

Cultural Companions

Evaluation Report of the Pilot Programme

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Executive Summary

This document presents an evaluation of the pilot phase (January to October 2011) of the Cultural Companions programme, delivered by Age & Opportunity in close co-operation with its Bealtaine programme and funded by Bord Gáis Foundation.

The evaluation is based on interviews and group discussions with Age & Opportunity staff and CEO, participants in the Cultural Companions programme, a Bord Gáis Foundation representative and a number of staff of arts and cultural organisations.

The responses from stakeholders identify the positive impact of Cultural Companions, its potential for development and expansion, and some of the challenges involved in the programme.

Analysis of the findings points to Cultural Companions making a significant contribution to enhanced quality of life for the participants in terms of increased opportunities for social engagement, with consequent positive impacts on their quality of life, well-being, social capital and access to the arts.

The evaluation concludes that Cultural Companions has been a successful pilot programme in terms of:

- Positive impact on participants
- Model identified, based on successes, lessons learned and feedback from participants, which will form the basis for the next phase of the programme
- Responsiveness and reflective practice on the part of Age & Opportunity and Cultural Companions staff – this is crucial to the development of a feasible and effective model
- Increasing empowerment and programme co-ownership for the participants
- Collaborative relationship with the funding agency – Bord Gáis Foundation – with opportunities for further development
- Initiating relationships with arts and cultural organisations.

Cultural Companions has made significant progress towards achieving the programme's overall aim of addressing social isolation amongst older people by facilitating their engagement in arts and cultural opportunities. The next phase of the programme will establish to what extent and in what form/s further development is feasible, effective and sustainable.

The report presents recommendations for actions to build on the successes of Cultural Companions to date and to address the learnings and challenges identified throughout the pilot programme and in the evaluation process. The recommendations relate to key areas of focus including: sustainability, inclusion, monitoring and evaluation, relationships with arts and cultural organisations, ongoing learning and development, expansion, collaboration, communication systems, and management of the programme.

1. Introduction

This document presents an evaluation of the pilot phase of the Cultural Companions programme. Cultural Companions is delivered by Age & Opportunity in close co-operation with the Bealtaine Festival and is funded by Bord Gáis Foundation. The pilot phase of the programme ran for nine months - January to October 2011.

The objectives for the evaluation were to:

- Enable the key stakeholders to reflect on their experience of, and learning from, the implementation of Cultural Companions to date
- Evaluate and document the impact, effectiveness, and potential of Cultural Companions, from the varied perspectives of the key stakeholders
- Identify and document the expected and unexpected learning about constraints, challenges, and opportunities, from the varied perspectives of the key stakeholders
- Make recommendations about the further development of Cultural Companions that will maximise its identified potential, within the existing constraints.

2. Cultural Companions: the Initiative

2.1 Background

Cultural Companions was originally conceived by Age & Opportunity as a way of reaching older people who, with the support of volunteer companions, could be facilitated to participate more in arts and cultural opportunities. It was informed particularly by learning from Bealtaine, Age & Opportunity's national festival celebrating creativity as we age, which takes place each May. The aims of Cultural Companions and Bealtaine were seen as particularly complementary.¹

Age & Opportunity was awarded financial support from Bord Gáis Foundation for the pilot phase of the programme – (nine months: January to October 2011). Bord Gáis Foundation was particularly interested in initiatives that would have tangible results in the lives of older people and would also provide opportunities for Bord Gáis employees to volunteer.

2.2 Aims and objectives

The following aims and objectives were set for the programme during Age & Opportunity planning sessions held early in 2011.

Programme aims

To address the issue of social isolation amongst older people in two pilot sites, by facilitating their engagement in arts and cultural opportunities, and by also providing volunteer companions for encouragement and support.

Objectives

- Develop and test methods of identifying and engaging with potential older people as participants
- Research and document an analysis of why interested older people do not currently participate in these kinds of entertainment and social opportunities
- Develop and test ways of enabling older people's ongoing access to these opportunities in a way that also enhances and sustains their access to an expanded social network
- Engage arts and cultural organisations as a resource in this social engagement process
- Engage community groups, local development organisations, and community service providers as a resource in this social engagement process
- Develop and test methods of recruiting, training, retaining, and engaging volunteers (including Bord Gáis staff) as a resource in this social engagement process.

Expected Outcomes

- Increased participation of isolated older people in arts and cultural events and an extension of their social network

¹ Much of the information in this chapter is based on Age & Opportunity's *Report on the Cultural Companions Project January to October 2011* (unpublished), Dublin, Age & Opportunity.

