MEMORABLE

NATIONAL REPORT IRELAND

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ABOUT THIS PUBLICATION

This report presents the findings of desk research and interviews conducted in Ireland within the Erasmus+ project Memorable (cooperation partnership in adult education, project number: 2024-1-BG01-KA220-ADU-000245828). More information is available at https://memorable-project.eu/.

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1 INTRODUCTION AND METHODOLOGY

1.1 Project context

The Memorable project is an Erasmus+ initiative that aims to promote a dementia-friendly society by training volunteers, (in)formal carers, artists and cultural stakeholders to make cultural institutions more accommodating for people with dementia. The project will develop educational materials to raise awareness and equip individuals with the necessary skills for creating dementia-friendly cultural spaces.

This report presents the findings of desk research and interviews conducted in Ireland as part of the **Memorable Project**. The research portrayed in this report aimed to assess the landscape of dementia-friendly cultural practices, identifying existing initiatives, and analysing the educational needs of people with dementia, their family members, cultural workers, volunteers, and other stakeholders.

Lessons learned from local and regional projects and training efforts in the field are provided as a valuable knowledge base. Additionally, the expertise of diverse stakeholders, including people living with dementia, their families, healthcare providers, staff from cultural institutions, trainers, and facilitators with experience in dementia-friendly practices, provides deeper insights into key issues surrounding cultural inclusion.

The research phase focused on four key objectives:

1. Facilitating the creation of comprehensive learning resources by identifying educational needs.
2. Enhancing understanding of the dementia-friendly cultural landscape and its supporting structures.
3. Promoting cross-border knowledge exchange by sharing existing practices and experiences.
4. Identifying effective practices that can serve as models for future initiatives.

The study examined local and regional initiatives that promote inclusive cultural engagement and identified exemplary dementia-friendly cultural practices tailored for people with dementia and their families. Practitioners, experts, and potential learners were actively involved throughout the process to ensure the subsequent development of learning modules would be relevant and practical.

Based on first-hand data and expert insights, the findings provide a nuanced understanding of the learning needs, challenges, and best practices related to the cultural inclusion of people with living dementia and their carers. These insights will contribute to the development of educational materials, including a **European Compendium**, to raise awareness and support the expansion of dementia-friendly cultural practices.

1.2 Methodological approach

The research activities for the Memorable Project followed an exploratory qualitative study based on primary and secondary data. This approach combined desk research and stakeholder interviews to provide a comprehensive understanding of dementia-friendly cultural practices. It ensured a thorough analysis of existing initiatives, educational needs, and best practices across partner countries.

The desk research phase involved a comprehensive literature review to gather and analyse existing knowledge, reports, and studies on dementia-friendly cultural practices. The key focus areas included:

- **Public Discourse**: Examination of current discussions on dementia-friendly cultural engagement.
- **Access Challenges**: Identification of barriers faced by people with dementia and their caregivers when engaging with cultural institutions.
- **Best Practices**: Review of case studies showcasing successful dementia-friendly programmes.
- **Educational Needs**: Assessment of learning requirements for stakeholders, including caregivers and cultural institution staff.
- **Training Materials**: Analysis of existing educational resources on dementia awareness and cultural inclusion.
- **Policy Landscape**: Evaluation of national and regional policies supporting cultural participation for individuals with dementia.
- **Support Structures**: Overview of available services and frameworks for fostering dementia-friendly cultural spaces.
- **Recent Initiatives**: Identification of projects promoting inclusivity in the cultural sector.
- **Training Programmes**: Exploration of current training opportunities for volunteers, caregivers, and cultural workers on dementia-friendly practices.

Data was sourced from academic and policy databases, government reports, organisational publications, and relevant cultural sector materials to ensure a well-rounded analysis.

To complement the desk research, online semi-structured and narrative interviews were conducted with a total of 12 key stakeholders, some of them with dual roles.

Table 1. Sample and participants' characterisation

Num. interviews	Role	Gender
1	Formal carer	Female
1	Informal carer/musician facilitator	Male
1	Informal carer/researcher	Female
3	Arts Facilitators	Males
1	Facilitator/programme director	Female
2	Programme coordinator/manager	Females
2	Library staff	Females

1	Researcher	Male

This combined methodology ensures a nuanced understanding of the landscape, challenges, and best practices in dementia-friendly cultural participation, providing a strong foundation for developing educational resources and the broader objectives of the Memorable Project.

2 RESULTS OF THE RESEARCH PHASE

Dementia is a complex, progressive condition involving changes in cognitive function that can impact daily activities and independence (Jean & Dotson, 2024). It encompasses various subtypes, with Alzheimer's disease being the most prevalent form, accounting for 60–70% of cases (WHO, 2017). Other common types of dementia include: vascular dementia, Lewy body disease, frontotemporal dementia (FTD), early/younger onset dementia, and their symptoms differ depending on the type:

Table 2. The most common types of dementia, description and symptomatology

Type of dementia	Description/Cause	Key symptoms
Alzheimer's disease	Most common in older adults; caused by a buildup of abnormal proteins that damage brain cells, and it is characterised by slow progression	Memory loss, word-finding difficulties, and problems with reasoning
Vascular dementia	Caused by reduced blood flow to the brain, often due to strokes or small vessel disease	Memory difficulties, disorientation, and gait changes, with a sudden or gradual onset
Lewy body disease	Caused by abnormal protein deposits (Lewy bodies) that disrupt nerve function	Parkinson-like movement problems, hallucinations, confusion, sleep disturbances
Frontotemporal dementia (FTD)	Typically affects people aged 45–65; caused by damage to frontal and temporal lobes	Personality change, social inappropriateness, language and speech difficulties
Younger-onset dementia	Diagnosed before age 65; may have genetic factors or be linked to other diseases (e.g. Parkinson's, Huntington's)	Variable symptoms; may include cognitive, behavioural, or motor difficulties

Source: Dementia Understand Together (HSE, 2025)

As of 2021, over 55 million people worldwide are living with dementia, a number expected to rise to approximately 139 million by 2050 (WHO, 2021a). In Europe, prevalence is the second-highest globally, while in Ireland, more than 64,000 people are currently living with dementia, a figure projected to exceed 150,000 by 2045 (HSE, 2020).

As the population ages, the number of people living with dementia is also expected to rise. However, dementia is not exclusively part of ageing but rather a condition influenced by various risk factors, with age being the most significant (Begley et al., 2023; WHO, 2017). In addition to

non-modifiable risk factors, some lifestyle-related risk factors have been associated with dementia, such as mid-life depression, low educational attainment, social isolation and cognitive inactivity (Livingston et al., 2020).

