Imagine Arts: How the arts can transform care homes

Emma Broome, TanDem PhD Candidate, University of Nottingham
Justine Schneider, Professor of Mental Health and Social Care, University of Nottingham
Tom Dening, Professor of Dementia Research, University of Nottingham

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There is a growing body of evidence that demonstrates that the arts have an important role in the care of people with dementia. The Baring Foundation, a UK based organisation which aims to improve the quality of life of those who may be disadvantaged or discriminated against, conducted a report which found that incorporating creativity and artistic expression can improve the care and quality of life of people who are living in residential care (Cutler, 2011). Imagine Arts was a three year programme funded by Arts Council England and the Baring Foundation. It was a collaboration between a national care home provider, local arts organisations, the local authority and a higher educational institution. The aim of the programme was to enrich the lives of older people in care, changing perceptions about care homes and to integrate creativity and arts experiences as an essential part of life in care homes. Residents in seventeen care homes, many of whom living with dementia, were exposed to a diverse programme of arts interventions.

Evaluation Approach

The independent evaluation was led by a team from the University of Nottingham. It explored the impact of Imagine Arts on care home managers, activity coordinators and care personnel as well as arts practitioners and older people who attended the activities. Evaluation methods included qualitative interviews with stakeholders; observations of creative art sessions using Dementia Care Mapping; case studies of individual art forms and a Social Return on Investment analysis to demonstrate the wider impact of investment. This summative article synthesises and presents the findings of the evaluation exploring the impact of the programme on stakeholders and drawing out the main transferable messages,

Feasibility

This exploratory programme demonstrates that the delivery of high quality arts activities in care homes is feasible. Over the past three years, Imagine has provided 313 workshops for 1302 residents in ten care locations across the city. The art forms included:

- Carnival – a strand of work to ensure that care home partners had the opportunity to get involved with community life and events and feel part of something bigger in their localities.
- Accessing art gallery collections using touchscreen tablet computers – enabling digital access for older people whose circumstances do not allow for physical visits to world class collections.
- Live streaming of classical concerts – allowing residents to continue to enjoy and be part of quality cultural activities and bring new experiences to people who might not have attended such events before.
- Visits to local cultural venues – assisting care homes in overcoming barriers that prevent older people from accessing cultural venues.
- Participatory poetry, dance, theatre and singing
The programme consisted of artist residencies, commissions and opportunities to see and participate in regular arts activities and events. These experiences have generated a great deal of practice knowledge about the feasibility of delivering arts activities in care homes. It has also built up experiential capital of the artists themselves, whose confidence and skills have grown. Imagine has also been successful at creating effective partnerships between care homes, local arts venues, arts practitioners and the co-ordinators of the programme, however has taken a great deal of time. Contrary to the initial perceptions of the Managers (Broome et al., 2017a), cognitive and mobility impairments did not prevent residents from participating in the programmes of arts. Overall, residents had positive reflections about the programme and many regularly attended more than one session. Socialisation was one outcome which seemed to improve throughout the sessions; one resident commented:

_Everybody enjoys it and it brings us together because when we are on our own we sit rather in silence, whereas this makes you sit forward, open your mouth, and speak, which is a big thing at our age. There is a big variety of ages here and different ways of living and different lives we’ve all led and you sort of join them together with your programme all of us together and I’m very grateful._

Care home resident

**Culture of care**

It is evident that a shift needs to take place to embed the arts fully in residential care. That culture change has only begun. While the status of Activity Coordinators, in the eyes of colleagues and residents has been enhanced through the programme, they cannot maintain this level of arts interventions without additional funding, and the support of their budget holders. Imagine has provided 26 training sessions for 379 people and this has been an important element of the programme. Given the reality of staff turnover - its continuation may be important to embedding the Imagine programme learning and to encourage care staff to participate in creative arts programmes (Broome et al., 2017b). In particular, recognising that care home staff play a determining role in enabling residents to access arts opportunities. Two workshops were delivered, designed to engage care home staff with the potential of the arts. Through these and their direct contact with arts in homes, front-line personnel have had their awareness raised in relation to the scope and potential of arts interventions.

_If they didn’t have people coming in to do these things it would be really dull. The [residents] will sleep better, they will eat better, and they have something to talk about with each other. They have that feeling that they’ve been laughing and happy and if you’ve got dementia that feeling lasts a lot longer than a memory like might last._

Activity Coordinator

_I think that as an activities coordinator I have learnt so much as well because I’ve learnt quite a few techniques. It does give you a little bit more confidence to do other things not just the normal things that everybody does in a care home setting._

Activity Coordinator

Finally, organisational theory indicates that leadership from managers is needed to cement such changes and to enable them to continue in a care home context, since the commitment of
ongoing funding is an essential requirement. Persuading managers of the value of artistic activities in care homes is therefore seen as an important task to evaluate Imagine.

Legacy

Although the programme funding has ended, there is lasting evidence of its impact. Examples of legacy include the act that some artists have taken the initiative to bid for their own funding to continue work in care homes. Activity coordinators have been inspired to continue elements of the Imagine programme with their residents; displaying some of their work in the care home and in local community settings.

Relatives of the residents have higher expectations of the activities to be delivered. Some arts venues have reviewed their accessibility to this user group. Care homes and day facilities have invested in tablet computers to take advantage of the access to digital arts and activities that these afford, in particular for people with dementia. Activity Coordinators are working directly with artists without need of an intermediary.

"They have been able to introduce us to so much that we wouldn’t really be able to get involved in that easily. I think maybe now I would be more inclined to get them involved in things...especially local things and involve people that could bring something into the home.

Activity Coordinator"

The Activity Coordinators are also meeting independently as a professional group under the auspices of a large care home provider. A follow-on project funded by Nominet has enabled City Arts to extend the Armchair Gallery project to other cultural venues such as Mr Straws House, Lowry and the Pitt Rivers Museum. Other bids are in hand, each of which utilise the experience of Imagine to argue persuasively for further funding and evaluation for artistic activities for older people and people with dementia.

Recommendations

There are several recommendations which can be made following the Imagine Arts programme. First, Activity Coordinators should be empowered to facilitate the integration of quality arts into everyday practice. This can be accomplished by giving them the freedom and funding to commission artists. With this, it is expected that they will enhance their status and gain recognition for their meaningful work. Likewise, training opportunities should continue to be offered, both for artists working with older people, in particular, people living with dementia and for Activity Coordinators and care home personnel on specific arts-related interventions and how they can assist with their implementation. Overall, the social and economic analysis demonstrates that the Imagine Arts programme represents a good social return on investment and a justifiable use of resources. These recommendations are relevant for dementia care specialists, participatory arts organisations, arts venues, funders of the arts and their evaluation, as well as to practitioners or all forms of arts activities designed to engage older people, including those with memory problems or dementia.

References