- Increased engagement of cultural organisations with older people as participants/audience and with the Bealtaine festival. Service providers/community groups and organisations begin to recognise and use cultural events and organisations as a resource for engaging with socially isolated older people
- Age & Opportunity's equality ethos permeates the engagement.

2.3 Cultural Companions: Delivery

Initially contacts were made with local organisations in the two areas chosen for the pilot – organisations working in community development and services to older people – but most participants were recruited on foot of an intensive marketing and promotion strategy and public launch events. Those wishing to register with the programme contact the co-ordinator and complete a registration form. Attention is paid in these initial contacts to establishing a personal knowledge of, and relationship with, the participants. The participants receive a Cultural Companions Event Guide and contact the Cultural Companions office within Age & Opportunity to book events they wish to attend. The co-ordinator attends events to facilitate introductions and interaction among the participants attending and an opportunity to meet afterwards over a coffee/drink is usually provided.

Consultation with participants has been a key feature of programme development to ensure that it is meeting needs, and to nurture a sense of co-ownership. During the pilot phase it emerged that participants were looking for opportunities to network and were not readily identifying as people who needed volunteer companions or indeed would identify themselves as being socially isolated. As a result the 'volunteer companion' aspect of the programme was "de-emphasised" almost from the outset as people started to network and to become companions to each other and as it became clear that this organic model appealed to the target group.

2.4 Event programming

A monthly Events Guide has been developed, offering 4 events per month to participants in Dublin. Events are selected with a view to providing variety and choice in terms of art forms, venues, time of event and cost. They can include daytime, evening, mid-week and weekend events and there is an emphasis on events that are relatively inexpensive or free.

Approximately 20-25 people have attended each event to date.

An example of programming: Dublin Events July 2011

Week	Venue	Event	Cost
Week 1	National Concert Hall	Lunch-time concert	Cost €10
Week 2	James Joyce Centre	Tour & Photography Festival Exhibition	Cost €3.50
Week 3	IFI	Film Screening	Cost €8.50
Week 4	Hugh Lane Gallery	Gallery Exhibition	Free of charge

2.5 A developing model

As well as centrally organised events booked through Age & Opportunity, the programme has started to facilitate independent networking opportunities whereby participants can contact one another and plan their own events and meetings. By the end of the pilot phase, a Cultural Companions Event Guide and Directory had been produced. The Directory includes contact details of participants grouped according to area (with the consent of those concerned).

This aspect of the programme is at an early stage and it is envisaged that it will take some time to become established.

Some of those who originally indicated that they did not need a volunteer to collect them or otherwise support them to take part in events, are now beginning to admit that they would appreciate support. This is an aspect of the working model which will be developed in the next phase of the programme. It will further the work already begun in the first phase (this included the recruitment of volunteers who attended an introductory meeting with Age & Opportunity and an AgeWise training session and the development of a volunteer manual for Bord Gáis staff).

Some participants have also volunteered to support the programme co-ordinator in some key tasks, such as taking on the role of ‘meeting and greeting’ participants at events and making introductions.

Thus, a revised working model for Cultural Companions has emerged based on the experience gained in the pilot phase and feedback from participants. The working model comprises three main strands:

- The Larger Network: arts and cultural events advertised in the Event Guide, as in the pilot phase, offering a central venue for people to meet and develop relationships in the context of attending a specific event
- Independent Networking by participants: based on the shared Cultural Companions Directory, facilitating participants to get in touch with others locally to arrange their own outings in a more informal, organic way
- Volunteer Companions: this strand, which was not fully pursued in the pilot phase, will involve one-to-one support for those who need it to facilitate their engagement with the programme and its activities.

2.6 The programme outside Dublin

It was originally envisaged that the programme would be active in both Dublin and Cork. However, it became clear during the pilot phase that with the limited staffing available - a part-time programme co-ordinator working two days a week and some additional support from Age & Opportunity administrative staff, all based in Dublin - and with the need for personal contact to establish relationships with participants, it was necessary to concentrate more on Dublin so as to develop an effective working model.

The second phase of the programme will focus (in addition to maintaining and developing the Dublin base) on expanding the programme to Cork and possibly other locations also. Initial experience showed that Cork requires a more targeted focus at grassroots level and time is needed to build relationships with key partners in Cork, an element which pre-existed in Dublin.

2.7 Participant profile

Number of participants

The total number of participants is approximately 200.

The data below are based on the number of completed Cultural Companions registration forms examined by the evaluator in December 2011 – a total of 120 forms. Since that time, more of those known to be active participants have completed registration forms.