Dementia presents wide-ranging challenges for people living with the condition, as well as for their carers, families, and support networks, influencing physical, psychological, social, and economic well-being. These challenges are further exacerbated by stigma and discrimination (WHO, 2021b). Despite the significant proportion of the Irish population who know someone living with dementia (52%), public understanding of the condition remains limited (Glynn et al., 2017). Given the diverse groups involved, both directly and indirectly, a broad approach is needed to address the multifaceted nature of dementia.

In response to these challenges, raising awareness about dementia, promoting inclusion, and creating dementia-friendly spaces are essential steps toward reducing stigma, combating social isolation, and fostering supportive communities. Addressing dementia from a rights-based perspective ensures that people living with dementia are not only cared for but also recognised as active members of society with the right to participation, dignity, and autonomy. In this context, arts and culture enhance well-being, foster social connections, and create inclusive environments. The following sections explore key aspects from the perspective of arts and culture and their impact on dementia care and community support.

2.1 The role of cultural spaces in enhancing well-being

Among dementia's primary symptoms, short-term memory loss and other domains are compromised, such as complex attention, executive function, learning and memory, language, perceptual-motor function, and social cognition (Begley et al., 2023). However, non-cognitive changes such as anxiety, apathy, depression, delusions and hallucinations are also frequent, along with other behavioural responses. Research has shown that approximately 40% of people living with dementia have psychological distress (Leung et al., 2021).

In the absence of curative treatments to counteract the degenerative aspect of dementia and its symptomatology, interventions to improve the quality of life of people living with dementia and their caregivers or family members acquire relevance (Chancellor et al., 2014). Participation in arts and cultural activities, such as museum visits, music sessions, and poetry reading and creation, has been associated with improved mood, reduced anxiety, and greater social engagement for people with dementia (Belver et al., 2018; Caulfield, 2011; Letrondo et al., 2023). It also improves behavioural symptoms and the quality of life (Chancellor et al., 2014; Emblad and Mukaetova-Ladinska, 2021).

Interviewees from multiple backgrounds consistently emphasised cultural engagement's substantial emotional, social, and mental benefits. Beyond benefits for participants themselves, family members and carers also spoke of the meaningful connections these moments fostered. A formal carer (female) recalls the joy her client experienced through music: *"She loved music. For her, who had so many memory problems, it was very comforting to remember the lyrics of the songs... She sang, even danced sometimes, to Ravel's Bolero... We enjoyed it immensely."*. A musician and facilitator (male) also supported this: *"just singing as a group […] seems to be very effective for the residents themselves or the daycare participants, and if there's any family members there and if there's any staff there, and for us as well"*.

A musician, who also had cared for his mother before she moved into a residential facility, shared how music continued to provide a deep connection between them during her final years in care:

> *"She liked music […]. Sometimes my brother and I would play in her room, and that's the point where you discover the connection you make with people you're going much deeper than you are at a concert, I call them deep and meaningful moments, which are really important because I know the power now of music and how it affects people's well-being and how it affects your brain […]."*, (Informal caregiver and musician, male).

Others noted how creative encounters can reshape carers' perception of the people they support. A music therapist observed:

> *"I've noticed different things. For example, sometimes they will be shocked if they see a person start to sing, […] because they would never see that side of them. There may be an underestimate of the level of interaction and engagement you can get out of the person, so I think that can be helpful. And then, that's going to hopefully have a positive impact on how they care for the person."*, (Music therapist, male).

Creative expression also plays a central role in supporting identity, primarily through co-creative activities that centre the experiences and stories of participants. (Hatton, 2021). Practices can provide mental stimulation and an enjoyable sense of normalcy, helping participants feel "like everyone else" and part of a community. This aspect was reflected in the account of a facilitator and programme director (female) who described how music-making with residents became a way of honouring personal and collective memory, highlighting their autobiographical nature and cultural value: *"This is not about light touch, this is actually doing some amazing stuff, really autobiographical, and capturing the history and heritage of our communities through song, the stories that are overheard."*.

Many facilitators also spoke about how creative settings help people living with dementia communicate in unexpected and authentic ways. Evidence has shown that different types of artworks also evoke different responses, highlighting the need for tailored approaches, as no single format suits all participants (Hendriks et al., 2019). One facilitator explained how the environment fosters inclusion and dialogue:

> *"[…] we remove that sense of you needing to have an art theory background or an art history background, and really, it's just observation talking. You're talking about simple elements, and naturally, from there, you progress into a deeper conversation because the participants, once they've started to get involved in the conversation, want to talk more. And this is what I found from my experience […] that conversations always happened. Conversations happen between participants as well. And that's why we are there to cater for conversations. So, if a conversation is going one way, we try to let it go in that organic way, and letting people speak so they feel like the space is there, so that they belong in the space."*, (Facilitator and curator, male).

Similarly, a music therapist (male) reflected on the unique communicative role of music within these encounters: *"I can sometimes see a different side to the residents […]. I'm offering an alternative way to communicate, because that is a need. […] there's still a need to connect and interact and have meaningful engagement with another human. And I think I'm lucky because I can do that through the music."*. Even when cognitive or speech abilities change, people living

with dementia retain the capacity to express themselves through art in powerful and creative ways (Chancellor et al., 2014).

These moments of meaningful connection not only support individual well-being, they also underscore the need to create environments where people living with dementia are seen, heard, and included in ways that honour their full humanity. However, when public understanding of dementia remains limited, this can contribute to fear, stigma, and social exclusion (Phillipson et al., 2019). These social barriers can undermine confidence, reduce access to meaningful activity, and even prevent individuals from continuing to live independently in their own homes (Caulfield, 2011; Hung et al., 2021).

In this context, inclusive cultural initiatives serve as tools of visibility and social change. By engaging people with dementia in shared, valued experiences, such initiatives challenge prevailing stereotypes and foster more dementia-inclusive communities. As one programme coordinator share: "*So from my standpoint, […] dementia has no limits. It's just that I think us as people tend to limit people with dementia saying, 'I will leave with dementia so you wouldn't be able for this'. Of course you're able for it".*

A researcher (female) who also held a role as an informal carer insightfully noted, *"That somebody can have a cognitive impairment that impairs their narrative capacity to speak, but it doesn't impair the narrative agency, which is a different thing.*".This distinction highlights the core of dementia-inclusive practice: acknowledging agency, personhood, and the right to participate meaningfully in society.

Thus, people living with dementia can participate in cultural and creative life in a range of ways, from structured therapeutic sessions to informal moments of artistic exploration, where no prior knowledge of art is expected. Whether through active involvement or more passive observation, cultural venues and programmes offer valuable opportunities for self-expression, connection, and inclusion.

2.2 Current state of dementia-friendly cultural institutions in Ireland

In response to the demographic changes, there has been a paradigm shift in dementia care that moves beyond clinical treatment toward a more holistic, person-centred approach. Central to this is the recognition of the role of arts and cultural engagement in enhancing the quality of life, identity, and social inclusion of people living with dementia. In Ireland, the availability and accessibility of such activities remain uneven and under-researched despite promising initiatives and growing awareness.

