in arts and cultural activities as part of planning for the future of Cork Cultural Companions.

The accounts of the participants who self-identified as socially isolated suggest that intervening to address isolation is complex. Participants expressed a strong need to connect with other people. Some described how technology acted as a stepping-stone to joining groups, where shyness might have been a barrier to initially joining in-person. Others described how they would have liked a stronger role of facilitators to draw in people who find it difficult to speak in the group but may wish to do so. The challenges of participating in online groups mirror challenges within in-person group participation. Strategies for effective facilitation are available and can be adopted to ensure all group members are supported to participate in a group programme [91].

As a qualitative study, the findings elicit nuanced understandings of how the programmes impacted people in the way that they did. This is an essential part of building an evidence-base for Cultural Companions' arts-based programmes and activities. When developing evidence-based approaches, there is a need for studies, such as this qualitative one, that take account of the complexity of why people do what they do, and of how their actions are shaped by the opportunities available to them in their communities and networks [92]. This study

provides a novel contribution to existing literature. Participant and facilitator accounts highlighted how engagement in arts activities acted as a vehicle for conversation, and for meaningfully connecting with other people. In addition, the social experience of interacting with other people strengthened their enjoyment and connection with the arts activities. What was pivotal was a sharing of the journey with others where the arts experience was intrinsically social, but the social interaction could only meaningfully come about through shared participation in the arts experience. This was noticeable not only when it occurred but also when it was absent, with many participants identifying the lack of opportunity to connect with others as a limiting feature of the Clay Modelling programme. This may have contributed to fewer participants completing the programme relative to Tea and Ballet. The interconnectedness between the arts and the social, identified in this study, adds to a growing body of international research on the positive impacts of arts' programmes on the wellbeing of older adults, and specifically those experiencing social isolation or loneliness [70-71].

### **Engaging Older Adults in Programmes**

It was clear from participants' accounts that the choice of art form was meaningful to them as individuals. This is an important consideration when the arts are being deployed to enhance wellbeing [64-65]. It may reflect the depth of informal contact that the Cultural Companions Coordinator had with members during the planning phase where she sought to understand members' interests and design events that would be of interest to members. Involving older adults in the co-design of programmes has been identified as an important factor in the effective implementation of interventions for healthy ageing [84]. As membership expands, it may be helpful to formalise this information by maintaining a database of information on members' interests. It would also be important to identify mechanisms that enable older adults to partake in the co-design of programmes. Examples of this would be the involvement of older adults in the planning and/or delivery of programmes/events including outreach to community members who find it more difficult to attend events due to isolation, accessibility, or self-confidence.

Given the number of participants in programmes was relatively small, it is difficult to establish whether the findings of this study have wider application beyond those who took part in the arts' programmes. Of note, all the participants were women, and many had either professional occupation and/or third-level education. Given the absence of information on



current membership, we are uncertain as to whether the participants featured in the current study are representative of the Cork Cultural Companions membership generally. It may, however, reflect wider patterns in Irish society of arts engagement where participation is lower among older adults with lower levels of education and income [93]. Because the arts are sometimes perceived to be exclusionary [69], it is important to ensure that events cater to diverse tastes, and that programmes and events are advertised in ways that maximise their reach. The study highlights the need to identify mechanisms for engaging people who are lonely and isolated, as well as those who are simply looking for others with a shared passion for a particular art form. Utilising the extensive community networks available to Cork Cultural Companions may help to engage people most at risk of loneliness.

Nonetheless, the study has demonstrated that arts-based programmes for older adults, developed and implemented at local level, are feasible and can have a very meaningful impact on older adults. Continuing to integrate research evaluation into the process of developing and implementing programmes and events, will help to identify and understand the impact of Cork Cultural Companions and inform planning. Ongoing research will also help to identify how to effectively engage diverse communities across the county and particularly, groups most at risk of poor health and wellbeing in later life.

### **Judicious Use of Technology**

The experience of organising the events online provided an insight into how technology could form part of a blended approach for Cork Cultural Companions in the future, with the potential for an online option offered to extend the reach of live events. The evaluation also raised the need, however, for careful facilitation of online participants to ensure the inclusion of those whose unfamiliarity with technology may make them reluctant to join in with group discussions online. These may be participants who are among the most isolated [29]. The evaluation also suggested that certain events fare better on an online platform than others, with practical activities being most compromised through the absence of direct interaction with a group and teacher.