Table 1 **Age profile of participants**

Age range	Number of participants	Number as % of total*
75+	7	5.93%
65-74	68	57.63 %
55-64	43	36.44%

* of 118 registration forms (two of the total 120 forms did not provide this information)

- Participants range in age from 55 to 89, with the majority in the 65-74 age-group.
- Of the ten men who completed forms, seven are in the 65+ age-group and three in the 56-65 group.

Gender profile of participants

The majority of participants are females; a relatively low number of males (15) have joined the network and ten have completed registration forms – of these, three are registered with their wives.

Location of participants

Table 2 below indicates the distribution of participants within the postal code areas of Dublin city. In addition, older people from the counties of Dublin, Wicklow, Meath, Kildare, Louth, Limerick and Galway have completed registration forms for inclusion on the programme.

Table 2 **Participant numbers in postal code areas of Dublin**

Location	Number of participants
Dublin 5	11
Dublin 9	10
Dublin 13	9
Dublin 11	8
Dublin 6W, 16, and 15	6 in each area
Dublin 18, 3, 6, 12, 8	3 in each area
Dublin 24, 4, 14	2 in each area
Dublin 24, 20, 7, 10, 1, 2	1 in each area

3. Cultural Companions: Contexts

This section presents a brief overview of some key research and theoretical contexts which are particularly relevant to the aims, practices and outcomes of Cultural Companions.

3.1 Quality of life, well-being and social engagement

Walker (2009) provides an overview of current research and emerging theory in relation to the quality of life of older people. Although an area of research and analysis with many perspectives and differing emphases, there is agreement on the importance of maintaining and enhancing quality of life throughout the life cycle, including the various phases of ‘older age’. Quality of life encompasses many aspects of an individual’s life; five broad domains contribute to personal quality of life: physical, social, emotional and material well-being, personal growth and activity (Walker, 2009).

In Ireland, the most recent TILDA² findings (Barrett, Savva, Timonen and Kenny, 2011) confirm the results of other studies, such as the *Survey of Health, Ageing and Retirement in Europe (SHARE)* that observed a significant association between social engagement and quality of life (see Litwin, 2010; Netuveli and Blane, 2008).

In relation to social engagement, the TILDA results indicate that:

- Quality of life increases with greater social integration
- In Ireland, 6% of older women and 7% of older men are socially isolated
- Older persons with poorer self-rated health are most likely to be socially isolated.

The report emphasises the diversity among the over-50s across the domains examined, with quality of life measures differing across three age-groups:

Based on a broad measure, quality of life is higher for those aged between 65-74 years relative to those aged between 50 and 64 and is lowest for those aged 75 years and older. (Barrett, Savva, Timonen and Kenny, 2011, p. 19)

3.2 Loneliness

Low levels of social engagement can result in loneliness, which in turn may impact negatively on mental health and well-being (NESC, 2009). Research by The National Council on Ageing and Older People found that 11 per cent of older people have minimal social contacts and a limited social network (NCAOP, 2005). A recent report by St. Vincent de Paul found that loneliness was the biggest individual problem faced by older people living alone (Walsh and Harvey, 2011).

In the SLÁN survey (Barry et.al., 2009) almost one-fifth (17 per cent) of respondents aged 65 and over reported being often lonely, compared to 13 per cent of 30-64 year olds; in addition, “Women were more likely to be lonely than men and people in lower social classes were more likely to be lonely”. Respondents who were widowed were about five times more likely to feel lonely than those who were married or cohabiting (NESC, 2009, p. 194; Barry et.al., 2009).

² TILDA is the Irish Longitudinal Study on Ageing. Study results are based on a stratified clustered sample of 8178 individuals representative of the Irish population aged 50 years and over.

However, the TILDA authors caution against conflating social isolation with loneliness: “Not all persons who are less socially engaged in fact experience loneliness; 60% of people who are ‘objectively’ socially isolated state that they never feel isolated from others. ...Although social isolation is sometimes equated with loneliness, loneliness and social isolation are separate concepts and do not necessarily co-occur” (Barrett, Savva, Timonen and Kenny, 2011, p. 61).

3.3 Social capital

Social engagement contributes to building and maintaining ‘social capital’ for the individuals concerned, and with consequent benefits for the broader society. Social capital is most often associated with the analyses of Putnam (2001) who defines the concept as “social networks and the norms of reciprocity and trustworthiness that arise from them” (2001, p.19). These networks facilitate co-operation and include “informal social support networks, friendship, neighbourhood generosity, interpersonal trust and volunteering activity – but also aspects of local and community development, public-private-voluntary partnerships and civic spirit” (NESF, 2003, p. v).