2.2.1 National policy landscape on culture and dementia

According to the Compendium of Cultural Policies & Trends (2020), the cultural policy in Ireland is guided by the promotion of access, participation, and creative expression, with a growing emphasis on the role of culture in supporting individual and societal well-being. The country operates a hybrid policy model that combines direct state intervention through the Department of Tourism, Culture, Arts, Gaeltacht, Sport and Media with arm's-length funding via semi-state agencies such as the Arts Council and the Heritage Council. Since 2017, the Creative Ireland programme has become a central strategic platform to promote culture as a pillar of wellbeing and community development, fostering interdepartmental cooperation and cultural engagement at national and local levels.

2.2.1.1 *Creative Ireland Programme (2017–Present)*

Creative Ireland has advocated for cultural participation as a fundamental right, allocating specific funding to dementia-related initiatives through its Creativity in Older Age programme (2020-2022). However, the lack of a formal, cross-sectoral arts and dementia framework has limited systemic planning, funding continuity, and national coordination. Key policy mechanisms under Creative Ireland include:

- **Creative Communities (Pillar 2):** Delivered in partnership with local authorities, this strand funds locally-led creative projects, many of which target older populations and people with dementia. Local Arts Officers often implement this in collaboration with health and community organisations.
- **Creativity in Older Age Programme (2020–2022):** Developed in response to the COVID-19 pandemic, this initiative funded several dementia-inclusive cultural projects, such as the Azure Programme at Butler Gallery, musical memory cafés and reminiscence projects, and the development of online arts content for people with dementia during lockdown.

2.2.1.2 *Arts Council of Ireland*

Although the Arts Council has not historically prioritised dementia in its funding calls, recent years have seen increasing engagement with access and inclusion issues. The Arts Council launched the Arts and Health Policy (2010) and the Equality, Human Rights and Diversity Policy (EHRD) (2024) and both create a policy rationale for supporting initiatives that reach people with cognitive disabilities or dementia. Some funded projects have explicitly addressed dementia through theatre, music, or intergenerational programming. In addition, the Council's Partnership with Creative Ireland has enabled organisations such as Arts and Health and Helium Arts to explore the arts in the context of cognitive and neurological health.

2.2.1.3 *The Irish National Dementia Strategy (2014)*

The Department of Health (2014) launched the Irish National Dementia Strategy (NDS) represents the cornerstone of dementia policy in Ireland. Published by the Department of Health, the strategy emphasises the need for improved diagnosis, integrated care pathways, and community-based support for individuals with dementia. While the strategy does not explicitly address cultural engagement or the arts, it outlines several key principles that align with dementia-inclusive cultural programming, including:

- **Person-centred care:** Recognising the individual behind the condition with respect for autonomy, preferences, and social engagement.
- **Community-based support:** Emphasising the importance of supporting individuals to remain active and connected within their communities.
- Reducing stigma: Promoting greater public awareness and acceptance of dementia.

These principles have provided a policy basis for community initiatives, including those situated within cultural institutions. Notably, the NDS calls for collaboration with voluntary and community sectors, an avenue through which arts and cultural organisations have increasingly participated.

2.2.1.4 *The Dementia: Understand Together Campaign*

The Understand Together campaign, launched in 2016 as part of the NDS implementation, is a national public support, awareness, and social movement led by the HSE in partnership with the

Alzheimer's Society of Ireland and Genio. While primarily aimed at reducing stigma and improving dementia literacy, the campaign has supported dementia-friendly community initiatives across sectors, including arts and culture. Key contributions of the campaign include toolkits to become dementia-inclusive for organisations (including libraries, museums, and community centres), training materials and workshops for service providers, and a mapping of dementia-inclusive spaces across Ireland. Although not arts-specific, the campaign has played a catalytic role in sensitising cultural institutions to the needs of people living with dementia and in encouraging a networked, cross-sectoral approach to inclusion.

2.2.1.5 Healthy Ireland Framework

The Department of Health (2019) launched Healthy Ireland, the national framework for improved health and wellbeing (2013-2025), emphasising health's social determinants, including community participation and access to the arts. Though not specific to dementia, the framework promotes a healthy and active ageing, a positive mental health and wellbeing, and supportive environments for vulnerable populations

The framework's implementation through Healthy Ireland Funded Projects has enabled partnerships between cultural bodies, libraries, and health services to support older people, including those with cognitive impairments. For instance, some local authorities have developed memory-friendly libraries or arts-based wellbeing initiatives under this framework.

2.2.1.6 Age-Friendly Ireland and the Age-Friendly Cities and Counties Programme

Ireland is a member of the World Health Organisation's Global Network of Age-Friendly Cities and Communities. Through Age-Friendly Ireland (AFI), all 31 local authorities have developed and implemented Age-Friendly Strategies tailored to local populations. Many of these strategies specifically reference dementia and outline actions to promote cultural participation among older people, including the creation of dementia-friendly public spaces and venues, the support of accessible community arts programmes, and the training of staff in cultural and public institutions in dementia awareness. Dublin City's Age-Friendly Strategy (2022–2026) includes commitments to increase the availability of dementia-friendly cultural events and environments across libraries, galleries, and theatres.

Despite encouraging developments in dementia-inclusive arts programming, several policy gaps hinder broader and more sustainable progress. Ireland lacks a National Arts and Dementia Strategy, leaving current initiatives fragmented, short-term, and heavily dependent on individual institutional champions. Cross-sectoral coordination between departments such as Health, Arts, and Local Government remains largely ad hoc, limiting the potential for cohesive, systemic approaches. Furthermore, the absence of national data collection and evaluation frameworks on cultural participation among people living with dementia hampers evidence-based policymaking and long-term planning. Lastly, regional disparities persist, with urban centres like Dublin, Cork, and Galway receiving most of the dementia-inclusive cultural investment, while rural and peripheral communities remain significantly underserved.