The current study highlights how the use of technology was a double-edged sword, serving as both a barrier and enabler. Resonating with research carried out in the USA [33], this study indicates that technology can provide an access point for people to engage in a group activity where they feel too shy to attend a group event in-person at an arts venue. Instead, people

can participate from the safety of their own home and this may build up a person's confidence to attend events in-person. Similar to the US research [33], the study also highlighted how the connection with others through technology strengthened resilience in times of stress.

The study suggests the benefits of a blended approach in the future, featuring both an in-person and online option, particularly for people who find it difficult to leave their homes for example, due to mobility or caring responsibilities. However, it is important to recognise that many older adults do not have access to the internet and/or to devices suitable for participation online (for example, a large screen, speakers, microphone). The number of older adults in Ireland who have never used the internet remains high [25]. Participants' accounts in this study suggested that it is often those who are already isolated who struggle most with technology.

The study also highlights that older adults may have multiple problems which are not considered in a technology's design. The issue of eye strain and difficulty with seeing the screen was highlighted by participants and mirrors issues raised in research carried out internationally [29]. This should be borne in mind when considering how online events are technically set up for older adults. It would also be beneficial to identify what supports are needed to enable older adults to get set up on and trained in the use of technology, and to identify resources within the community and voluntary sector that could provide these supports.

### **Considerations for the Future**

The study has highlighted issues for Cork Cultural Companions to consider as they plan for the future. In summary, these are:

#### **Considerations for Future Development**

**1. Database:** Create a database for the collection of information on members' cultural interests and their needs for example, the degree of facilitation and support which they require. The latter might relate to assistance with the technology and with participating in online events, or efforts by a facilitator to arrange for introductions at in-person events.

**2. Co-Design:** Develop mechanisms whereby members can contribute to the design of programmes and events for example, through formation of a representative panel

of members. As the membership grows, this may help to ensure events remain relevant to specific interests and needs within the membership group.

**3. Personalised:** Ensure the choice of events are personalised to the needs and interests of individual members. Having diverse programmes and/or events running concurrently can help to ensure the participants have access to arts/cultural activities that are meaningful to them. This could be achieved by working in partnership with venues/arts groups who would design programmes of interest to members. It would be a way of connecting older adults to the rich arts and cultural opportunities available locally, both online and at venues. When doing so, it is important to consider what supports a person may need to derive most benefit from the event/programme socially and artistically. It is also important to consider where and how programmes and events are advertised. This can aim to break down barriers and promote the arts as accessible through finding art forms that are meaningful to a broad spectrum of individuals.

**4. Inclusive:** Identify mechanisms for including a diversity of needs particularly for older adults who are lonely, physically, or socially isolated, people who cannot afford the cost of arts events, or who lack access to technology, devices and/or internet. There is also a need to extend the reach of activities to men and to groups most at risk of poor health or wellbeing in later life. The community networks and resources available to Cork Cultural Companions can provide a way to reach older adults who may not be aware of the events but may benefit from them. Developing events and programmes that could run online and/or in-person would help to improve accessibility, recognising that older adults face a variety of barriers to participation and have different preferences and needs.

**5. Connect the Social and Creative:** When designing and delivering events or programmes either directly, or where led by community arts' groups/venues, it is important to consider both the artistic and social value of the activity. This study identified how the artistic and social benefits are highly interconnected and where both are present in an activity, the social and artistic value is strongest. Whether online or in-person, there needs to be spaces for the person to share their experience of the art activity with other people.

**6. Access and Technology:** As events and programmes continue to run online, it would be important to document the difficulties people have with accessing events

through technology. This would help to identify whether the barriers relate to a lack of suitable devices (for example, size of screen, microphone), internet access (quality or cost of broadband), technical skills and confidence. This would help to clarify what resources may help for example, devices, internet access, or technology training supports. Cork Cultural Companions could connect with stakeholders in the community and voluntary sector who are working to improve access and skills in the use of technology.

**7. Research:** It would be beneficial to continue a programme of research in tandem with the development of initiatives. Research can generate an evidence-base for activities and ensure events and programmes are tailored to the specific needs of older adults across the county. Creation of a members' database (See Recommendation 1) will help researchers to systematically analyse impact, acceptability and reach of the initiative according to the dimensions known to affect both arts engagement and wellbeing (for example, gender or location).

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