3.4 Benefits of the arts

Participation in the arts has been shown to result in a range of benefits, both social and economic, including opportunities to build social capital (see NESF, 2007). These benefits impact at the individual and societal levels and “the arts also play an important role in providing intellectual and emotional stimulation and meaning” (NESF, 2007, p. 24).

A growing body of research is emerging which identifies significant benefits for older people through engagement with the arts (see Ní Léime and O’Shea, 2008; Fleming and Gallagher, 2000; NESF, 2007). The spectrum of type and levels of engagement from which these benefits can be derived includes attendance at arts and cultural events.

A study in Sweden examined the effects of attending cultural events (visits to the cinema, theatre, concerts and live music performances, museums and art exhibitions) and found that attendance had positive impacts on the maintenance of health. (Johansson et al., 2001 cited in Ní Léime and O’Shea, 2008, p. 41)

3.5 The arts and older people: rates of participation

The Arts Council’s report on *The Public and the Arts 2006*³ found attendance levels at art events declining with age; the lowest rate of attendance at selected art events was among the over-65s at 56%, the next lowest was among the 55-64 age-group at 78% (Hibernian Consulting et al., 2006, p.68).

In its report on the contribution of the arts to cultural inclusion and social cohesion, NESF also highlights age as a factor impacting on level of participation, which “varies markedly according to a number of factors, especially educational level, socio-economic status, area, and age” (NESF, 2007, p.24).

The report also identifies barriers to participation “such as economic costs, poor transport, lack of literacy, and social and psychological barriers” (NESF, 2007, 24). An additional barrier can be lack of information “in some cases people are not aware of the arts facilities or resources available to them” (ibid., p. 22).

³ The report is based on a survey of 1,210 people at 100 locations around Ireland in 2006.

4. Evaluation methodology

4.1 Methods

The evaluation has drawn on information gathered by means of primary and secondary research.

- The methods utilised in the primary research were focus groups and semi-structured interviews.
- Secondary research included collation of data from participant registration forms and from Cultural Companions programme reports and funding applications.

4.2 Respondents

Interviews and focus group discussions took place with: Age & Opportunity staff and CEO; Cultural Companions participants; a Bord Gáis Foundation representative; and staff of various arts and cultural organisations.

In relation to programme participants, members of the focus group and the interviewees were selected to reflect a mix of age-groups, gender, levels of participation in Cultural Companions and geographical location within Dublin and adjacent counties. A total of 25 ‘cultural companions’ were consulted.

Representatives of four arts and cultural organisations took part in a group discussion about the programme and representatives of two other arts and cultural organisations were interviewed individually.

5. Findings

This section presents the findings which have emerged from the interviews and discussions conducted in the course of the evaluation.

5.1 Participants' perspectives on Cultural Companions

The participants in Cultural Companions discussed their reasons for participating, the impact of the programme and their views on its future development.

Reasons for participating

Participants are attracted to Cultural Companions for reasons such as a desire:

“to be more outgoing”

“to meet like-minded people”

“[to have] new company, new faces”

“[to have] someone to sit with at a concert”

The loss of a spouse or partner is another key factor in participation. Many voiced anxiety about going out alone, especially at night:

“Society is changing ... it's more dangerous going out at night”.

One woman spoke eloquently of her experience of loneliness:

“There isn't anyone...my friends and family are dead...people don't understand the loneliness, it's not the same as aloneness when there's no longer anyone at all.”

Other comments:

“When I used to walk the dog in the park, other dog-owners would stop and chat or at least say hello. When my dog died and I had to go on my own no-one spoke to me, people just passed by.”

“I have no family left, my friends are almost all gone, the only one left has Alzheimer's, so I've almost no contact with people.”

“I'd love to have someone to drive to the beach and go for a walk – I used to love doing that. I'm tired of being in the one place. I need to get out.”

Impact on participants

The participants speak of their experience of Cultural Companions in terms such as:

“An opportunity to share interests”

“Having everything organised for you is great”

“Very good for those finding it difficult to go alone”

“More open than a club”

They also speak of the health benefits, both physical and mental:

“It gives you motivation to get up and get out, instead of just sitting in the chair. You feel better in yourself.”

Development of the programme

Participants want “to find a way to exchange information” and ask “how do we gather suggestions?”

They express a keen interest in “different cultural experiences” and, in a group setting exchanged suggestions about a range of activities and events. However, many are unsure as to whether their suggestions ‘fit’ within the Cultural Companions boundaries - “I wonder if that’s considered to be cultural.” A recurring theme in conversations is the desire among many for walking companions and they wonder if this could be combined with the “cultural pursuits”.