2.2.2 Cultural dementia-inclusive practice

In recent years, several Irish cultural institutions have begun to embrace dementia-inclusive practices, recognising the power of the arts to foster connection, memory, and well-being. These initiatives are often co-designed with healthcare professionals, artists, and people living with dementia, and draw on principles of co-production, accessibility, and reminiscence-based

practice. They include specialised tours, adapted programs, sensory experiences, and training for staff and volunteers. Key institutions offering dementia-inclusive programming include:

- Irish Museum of Modern Art (IMMA): Through its Art & Ageing programme and Azure Tours, IMMA offers tailored visual arts activities, including workshops and dementia-friendly tours, both onsite and in residential or community settings.
- Butler Gallery (Kilkenny): The gallery has led a dementia-inclusive programme and is part of the Azure network, delivering art discussion-based sessions for people living with dementia, their family members, and their carers.
- National Concert Hall (Dublin): The Health and Harmony programme provides interactive live music experiences for older adults with cognitive impairment, using familiar melodies and storytelling to foster connection.
- National Gallery of Ireland: Dementia-friendly workshops and in-home resources are offered, both onsite and virtually, enabling people with dementia to experience and create art in various settings.
- Other arts venues that offer Azure tours are: the National Museum of Ireland, Photo Museum Ireland, Dublin Castle, West Cork Arts Centre,

Local arts organisations and dementia advocacy groups have developed various inclusive, community-based programmes that bring creativity and connection to people with dementia. These initiatives often emerge through grassroots efforts and are delivered project-by-project, supported by local authority Arts Offices, Age Friendly Ireland, and Creative Ireland funding streams. Notable examples include:

- Living Well with Dementia (LWwD) (Dublin): Operating primarily in Dublin South, Dún Laoghaire, and Dublin South East, LWwD offers a range of weekly social activity groups designed to foster inclusion, creativity, and well-being for individuals living with dementia and their carers. These include a dementia-friendly choir (Sweet Memories Choir), dance classes (Movement to Music), and creative workshops (The Pleasure of Art).
- Singing for the Brain: Is a community-based group singing initiative for people living with dementia and their carers. It promotes connection, well-being, and inclusion through accessible, in-person, and online sessions supported by the HSE.
- Musical Memories Choir (Dublin): This is a weekly dementia-friendly choir held at Deansgrange Library. It offers older adults and their carers a relaxed, supportive space to connect through music, enhance mood, and stimulate memory, led by a professional choral director.
- Musical Memories (Wicklow) is a popular weekly singing group held on Friday mornings at St. Patrick's Parish Church, Greystones, where people living with dementia, their families, and friends come together to enjoy music, conversation, and community in a warm, interactive setting with volunteer musicians.
- Open Gallery (Waterford): This is an arts initiative by Waterford Healing Arts Trust (WHAT), launched in 2018. It invites people living with dementia and their carers to engage with artworks from the University Hospital Waterford collection in a safe, welcoming environment, guided by professional artists.

Additionally, there are virtual initiatives such as the Virtual Dementia Hub, a digital inclusivity project introduced by the Alzheimer's Society of Ireland. Here, users can access art, music,

poetry, and other activity packs, aiming to empower those living with dementia through technology.

Although they remain limited, toolkits and educational resources in Ireland have been developed to support the creation of dementia-friendly cultural spaces. Age & Opportunity has been a leading force in this area, publishing "A Toolkit for Arts & Creativity in Care Settings", a comprehensive guide for artists, carers, and coordinators that includes practical activities, safety guidance, artist collaboration tips, and links to video demonstrations. Furthermore, through the collaboration network on the Azure project, The Alzheimer Society of Ireland has developed "A guide for arts and cultural facilities", offering practical advice for arts and cultural venues on becoming more inclusive for individuals living with dementia.

Both toolkits emphasise the importance of creating safe, welcoming environments that reduce stress and promote accessibility. Activities should be person-centred, adaptable to individual needs, and focused on expression rather than outcomes. Clear, respectful communication and sensitivity to verbal and non-verbal cues are essential, as is collaboration with care staff, carers, and facilitators to ensure trust and continuity. Ethical considerations such as informed consent, dignity, and professional boundaries must be upheld. Ultimately, ongoing training, reflective practice, and long-term planning are essential for sustaining inclusive and meaningful engagement for individuals living with dementia.

Engaging Dementia also offers the Sonas Programme, a therapeutic activity designed for people with moderate to late-stage dementia that uses sensory stimulation, gentle movement, communication, and relaxation techniques. Its design and delivery incorporate artistic principles, especially from music, movement, and sensory arts, making it highly complementary to broader arts and culture initiatives in dementia care. Participants develop knowledge of dementia and person-centred communication strategies. Notably, The HSE offers a range of Dementia Education and Training programmes to support community care, though not explicitly focused on arts and culture.

2.3 Challenges of people living with dementia, informal caregivers and stakeholders in the cultural sector

Despite the enthusiasm for arts-based engagement, several structural and individual-level barriers constrain the full participation of people with dementia in cultural life. The challenges may differ for individuals in residential and community-based settings. People living independently or with family, or receiving home care, may struggle with transportation, lack of time for carers or family members, isolation and stigma. At the same time, those in residential settings often benefit from proximity and organised group access, but may face limitations regarding autonomy, personal tastes, and the scale of participation, as well as insufficient staff, staff timing, and staff training.

2.3.1 Physical accessibility and inclusive atmospheres

A consistent theme throughout the interviews was the practical difficulty of accessing cultural offerings, even when programs exist. Many cultural venues, especially in older buildings, lack adequate accessibility features, including step-free entrances, clear signage, or accessible restrooms.

Cultural environments are not always adapted to the cognitive needs of people living with dementia (Hatton, 2021). Factors such as low lighting, visual clutter, loud or unpredictable sounds, and complex signage can lead to disorientation, anxiety, or withdrawal. As a music therapist (male) said: *"Sometimes even getting people through the door is a challenge. That's not just physical access, it's also about how welcome they feel in that space."*.

However, where venues are accessible, the lack of reliable, dementia-sensitive transportation, especially in rural and semi-rural areas, presents a significant barrier. A formal carer (female) drawing from her experience in a small Irish town, where distance, limited transport options, and physical limitations create multiple layers of exclusion making cultural participation nearly impossible, she added: *"Perhaps cultural events should be brought closer to them […] An effort could be made to find a venue to host a travelling exhibition that goes around the different towns of Ireland. And the same could be done with music."*.

2.3.2 Stigma, social perception and awareness

Persistent stigma and public misunderstanding of dementia may discourage individuals and families from engaging in community events or cultural programming. Fear of judgment or discomfort in unfamiliar spaces can reinforce social isolation.

Participants' experiences have also shown that people might be reluctant to participate due to self-stigma:

> "[…] *there is this kind of self-stigma. People with early-stage dementia go, 'oh, I don't want to go to that because I might not remember, and I'll show myself up and people will see that I have dementia'. And then, when they get out and they realise everyone who's there has memory problems, then they're not as ashamed to turn up and be part of that gang*.", (Carer and researcher, female)

People who are younger or in the earlier stages of dementia may feel uncomfortable engaging in settings where other participants are in more advanced stages of the condition. Labelling programmes explicitly for "people living with dementia" may itself also discourage attendance, especially among those recently diagnosed or still living independently.

