

Executive Summary

Origins and Objectives

Age & Opportunity promotes the participation of older people in the arts through an annual month-long national festival – Bealtaine – that celebrates creativity in older age. It is the largest co-operative arts festival in Ireland and arguably its biggest arts festival. Although the core of the festival takes place during the month of May, its effects are felt throughout the year. Bealtaine aims to engage older people in the arts in Ireland in a participative and collective manner. It provides an opportunity for people to enjoy arts activities in later life that would not have been available to many of them in their earlier years. The festival incorporates all forms of art including music, theatre, literature, poetry, dance, film, storytelling, painting, drawing, print-making, sculpture and photography. Bealtaine involves co-operation and collaboration between Age & Opportunity and a range of agencies and organisations including: national cultural institutions,

national and regional arts bodies, public libraries, Active Retirement Associations, long-stay care facilities, local authorities and the Health Service Executive (HSE).

There are two key dimensions to the Bealtaine programme. First, Bealtaine brings arts programmes to older people in Ireland, thereby providing opportunities for creativity that participants might not otherwise experience. Second, Bealtaine contains the potential to make a significant contribution to the health and well-being of older people participating in the various activities associated with the programme. Creativity is a key factor in adaptation to ageing and a number of studies have also shown benefits for health and social outcomes in older people. The evidence from the limited number of international studies that have been carried out suggests that creativity strengthens self-confidence and morale in later life, contributes to physical health, and enriches relationships through greater social connectivity. The purpose of the current study is to assess the contribution of the Bealtaine festival to the promotion of the participation of older people in the arts in Ireland and to improving the health and well-being of older people. We incorporate both creativity and health and social gain elements as part of the evaluation.

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Methodology

In terms of the methodology for the study, we decided to focus primarily on the impact and implications of Bealtaine for a variety of current stakeholders including: organisers of events, facilitators, arts agencies, older people and policy-makers. The organisers are key figures in the dissemination of the festival. For that reason, we undertook a postal survey of all Bealtaine 2007 organisers across the country. The number of completed questionnaires returned was 187, representing a 43% response rate from this source. Postal questionnaires were also sent to members of one randomly selected Active Retirement Association engaged with Bealtaine in each county in Ireland. This was necessary to explore the impact of the festival on older people themselves. Members of Active Retirement Associations from over half (14) of the 26 counties responded to the survey yielding a total of 253 completed questionnaires. The views of older people were also solicited through a questionnaire handed out at a regular Bealtaine-inspired event run by the Irish Film Institute. 103 questionnaires were returned from this source. Face-to-face interviews were also conducted with 26 people including facilitators, artists, participants, organisers and policy-makers associated with the Bealtaine festival. Four members of a dance programme took

part in a group interview as did five members of a long-established writers' group that had its origins in Bealtaine in 1999.

Bealtaine Programme

Bealtaine has grown steadily in the past ten years and the number of participants has multiplied seven-fold to an estimated 51,000 in 2007. The number of organisers or partners involved in Bealtaine has increased ten-fold since 1996. This growth is observable in all sectors with a particularly large increase in the number of day care centres and Active Retirement Associations involved in the programme. Most organisations currently engaged with Bealtaine have ongoing events or programmes for older people that run every year. A high proportion (88%) of these organisations say that their programmes will continue into the future; those who did not expect to continue gave reasons such as lack of interest due to the age profile of membership increasing and difficulties in regard to funding.

The total reported cash spending on Bealtaine by organisations other than Age & Opportunity amounted to €285,549 in 2007. The direct grant from the Arts Council for Bealtaine in the same year was €70,000, but the Council also probably contributed

indirectly through its financial support of other agencies and organisations involved with the festival. Overall spending represents a considerable multiplier on Arts Council investment in terms of direct and indirect funding. Fundraising continues to be the major source of multiplier finance, accounting for over one-quarter of all monies spent on the programme. Local authority budgets account for 22% of all funding, while library budgets contribute 10% to overall expenditure. Cash transfers represent only part of overall resource allocation for Bealtaine events and activities. Two-thirds of all organisations surveyed reported using other ‘in-kind’ resources to supplement direct financial expenditure. Active Retirement Associations are particularly reliant on members’ own time contributions to arts events and activities.

Bealtaine and the Arts

Three-quarters of respondents believe that one of the most important achievements of Bealtaine is that it stimulates older people to participate in the arts. Face-to-face interviews confirm that Bealtaine is valued by participants for this and for the sense of celebration and identification with other older people that participation in Bealtaine engenders. Most participants believe that Bealtaine has succeeded

in promoting positive attitudes to the arts in society and say that it has helped broaden the base of artistic endeavour in the country. However, while Bealtaine has succeeded in attracting new and participatory audiences to the arts, some groups remain excluded, especially older people who lack transport, those who live alone and are not members of older people’s groups, men and people who are housebound.