Another recurring topic was the “individual talents [among the participants] which could be brought to the group.” Some participants have significant experience in for example, event management, administration, fund-raising. Others are “good with people, can draw them out” and would be keen to contribute these skills.

Men’s participation

The male participants acknowledged the difficulty in attracting men to initiatives such as Cultural Companions. One man told others in his art class about the programme but they did not respond – when asked how he feels about being in a minority he replied that “only 3 out of 16 in the art class are men so I’m used to it”.

Independent networking in local clusters

Some were hesitant about using the Cultural Companions Directory to contact others in their local area. The local groups are “potentially fraught but [have] lots of possibilities”, according to one participant.

In some cases, efforts to network were unsuccessful; for example, one woman who contacted those in her area was disappointed that none responded. In contrast, one local ‘cluster’ of participants had successfully initiated a get-together and then arranged to attend events together, independently of the Cultural Companions-organised events.

New places and events

For some, the programme has provided opportunities to attend cultural centres and events which they would not have considered visiting otherwise. Hitherto they may have been unfamiliar with the venue or the artform but with Cultural Companions have been willing to “try something new”.

Relationship with Age & Opportunity

It is clear from the responses of the participants that a relationship of trust and confidence in Age & Opportunity and Cultural Companions has built up. For some, it provides “a listening ear” and the telephone support that the programme provides is valued. An example of this trust is the willingness of participants to articulate their needs at this stage in relation to transport and support.

This relationship also reveals a potential difficulty in that for some, personal contact with the co-ordinator is a key element of the programme. Participants themselves voiced a concern around some becoming dependent on the co-ordinator and asked: “are we becoming institutionalised?”

Suggestions for improvement

All those consulted are keen to continue with Cultural Companions and look forward to the next phase; they are “impressed with it” and “it’s brilliant.” They do, however, have suggestions for improving the programme or dealing with weaknesses that have emerged in some contexts.

The cost of events is a concern for some, especially if they would like to attend more than one. Some voice caution around “becoming elitist”.

Encouraging more networking by phone as a way of addressing isolation is recommended.

“News of local events could be communicated to head office in advance and the locals could act as hosts.”

In the future, the contact details of the participants who assist with the programme could be circulated so as to assist with the flow of communication.

Interaction

Interaction with others is at the heart of the programme’s appeal to the participants. Although such interaction is happening and is facilitated at most events, through, for example, having a space provided to meet for a drink/coffee, the feedback from participants indicates their strong desire that this be emphasised to all participants and be strengthened if possible.

They need “an opportunity just to talk” and express caution around the programme becoming “too event focussed”. Some have been disappointed when their expectations in this regard were not met and recommend that Cultural Companions should “emphasise the interaction” (although this experience may be limited to one uncharacteristic event). This could be achieved by continuing to encourage people to stay after events, by pre-selecting a venue for meeting after each event and by organising “special get-togethers” at significant times during the year such as Christmas.

5.2 Age & Opportunity – perspectives on Cultural Companions

“At Age & Opportunity we feel that we are at the start of something with enormous potential in Cultural Companions” (Age & Opportunity, 2011).

Age & Opportunity demonstrates insight into and clarity around the challenges involved in implementing Cultural Companions and the learnings which have emerged from the pilot phase. The organisation adopts a reflective practice approach and is responsive to the emerging needs of the programme and its participants.

The challenges include:

- Providing sufficient resources, especially in terms of the time and staffing demands of the programme so that both the ‘practical’ work and the strategic/developmental work can be attended to

- Developing the programme in such a way as to underpin long-term sustainability
- Meeting the needs and expectations of the participants

The core characteristics which need to be maintained in Cultural Companions include:

- Providing participants with choice around how to engage with Cultural Companions
- Facilitating real ownership of the programme among the participants
- Quality arts experiences

The expansion of the programme to Cork and other areas of the country in the next phase provides both additional opportunities and challenges. A more targeted focus at grassroots level will be needed, and time to build relationships with key partners in areas outside of Dublin.

The involvement of arts and cultural organisations is another area which can be further developed, by encouraging an increased understanding of the potential offered by Cultural Companions for audience development.

The Community Development sector has not proved easy to involve in the pilot phase despite early contacts but it may be of assistance in achieving the participation of some hard-to-reach groups in subsequent phases.

A sustainable framework for expansion might also involve:

- Partnership with other organisations working with older people
- More opportunities for volunteer involvement in programme delivery
- Exploring the possibilities of a ‘franchising approach’ which would involve supporting other groups to replicate the programme.