Finally, there is a need to reframe how dementia and ageing are understood, including shifting public attitudes toward residential care and the language used to describe dementia. People living with dementia are often perceived as no longer fully present or socially active, a phenomenon described as the "social death" of dementia (Brannelly, 2011). As one participant observed, this narrative reflects deep-rooted prejudice and stigma:

> "*I suppose, trying to unpick some of the unwholesome narrative that is around the social death of dementia through language. […] I think there have been steps made […] about people trying to emphasise a more positive approach. I also think there is a very negative view of residential care. We need to rethink that*.", (Researcher, male).

These narratives reveal a complex ecosystem of stigma, encompassing internal, relational, institutional, and linguistic aspects. Thus, increasing awareness and education throughout society reduces stigma and fosters social acceptance (Liu et al., 2022). Cultural inclusion and art-based programmes must start by acknowledging and dismantling the social fears that keep people away.

2.3.3 Program design, training and evaluation

A crucial aspect is flexibility in program execution, in which a person-centred and co-created approach is not only encouraged but necessary to accommodate the heterogeneity of dementia and to foster meaningful engagement on the participants' own terms. Additionally, there is a need for institutions and organisations to be flexible in their operational protocols, particularly around access routes, timing, and staff roles. As one of the programme managers (female) noted," *one of the challenges would be institutions recognising the amount of time needed or given to training. The training course is three days. … sometimes for an organisation it's five days, depending on the number of participants. There are three days of training, and then there's another session for every staff member where they (the staff) deliver a practice session*. This was supported by a programme coordinator (female): "…*the challenges are that everything takes longer*", highlighting the importance of organisational willingness to invest time and resources in supporting inclusive practices.

Furthermore, while it is documented that reliance on carers can limit accessibility and increase the burden (Polden et al., 2025; Kasper et al., 2015). The interviews also reveal that carers play vital emotional, relational, and participatory roles. However, the carers' own needs are often overlooked, although they have their own cultural needs, and programmes should be designed to include and support them. This approach has empowered people living with dementia and their carers (Liu et al., 2022).

Several participants recognised that current training programmes and educational materials are helpful, particularly those developed through well-established initiatives. At the same time, more experienced facilitators and artists emphasised that practical experimentation, shared experience, and repetition are often the most effective tools for refining inclusive practices. However, despite these informal learning processes, many noted that formal education in music and the arts rarely included components on arts and health or dementia-inclusive approaches, highlighting a clear need to embed these topics more explicitly within contemporary arts training.

Measuring engagement in art-based interventions for people living with dementia also remains a complex challenge. Previous research has shown that responsiveness to art varies according to individual characteristics. According to Hendriks et al. (2019) people with less severe dementia or vascular dementia tend to show greater engagement and interaction, while those with motor or mood impairments engage less. However, standard evaluation tools often rely on visible, quantifiable behaviours, such as speech, participation, and verbal responses, but these may overlook more subtle or meaningful forms of engagement. As participants noted:

> *"If I felt like one or three participants were losing interest, I would ensure that one of the care workers was engaging in a conversation […] And just note, not everyone engages verbally in these tours, but you can tell that through smiling or looking that they're still engaged. So, just because you're not engaged primarily doesn't mean that they're not actually in tune with what's happening in the event",* (Facilitator and curator, male).
>
> *"[…] I've seen in certain settings and they have these sheets on who's in the room and they tick off, obviously to say who's engaged in what activity, and my question often is, well, what is engagement? Is it just because they're sitting there, …are they actually engaged? […] what is the standard? Can we dig down to what this standard is? Because*

> *I don't understand it and I have never seen the standard when it relates to engagement with arts or music"*, (Facilitator and programme director, female).

> *"The challenge would be sometimes in. You don't know what you don't know, so are we missing something? And always looking for feedback after a session, and not everyone will give feedback, and not everyone has the time or the capacity to give it."*, (Library staff)

Considering these methodological challenges and the lack of theoretically grounded research, many conclusions remain tentative instead of confident, especially regarding the long-term effects of arts projects (Zeilig et al., 2014).

2.3.4 Economic barriers and sustainability

Although many cultural programmes are offered free of charge, associated costs, including transportation, carers' accompaniment, or loss of earnings, can inhibit participation. Financial support for carers to attend alongside their loved ones is also inconsistently provided. At the same time, social class as a structural barrier to participation in traditional arts and cultural institutions*: "Nobody's talking about social class, which is probably the biggest barrier to access to some what might be seen as some of the higher arts."*, highlighted a researcher (male).

In terms of the sustainability of cultural and art-based programmes, there is a need for dedicated funding and systemic recognition of the value of cultural participation of people living with dementia and their carers or family members (Polden et al., 2025). Strengthening sustainability also requires investment in capacity building, particularly through training and professional development. As one programme manager (female) pointed out, *"there is a need for funding around the delivery [of the training program]. I think it would be really useful to have more opportunities and expand the training".*

One participant highlighted how the COVID-19 pandemic, despite its devastating impact, also served as a catalyst for policy attention and resource allocation:

> *"For there has been a real interest in growth, which has been phenomenal over the last couple of years. COVID was transformative in that way. […] So, for the first time ever, there was funding available beyond one month a year […]. But now, at the moment, it's only six months. And I'm like, oh, why?",* (Facilitator and programme director, female).

However, a participant also noted that key policies and frameworks supporting the arts and health sector are outdated, some by over a decade, and have not been revised to meet current needs or reflect the growing evidence base. This policy lag undermines consistent support across cultural and healthcare systems. The limited visibility of dementia-specific initiatives within national Arts and Health programming mirrors the lack of public awareness. In a national mapping made in 2019, only 6% of programmes supported people with dementia and disabilities (Arts & Health Coordinators Ireland, 2021).

As Polden et al. (2025) demonstrate, balancing the costs and benefits of arts interventions is key to ensuring their long-term sustainability. Greater integration into existing dementia care, supported by policy and accredited training, can help make these approaches a standard part of care provision.

2.4 Examples of best practices in dementia-friendly cultural spaces

2.4.1 Movement to Music: inclusive of Dementia, Dun Laoghaire, Dublin County

Dance Theatre of Ireland, a leading Contemporary Dance company, offers a wide range of dance and health classes for people of all ages. The company aims to connect people with their creative potential, broaden access to dance for all, including those who might otherwise be excluded, and advance innovation in dance for health, well-being, and self-expression. It also seeks to challenge stereotypes about older adults and people with chronic conditions, while offering high-quality dance experiences through classes, workshops, performances, and participatory activities.



Source: Arts and Health.

Since 2014, one of their most popular programmes has been Well-Dance for Seniors, an evidence-based initiative that fosters creativity, mobility, social connection, balance, confidence, and overall well-being. Building on this success, Dance Theatre of Ireland developed Movement to Music (previously known as Dancing Well with Dementia) and Dancing Well with Parkinson's, a series of innovative classes designed specifically for individuals living with dementia and Parkinson's, together with their care partners.