Organisers were generally happy with the artistic quality of Bealtaine events/programmes. The availability of professional artists/facilitators seemed to matter for quality; a number of organisations said that quality suffered when it was difficult to find professional facilitators in the locality. Some organisers said that the quality of events varied, but the social aspect of the events/programmes often compensated for inferior quality. Overall, artists and facilitators see Bealtaine as important in providing a vehicle for showcasing and validating their work with older people and for highlighting the potential contribution of older people to the arts in Ireland, both as participants and consumers.

Bealtaine and Health and Social Gain

Bealtaine provides significant health and quality of life gains for participants.



'Breaking the Mould'
by Arts for an Active
Mind with Paul
Cialis at West Cork
Arts Centre
(Bealtaine 2008)

Photo
Phil Pound
Photography

People feel better because of Bealtaine. The creative expression associated with Bealtaine fosters feelings of well-being that improves psychological outlook and morale among participants and older audiences. Dancing, drama and visual art programmes were specifically mentioned by respondents as encouraging personal development. Taking part in local arts projects is a popular way of becoming involved in community activities. Bealtaine provides an outlet for social connections that enrich the experience of ageing and provides hope and expectation through enhanced social relationships with others. Interviews confirmed that participants succeed in extending their social networks through participation in Bealtaine in a variety of ways ranging from the formation of lasting friendships in their own groups to meeting other older people involved in similar activities locally and elsewhere. Self-confidence and self-esteem are enhanced; social cohesion and social capital are nurtured.

Public Policy for Bealtaine

Responsibility for arts policy in Ireland is largely vested in the Department of Arts, Sport and Tourism and the Arts Council. However, there is currently no unifying arts policy for older people, which means that existing supports remain fragmented and inconsistent

across sectors and regions. Older people are not referenced as a target group in the Department's Arts and Culture Plan, 2008; similarly, older people are not explicitly mentioned in Arts Council strategic planning documents. Not surprisingly, in view of the absences referenced above, the Health Service Executive (HSE) does not currently have an official policy on older people and the arts. Arts activity for older people within the local authority sector, although better, tends to be fragmented and dependent on financial resources, staff capacity, local circumstances and whether the arts officer has an interest in developing such programmes. Public policy needs to impact on the wide variety of agencies with responsibility for the delivery of arts programmes and community-based education programmes for older people. To achieve this goal, co-responsibility for policy for the arts and older people should be taken up by the Office of the Minister for Older People, whose remit covers many different Government Departments and agencies, with new funding being made available to organisations involved in the production of successful creative programmes for older people in a variety of settings.

Bealtaine operates within a policy vacuum that serves to undermine rather than enhance the work of the

Poet Brendan
Kennelly provides the
theme 'forever begin'
for 2007

(Bealtaine 2007)

Photo

Mark Condren,
courtesy of The
Sunday Tribune



festival in achieving specified goals and objectives. The Bealtaine festival remains precariously funded, without adequate staffing and without any full-time staff, depending on the goodwill and enthusiasm of volunteers for its survival. This raises questions of sustainability in the long run, particularly if increases in expectations among the public are not met by the continued delivery of a high-quality arts programme. A national policy for older people and the arts is necessary to support Bealtaine and to realise the considerable potential for health and social gain associated with creative activities and events in this area.

Bealtaine's Future

Bealtaine is the major creative programme for older people in Ireland and has global recognition as an innovative and original festival. The festival is part of the creative landscape for older people and their families, and its effects are felt locally and nationally. Bealtaine yields considerable health and social gains for older people across a wide range of indicators. Unfortunately, these gains have not yet been recognised by an official system that continues to view resource allocation for older people in terms of an illness paradigm rather than a health-enhancing paradigm. Older people are holistic beings with multiple needs that cannot be met solely through health and social care interventions. For that reason, we need a strategic plan for older people and the arts that recognises the importance of equality of access to creative programmes for every older person in the country. The existence of such a plan would provide important support to Bealtaine in terms of increased resources and funding, allowing it to maintain its pre-eminent global position. More practically, it would facilitate the hiring of additional staff that would help broaden and deepen the programme across the country. This would facilitate greater efficiency and information-sharing, as well as facilitating further growth in the festival programme.

US-based Liz Lerman Dance Exchange collaborates with the Dunamais Arts Centre in Portlaoise and the Source Arts Centre in Thurles to create a moving performance with support from Age & Opportunity (Bealtaine 2008)

Photo
Alf Harvey