5.3 Bord Gáis Foundation - perspectives on Cultural Companions

(Note: Before the conclusion of this evaluation, Bord Gáis Foundation had approved funding to Cultural Companions for the second phase of the programme.)

Bord Gáis Foundation was formed in 2009 to co-ordinate and focus the company’s corporate-giving programme in areas of most concern to staff and where the company’s funds and staff volunteering could have a significant impact. The selection of programmes for funding is based on staff decision making, with staff from all parts of the organisation represented on the Foundation.

Bord Gáis Foundation is “encouraged by the results of Cultural Companions” which is “meeting a need greater than expected” and welcomes the plan for extension of the programme in the next phase.

The Foundation also acknowledges the ongoing communication from Age & Opportunity around programme development, adjustments and learnings during the pilot phase.

The Foundation accepts that its original vision of volunteers acting as companions for older people in accessing events did not match the expressed preferences of the target group. As a funding body it wishes to be responsive to the needs of the target groups and recognises the pitfalls of funding approaches which result in funder-driven programme design and delivery.

Bord Gáis Foundation is committed to engaging in “a dynamic partnership with Age & Opportunity” and would like to further explore ways in which Bord Gáis staff could contribute to and link with Cultural Companions in a voluntary capacity. Such voluntary activity need not be that originally envisaged (employees providing support to older people in accessing/attending events) but could, for example, take the form of support with training, skills development and publicity.

As Cork is a major hub for Bord Gáis and Bord Gáis Foundation, the development of the programme in Cork would be strongly welcomed. The organisation could contribute to the programme’s expansion by using its linkages to the community there, for example by introducing Cultural Companions to existing networks.

Bord Gáis Foundation can also provide ways of publicising the programme via the quarterly magazine and its other communications networks. The magazine has a total distribution of approximately 2000. This includes retired Bord Gáis staff who are potential participants in and advocates for Cultural Companions and existing staff who may encourage parents and older relatives to take part.

The Foundation is conscious of the difficulties in attracting men to programmes such as Cultural Companions and of the isolation many of them experience. It suggests tapping into sports networks as a way of publicising the programme and encouraging the participation of men.

5.4 Arts and cultural organisations - perspectives on Cultural Companions

The arts and cultural organisations consulted are generally enthusiastic about the audience development opportunities presented by Cultural Companions and are keen to support the programme.

They do, however, acknowledge the constraints they experience in terms of capacity for sustained and/or particular engagement with the programme and limitations in relation to any ‘special’ treatment of the Cultural Companions group. While wishing to facilitate the programme as much as possible, some have difficulty in facilitating the ‘meeting space’ which is key to the interaction at the core of Cultural Companions.

6. Analysis

It is clear that Cultural Companions has tapped into an area of need among older people. The participants themselves speak of the positive impact of the Initiative on their well-being and quality of life. It could be said that the impact of the programme in this regard is felt across most of the life domains identified in Walker (2009), in particular social and emotional well-being, personal growth and activity.

It is providing valuable opportunities for social engagement and an increase in social capital. There is evidence that the programme is reaching many who feel somewhat isolated, some who are lonely and some who have a need for companions with shared interests. There are different levels of need among the participants and the programme aims to provide opportunities for companionship at different levels and in different ways - individual links and the possibility of tapping into the wider network.

There is, however, scope for greater inclusion of those less immediately enthusiastic about getting involved, those who are harder to reach and for increased numbers of men. While the 'volunteer companions' aspect was "de-emphasised" almost immediately in response to participants who did not appear to take up this offer, some have since admitted that they would appreciate more practical support beyond companionship. This would imply there are levels of isolation people are willing to admit to initially, e.g. socially or culturally, but a level of trust needs to be established before people are comfortable to reveal other needs, e.g. physical assistance, transport etc. This indicates that people experiencing disability or frailty are even harder to include. A more targeted approach in the second phase of the programme may tackle some of these issues.

The independent networking which is emerging as a facet of the programme model provides a means of increasing social capital, and of facilitating independence, ownership and empowerment among the participants. The next phase of the programme will open up new ways for the participants to contribute in a voluntary capacity and use their skills and experience.

Companionship is at the core of Cultural Companions, and this presents significant challenges for those designing and implementing the programme. Cultural Companions, although an ostensibly simple idea, involves a complex web of psychological, social, practical, and organisational factors. All of these challenges require sensitive and skilful management; the expansion of the programme will present new demands in relation to this.

The interaction which is at the heart of Cultural Companions for the participants needs to be maintained and nurtured and emphasised to all those involved.

By facilitating new experiences for the participants, the programme also creates opportunities for learning and personal development and as such contributes to lifelong learning.