Launched in 2016 in partnership with HSE Living Well with Dementia—Community Health Organisation (CHO) 6, a programme that supports people with dementia to live at home and stay engaged in their community, Movement to Music is a regular Living Well with Dementia (LWwD) activity, providing a dance class every Wednesday at Holy Family Parish Hall in Dun Laoghaire for €5 per class. This welcoming activity brings together individuals with dementia and their families or carers, with the assistance of LWwD volunteers, focusing on musicality, rhythm, and joyful expression to foster well-being and community connection.

The classes typically begin with participants seated and gradually progress to standing and moving, using imagery and visualisation to inspire gentle movement. The carefully chosen music encourages creativity, imagination, and self-expression, whether participants are seated or standing. These classes offer participants the chance to be fully present, engage their senses, and reconnect with their independence and individuality. The result is a lively, sociable atmosphere filled with joy.

In 2018, Saint Joseph's Shankill, Ireland's largest day and residential centre dedicated to dementia care, initiated a year-long pilot program funded by the HSE National Lottery Fund and led by choreographer Robert Connor from the Dance Theatre of Ireland. The program held weekly sessions and served 25 participants, supported by eight dedicated volunteers, exploring how dance and music could enhance well-being. These classes created a safe, inclusive space where participants felt valued, loved, and connected, addressing their complex social, emotional, psychological, and physical needs. Today, Saint Joseph's continues to offer these dance classes for Day Club clients and Residents in partnership with Dance Theatre of Ireland, with ongoing support made possible through donations.

As a non-profit charity, Dance Theatre of Ireland's work has been supported by the Arts Council, Dun Laoghaire-Rathdown County Council, the HSE, the Ireland Funds, the Department of

Culture, Heritage and the Gaeltacht, and private donations. Dance Theatre of Ireland has been a National Lottery Good Causes Awards National Finalist, 2019 and a County Winner, 2021, 2022 and 2024 in the Arts & Culture category.

Source: Dance Theatre of Ireland, Living Well with Dementia, Arts and Health, St Joseph Shankill and Dementia: Understand Together

2.4.2 Azure project: Dementia-friendly tours of cultural institutions, Nationwide

Azure is an initiative that improves access for people living with dementia and their family, friends and carers to galleries and museums across Ireland. It enhances their experience and involvement in cultural institutions and historic sites by providing facilitated discussions about exhibited artworks, objects, or aspects of a historic building. Underpinning the initiative is the belief that we are all entitled to be active cultural participants at each stage of our lives.

There are two strands to the initiative: the training of staff within galleries, museums, and cultural spaces to deliver Azure tours and the facilitation of the tours. Since its launch in 2012, Azure has been a collaboration between Age & Opportunity, the Alzheimer Society of Ireland, the Butler Gallery (Kilkenny), and the Irish Museum of Modern Art (IMMA) in Dublin. Today, more than 35 galleries, museums, arts centres and historic sites across Ireland have participated in Azure training. However, this figure does not include the various Office of Public Works (OPW) sites nationwide, which offer Azure tours.

Inspired by the Meet Me at MoMA Project, Azure promotes and normalises the involvement of people with dementia and their carers, families, and friends in the arts, making cultural spaces more dementia-inclusive. The tours invite participants to observe and discuss artworks in a safe, welcoming environment, supported by trained facilitators who encourage conversation and engagement at each person's pace and in their own way.

The idea is that following staff training, cultural institutions will offer regular tours for small groups of up to eight people. Tours may also be tailored for nursing homes, care facilities, and dementia or social support groups. They are also available at no charge and can be delivered in person or online. During each tour, participants explore and discuss three to four artworks with a trained facilitator, followed by a chance to chat and share a cup of tea or coffee. The social aspect of the tour is a key element of it.

The training for gallery and museum staff is managed by Age & Opportunity and supported by the Azure Steering Group. Recent courses have cost approximately €675 per participant, and training takes place over 4 to 5 days. It includes topics such as attitudes towards ageing, dementia awareness (including types of dementia and recommended language), the Azure tour methodology, facilitation skills, guidance on online facilitation, reflective practice, and practice-led facilitation sessions.

A pilot of the initiative involving facilitated Azure tours was evaluated in 2012 using a mixed-methods approach, which combined observations, interviews, facilitated sessions, and questionnaires to gather insights from participants with dementia, carers, museum staff, and artists. The evaluation found it to be a positive and meaningful experience, highlighting the potential of facilitated art sessions to engage people with dementia in cultural settings. Participants showed enjoyment, interest, and moments of connection, with observers noting a range of emotional responses and engagement levels, from verbal contributions to subtle non-verbal interactions. Carers and facilitators described the sessions as welcoming and supportive.

Challenges included logistical issues such as last-minute cancellations, accessibility barriers, and differences in participants' cognitive and physical abilities, requiring flexible approaches. The evaluation overall recommended providing trained facilitators, carefully selecting venues and artworks, and allowing more time for recruitment.

Source: Age & Opportunity [1] [2] [3]

2.4.3 Songlines: Making connections through poetry & music, nationwide

The Songlines project, initiated by Festival in a Van, was created to connect artists with individuals living with dementia and cognitive impairment. Since 2023, the initiative has focused on using poetry and music to reduce loneliness and foster community spirit among participants. It also seeks to strengthen relationships between clients and care home staff while nurturing a sense of pride and accomplishment.

Through interactive workshops and event series, participants discuss, read, and sing together their favourite poems and songs. Facilitated by professional artists with extensive experience working in arts and health, these workshops aspire to reveal memories associated with both art forms and often result in the composition of new creations by the artists and participants.



Source: Festival in a Van.

The experience concludes with a special event at the Festival in Van stage, featuring facilitators, clients, and staff while engaging the audience through active participation. At the end of the project, the team commissioned illustrations based on the stories and memories shared throughout, which were then framed, gifted and printed on mugs for the staff and residents.

The project was designed closely between Festival in a Van and the artist Marie Brett, Jane O'Hanlon, Head of Education with Poetry Ireland, and Réalta, and is funded by The Arts Council, with support from Réalta, Poetry Ireland, and Ireland's local authority network.

The workshops were held in various care settings, such as care homes, community hospitals, and daycare centres. In 2023, the tour included visits to Wexford and Waterford. Building on this success, Songlines returned in 2024 with workshops in Tipperary and Mayo. In 2025, Songlines plans to visit four care homes in Wicklow and Monaghan.

From the initial evaluation, it became clear that artists needed time to build trust and meaningful relationships with participants. Additionally, facilitators required debriefing support, as the emotionally enriching nature of the work could also be demanding. In 2023, Réalta offered guidance on programme development and oversaw the management of the project's independent evaluation.

The evaluation conducted in 2024 employed a mixed-methods approach, combining observations, interviews and surveys across the four participating care homes, located in both County Mayo and County Tipperary. The findings showed a strong positive impact, uplifting residents' moods, enhancing social and emotional engagement, and affirming their identities through creative expression. The project's success was driven by locally connected artists, multi-sensory and inclusive design, and active involvement of care staff. Final performances fostered a sense of community, with family participation adding emotional depth. Challenges included

staffing constraints, while future opportunities lie in improving communication, artist training, and expanding themes such as the Irish language and staff-focused sessions.

Source: Festival in a Van and Art + Health

2.4.4 The Forget Me Nots Choir, Dublin County

The Forget Me Nots Organisation is a dementia-inclusive community choir based in Dublin's Northeast, founded in 2014 with initial support from Fingal County Council Arts Office and Community Affairs. As a registered charity in Ireland, the organisation promotes community engagement through music, with a focus on inclusion, well-being, and intergenerational connections while offering a Quality Arts social outlet.

The organisation aims to create a welcoming choir for older adults, those living with dementia and their families, and the local senior community. It offers access to professionally managed, high-quality musical activities that promote social inclusion and well-being. The initiative also encourages broader community involvement when possible, including local nursing homes, Montessori kids and schools, while documenting participation's personal and collective benefits. By creating a consistent, non-judgmental, and joyful space, the choir allows individuals with memory loss to actively participate, feel valued, and connect emotionally through song. Furthermore, it recognises music as a powerful medium for memory retention, expression, and social bonding.



Source: The Forget Me Nots Choir.

Music professionals employ sensitive facilitation techniques, while the familiar structure of rehearsals offers cognitive comfort. The musical director is responsible for preparing engaging, well-structured rehearsals that enhance choral qualities and set challenging, yet attainable, musical goals. The sessions include varied warm-ups, the development of technical skills such as tuning and diction through musical arrangements and the use of harmonies, which are also supported by the volunteers, encouraging concentration and engagement through musical exercises and focused rehearsals in preparation for differing themed performances. The repertoire is diverse, balancing new material with nostalgic pieces, while stretch pieces are used to foster continuous improvement.

Rehearsals and performances take place every Tuesday at Baldoyle Community Hall, with over 120 members in the group, and participation is free. During COVID-19, adaptations were made to run weekly Zoom sessions, keeping the community connected during lockdowns. The choir regularly performs at concerts and festivals across Dublin, including iconic venues like Áras an Uachtaráin, the Mansion House, St Patrick's Cathedral, the National Gallery, the Hugh Lane Gallery and the Helix. While also ensuring a mix of local performances in nursing homes, hospitals and rehabilitation facilities.

The Forget-Me-Nots Member Survey (2019) assessed participants' experiences across six areas: choir enjoyment, musical direction, social inclusion, performance enjoyment, volunteer support, and venue facilities, combining ratings with open feedback. Members particularly valued the inclusive atmosphere, emotional uplift, social connection, and musical engagement. Many described the choir as a space where memory loss became less visible, and participation felt

meaningful. While suggestions for improvement included better transport, amplified sound, and larger venues due to growing membership, the overall satisfaction remained high (87%).

The Forget Me Nots Organisation is wholly managed and supported by unpaid volunteers from the Dublin Northeast community, while highly experienced choral professionals lead its artistic direction and piano accompaniment. The project is sustained through a combination of financial support, including voluntary subscriptions, grants, donations, and in-kind contributions from individuals and partner organisations. Over the years, supporters such as Creative Ireland, Fingal County Council, Member First Credit Union, the HSE, Collen Construction, the Community Foundation for Ireland, and the Ireland Fund have contributed to its success. All funds raised directly support the choir's activities, including professional music services (direction, composition, accompanists, musicians), event logistics and technical production (transport, sound and video), venue rental, materials, communications, community initiatives, and social events.

Source: The Forget Me Nots Choir

2.4.5 Health & Harmony Programme at National Concert Hall, nationwide

The Health & Harmony programme, developed by the National Concert Hall (NCH) in partnership with the Alzheimer's Society of Ireland (ASI), brings the joy of live music into ASI day and respite care centres nationwide. Through professional performances and interactive workshops, the programme offers people with dementia, their families and carers the chance to experience meaningful moments of connection, joy, and self-expression. During the sessions, participants are encouraged to sing along or even perform themselves, creating a warm and uplifting atmosphere.

First piloted in Galway in 2009, in collaboration with the Community Foundation for Ireland and the Medtronic Foundation, Health & Harmony initially focused on older adults. In 2012, with funding from The Ireland Funds and in partnership with the Alzheimer's Society of Ireland, the programme expanded its focus to support people with dementia and their families. Its aims include enriching sensory and communication experiences, inspiring self-expression through music, and developing a framework and toolkit to help similar initiatives continue and grow, to encourage the introduction of similar programmes in other care centres across Ireland.



Source: The National Concert Hall.

Sessions were typically held once a month at each centre, lasting approximately an hour. Significantly, the programme's structure was gradually refined over time. During its first year, Health & Harmony underwent a process of reflection and learning, drawing on feedback from clients, musicians, care staff, and occasionally families. Based on these insights, the organising team developed a recommended session model to guide ongoing practice and future programmes. This recommended approach includes musicians warmly introducing themselves and engaging participants as they set up; arranging seating in a relaxed living room style to ensure comfort and inclusion; offering a varied mix of familiar songs, sing-alongs, and occasional solos; and creating a lively, personal atmosphere through stories and requests. Care staff play an active role by encouraging interaction and sharing insights about

participants' preferences. Sessions typically end with thanks and informal conversation, leaving participants and families with a sense of connection and joy.

Feedback also highlighted the programme's positive impact. Participants report feeling uplifted, more communicative, and joyful during and after the sessions. Families note improvements in mood and engagement, while care staff observe greater interaction, relaxation, and emotional connection. Musicians, too, describe how music sparks memories and draws out individuality, even in those with middle and later-stage dementia.

Health & Harmony is part of the National Concert Hall's broader Health and Wellbeing Programme, which operates across 20 counties to enrich the lives of people living with long-term health conditions through music, supporting mental health, paediatric care, and injury recovery. The Health and Wellbeing Programme also hosts Tea Dance Tunes, a dementia-friendly concert where people living with dementia, their families, and carers can enjoy performances of ballads, seasonal songs, and light opera by special guests. These concerts are held every two months at the National Concert Hall, with tickets available for €4 and bookings managed through the NCH's platform.