Illeris (2003) identifies three dimensions of learning: the cognitive, the emotional and the social. The responses of the participants would appear to confirm that the Cultural Companions experience has the potential to impact on learning/ become a site for learning. Its impacts are evident in the domains of the cognitive, affective and social – these are also the key domains of learning (Illeris, 2003).

The modern concept of competence comprises not only relevant knowledge and skills, but also a range of personal qualities and the ability to perform adequately and flexibly in well-known and

unknown situations. ... all learning includes three dimensions, namely, the cognitive dimension of knowledge and skills, the emotional dimension of feelings and motivation, and the social dimension of communication and cooperation— all of which are embedded in a societally situated context. (ibid., 2003, p. 1)

Access to training and learning opportunities in areas that emerge as relevant can build on this learning potential. For example, there is scope for strengthening skills, knowledge and understanding in relation to aspects of group dynamics which can impact on the processes within Cultural Companions. This may become increasingly salient with the future development of localised groups, more independent networking and more participant involvement in programme delivery.

Cultural Companions presents a challenge in terms of Age & Opportunity's ways of working; a membership programme does not 'sit' comfortably with the other activities of the organisation. Cultural Companions is not a membership programme as such but the expectations of some participants around organisational centralised support may result in some 'blurring of the lines'. Age & Opportunity is conscious of this issue, of the fact that there are other age organisations that do offer membership opportunities, and the plans for future development of the programme will address this.

Where appropriate, Cultural Companions can refer participants to other organisations working with older people so that they may find additional types of engagement and activity which do not fall within the remit of Cultural Companions.

A key organisational challenge is the unsustainability of the current model of Cultural Companions, due primarily to the range and volume of tasks for one co-ordinator. Age & Opportunity's plans for programme development seek to address this but it is likely to be an ongoing challenge until a more sustainable model can be strongly established.

7. Conclusion

Cultural Companions has been a successful pilot programme in terms of:

Positive impact on participants

Model identified, based on successes, lessons learned and feedback from participants, which will form the basis for the next phase of the programme

Responsiveness and reflective practice on the part of Age & Opportunity and Cultural Companions staff – this is crucial to the development of a feasible and effective model

Increasing empowerment and programme co-ownership for the participants

A collaborative relationship with the funding agency – Bord Gáis Foundation

Initiating relationships with arts and cultural organisations.

By designing, implementing and learning from a successful pilot programme, Cultural Companions has made significant progress towards achieving the programme's overall aim of addressing social isolation amongst older people by facilitating their engagement in arts and cultural opportunities. The next phase of the programme will establish to what extent and in what form/s further development is feasible, effective and sustainable.

While work was done to address them, some of the initial objectives could not be achieved within the constraints of the pilot phase. These objectives are:

Engage community groups, local development organisations, and community service providers as a resource in this social engagement process

Develop and test methods of recruiting, training, retaining, and engaging volunteers (including Bord Gáis staff) as a resource in this social engagement process⁴

Researching, documenting and analysing why different cohorts of interested older people do not currently participate in such social opportunities.⁵

These objectives will be revisited as part of a process to set aims and objectives for the second phase. Age & Opportunity's ethos of equality permeates Cultural Companions and the programme benefits from high levels of commitment, analytical skills and creative development processes at individual and organisational levels.

⁴ Work done included: liaison with Volunteering Ireland, putting Garda vetting systems in place, delivering information sessions and some AgeWise training to some volunteers, preparing a manual.

⁵ Some data are collected through registration forms and documenting telephone calls.

8. Recommendations

The recommendations below have been developed to build on the considerable successes of Cultural Companions to date and to address the learnings and challenges identified throughout the pilot programme and in the evaluation process. The recommendations are presented in categories for clarity and analysis – in practice they are interlinked; action on one element will have an impact on others.

They are addressed to Age & Opportunity.

(Note: Age & Opportunity's planning for the next phase of Cultural Companions has pre-dated the completion of the evaluation. The developments envisaged for the next phase of the programme relate to many of the issues and themes of the recommendations presented in this evaluation.)

Sustainability

- Continue to explore and facilitate the increasing co-ownership and task sharing between Age & Opportunity and the participants
- Encourage the consolidation and expansion of the Independent Networking element of the model
- Establish a high-level Steering Group and explore partnerships which would assist in the development of a strategic plan for the programme.

Inclusion

- Continue to develop Cultural Companions in ways which will maximise the participation of the harder-to-reach, perhaps resuming links with the local development sector in order to do so
- Initiate a more targeted approach so as to increase the participation of men. For example, although the inclusion of sporting activities is outside the current remit of arts and culture activities, perhaps community-based sporting networks could be used to publicise the programme and encourage the participation of men
- Develop the Volunteer Companions strand of the programme, so as to meet the emerging needs of some participants for one-to-one support
- Explore the development or encouragement of peer-to-peer telephone support for participants.

Programme identity, design and delivery

- Maintain the responsive and developmental approach to programme design and delivery - which has proven successful in facilitating a working model to emerge from the pilot phase - in such a way as to explore/identify models which will be appropriate for the expansion of the programme beyond the Dublin area. This will require ongoing clarity around the core characteristics and identity of Cultural Companions
- Provide clarity for the participants in relation to the parameters/definition of the programme, so as to eliminate uncertainty as to the types of events, locations and activities which can be included
- With regard to increased clarity and definition, encourage the inclusion of opportunities beyond the arts and culture parameters as part of the Independent Networking strand.

Planning, Monitoring, Evaluation, and Research

- Maintain an up-to-date database for Cultural Companions
- Develop appropriate and effective methods for accessing and collating data on the next phase of the programme. Information on patterns of participation, barriers to and enablers of participation, ways in which participants are developing independent networking – all of this information will be of value beyond the parameters of the programme itself. Patterns such as attendance rates, repeat attenders, non-attenders and the reasons behind such patterns will be crucial information for the programme's development and ongoing effectiveness
- Develop ongoing monitoring and evaluation systems – these can include methods which are participatory in nature. Such methods would engage the participants in for example, designing questionnaires, designing and participating in group evaluation sessions; such methods seek to minimise potentially negative feelings around 'being researched' and seek to empower participants in relation to the monitoring and evaluation systems
- Cultural Companions presents opportunities to contribute to research on, and increased understanding of, many aspects of the experience of older people in Ireland, in particular those aspects relating to such programmes and the longer-term impacts of participation.

Ongoing learning and development

- Facilitate ongoing learning and development among the participants, for example in relation to:
 - Leadership training
 - Confidence building

Other personal development and skills areas may emerge as relevant as the programme develops

- Such facilitation could take the form of providing information about learning and training opportunities, links to Age & Opportunity's range of activities in this area, and links to other organisations providing such opportunities
- Continue to provide variety in programming and challenge as appropriate, for example in the range of events proposed, locations visited, and type of engagement. Types of engagement can include for example: attendance as an audience member, listening to a discussion/debate, participation in discussion, participation in the making/construction/design of an arts and culture event, meeting with artists etc.

Group processes and group development

- As interaction is core to the programme, attention to group processes, and increased participant understanding of group dynamics and group work skills could impact very positively on their experience and the effectiveness of the programme model, especially as it expands to include regional groupings and becomes increasingly participant-led.

Funding

- Explore a range of possibilities for longer-term, multi-annual funding of the programme, to enable strategic planning and to meet the emerging challenges in terms of resourcing an expanded and multi-dimensional model of Cultural Companions.

Partnership, collaboration and linkages

- Explore the potential for Cultural Companions to integrate further with other areas of Age & Opportunity's work and existing Age & Opportunity linkages, for example, the Bealtaine networks and regional Age & Opportunity groupings
- Explore the potential for Cultural Companions to further link in a variety of ways with other organisations working with older people, such as Active Retirement Ireland, The Third Age Foundation, The Older Women's Network and others
- Explore the possibility and effectiveness of links with initiatives similar to Cultural Companions at an international level.

Communication systems, information dissemination and ideas gathering

- Maintain an expanded Cultural Companions website
- Consider the potential for mapping the networks of arts and cultural activities nationally and at a local area level. This could be a task for the volunteers and the networks and would facilitate greater awareness of the range of options available to older people
- Establish a Cultural Companions forum/gathering of some kind, perhaps twice a year, at which feedback and ideas could be gathered from the participants.

Involvement of Bord Gáis Foundation and Bord Gáis staff

- Explore, in collaboration with Bord Gáis Foundation, ways in which Bord Gáis employees may be further involved in the programme.

Relationships with Arts and Cultural Organisations

- Develop and consolidate links with the Council of National Cultural Institutions (CNCI) to increase awareness of Cultural Companions and to explore possibilities for collaboration.
- There is scope to deepen and strengthen the already established linkages with nationwide arts and cultural infrastructure and networks and to establish new ones: including local authority arts officers, regional and local arts centres and arts and cultural groups
- Continue to develop and strengthen relationships with arts and cultural organisations so as to maximise the potential for positive experiences for the participants when visiting venues and events
- Where feasible, facilitate and assist arts and cultural organisations in the development of policies and standards of good practice in relation to older people/older audiences.

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