Sources: The National Concert Hall [1] [2], The National Concert Hall & Alzheimer Society of Ireland, Arts and Health

2.4.6 Training Notes: a training programme of Music & Health Ireland, nationwide

Music & Health Ireland, founded in 2008, is a non-profit organisation that brings professional music into educational, community, and healthcare settings. Guided by a vision of music equity, the organisation ensures that everyone in Ireland can access high-quality live music regardless of their circumstances. The organisation provides specialised training for musicians working in healthcare, offers education for healthcare staff on the benefits of music, and creates opportunities for residents, patients, staff, and families to participate in shared music-making experiences that support mood, memory, and overall well-being. While not limited to dementia care, its programmes include several initiatives tailored to people living with dementia, their families and carers.



Source: Dave Keegan.

Since 2013, Music & Health Ireland has developed Training Notes. This specialised national training initiative equips musicians to work safely and sensitively in healthcare environments such as hospitals, care homes, and dementia settings. The programme includes a range of courses from one-day introductory workshops to immersive three- and five-day trainings, offered one or two times per year, depending on funding and regional partnerships. The formats include introductory courses, apprenticeship and mentorship programmes, bespoke workshop and CPD sessions.

Workshops focus on using live music sensitively in care settings, spatial and emotional awareness, ethical considerations, and collaborative practice with healthcare teams. Musicians hands-on training through mentoring and apprenticeships. Across all formats, a core component is preparing participants to engage sensitively and creatively with people living with dementia. Training includes strategies for musical memory recall, empathetic communication, and

repertoire curation that respects individual life histories. The approach prioritises cultural interaction over clinical outcomes, supporting dignity, connection, and emotional well-being through shared musical experiences.

These offerings are tailored to suit the needs of professional musicians, early-career artists, and graduates from all musical backgrounds, as well as care staff such as activity coordinators, healthcare assistants, nurses, and social care professionals. Participants are prepared with the skills, awareness, and sensitivity needed to deliver music in clinical spaces with care, quality, and genuine impact for patients and residents alike.

Gráinne Hope, founder of Music & Health Ireland, leads the Training Notes programme alongside musician and co-trainer Liam Merriman. Together, they bring a wealth of expertise to the training, with both certified under the European Commission's Leonardo da Vinci Lifelong Learning Programme. The initiative has partnered with Meath County Council and other regional and national bodies to deliver tailored music and health programmes across Ireland. These partnerships include initiatives with Louth County Council, Waterford City Council, Réalta, the National Concert Hall, and County Councils in Limerick, Clare, and Tipperary, ensuring regional responsiveness and sustainability.

In 2021, as part of Training Notes, Music & Health Ireland, working in partnership with Meath County Council Arts Office, launched Tea, Chats and Tunes, a music residency programme developed in response to the COVID-19 pandemic. The project addressed the need for new ways of connecting families and fostering social engagement during periods of restricted contact. Implemented in seven nursing homes in County Meath, including residents living with dementia, it consisted of a series of weekly sessions, usually four, culminating in a final concert. Using a co-curation approach, musicians worked with residents, staff, and families to select music that reflected personal memories and life stories, enhancing emotional connection, memory recall, and participation. The initiative was funded by Meath County Council Arts Office, Creative Ireland, and the Age-Friendly Meath Keep Well Fund. In 2022, the programme received additional support under the Creative Ireland Creativity in Older Age Programme, allowing for its expansion and evaluation.

In 2023, with support from the Global Brain Health Institute (GBHI), The Alzheimer's Society (UK), and the Alzheimer's Association (USA), Gráinne Hope, Creative Director of Music & Health, led a national dialogue with diverse stakeholders to explore the potential of clinical-creative partnerships in dementia care. The conversations highlighted the value of music and the arts for people living with dementia, their carers, and healthcare professionals. Findings emphasised the need for systemic leadership, cross-sector policy dialogue, sustained investment, dedicated training, and defined career pathways to ensure these partnerships are equitable, scalable, and sustainable across healthcare systems.

Sources: Music & Health [1] [2] [3] [4] Arts and Health [1]

2.5 Recommendations

Drawing from the perspectives and experiences of participants involved in dementia-inclusive cultural initiatives in Ireland, this section outlines key areas that may benefit from further attention, support, or development. They are presented as a contribution to ongoing dialogue

among cultural organisations, health and care services, funding bodies, policymakers, artists, and communities seeking to strengthen cultural inclusion for people living with dementia and their carers and family members.

Explore the development of a national arts and dementia framework.

Participants and current policy frameworks noted the absence of a unified policy or long-term vision that links dementia strategies with cultural inclusion efforts. A national framework could offer greater coherence, visibility, and sustainability for existing and emerging initiatives. Such a framework could build on Ireland's National Dementia Strategy and existing cultural policies (e.g., Creative Ireland, Arts Council strategies) by identifying shared priorities and supporting long-term collaboration.

Consider long-term and flexible funding approaches.

Short-term, project-based funding was consistently described as a barrier to continuity, relationship-building, and programme sustainability. Participants stressed the need for funding models that support artist and staff time, training and development, transport and access, evaluation and learning, and co-designed programming.

Support the integration of dementia-awareness training across cultural sectors.

While some organisations offer high-quality training, the findings suggest that access to such training remains uneven and is not always sustained. As more institutions express interest in dementia-inclusive programming, ensuring training is widely available, context-relevant, and embedded as an ongoing process is necessary. Broadening the educational intervention types may also support inclusion across diverse roles, settings, and learning styles.

Strengthen access through community transport and outreach.

Physical access remains one of the most important barriers to participation for people living with dementia, especially those in rural areas receiving care at home without consistent support from carers and carers who may lack capacity or resources to facilitate outings. This challenge intersects with issues of equity, geography, and social inclusion. Suggestions included subsidised or coordinated transport, bringing more or sustained programmes into local settings (libraries, community halls), and expanding mobile and pop-up cultural programmes.

Foster cognitive-friendly cultural environments.

Cultural institutions could adopt cognitive accessibility principles alongside physical accessibility to create spaces where people with dementia feel safe and welcome. This includes reducing sensory overload, offering clear signage, and designing spaces that support orientation and calmness. Involving people with dementia in the planning and design of these environments, through consultation or co-design, could ensure that the settings are functional, emotionally supportive, and culturally inclusive.

Include and support carers and family members as participants.

Carers and family members often play a crucial role in enabling participation, but are not consistently recognised as participants in their own right. Programmes that include carers, offer respite, or create opportunities for peer connection can contribute significantly to their

wellbeing and the sustainability of their caregiving role. Recognising and designing for carers as co-beneficiaries can also enhance engagement and retention.

Enhance inclusive approaches to evaluation and engagement.

Standard methods of measuring success, such as attendance numbers or verbal feedback, may not fully capture the forms of engagement meaningful to people living with dementia. Participants advocated recognising non-verbal cues like eye contact, smiling, movement, and emotional presence as valid impact indicators. Developing more inclusive, flexible evaluation tools, potentially co-designed with people with dementia and carers, could offer a richer understanding of how cultural experiences affect wellbeing and inclusion while supporting programme development and funding justification.

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