

Cultural participation by older people:

Are we aging older in life? When it comes to engaging in the arts are habits changing? Recent statistics would suggest so. When we look at the Taking Part data 2005/6¹ we can see a gap between those aged 65 – 74 and the rest of the population in terms of their engagement.

The latest data 2012/13 has recorded an increase in the level of arts engagement by those aged 65 – 74. They are engaging more in the arts than they used to; their engagement is being maintained. This could indicate that habits are changing and people are engaging in the arts for longer. There are a number of reasons for this, which we can all start to quote and unpick but what impact does this 'golden pensionable age' have on the demand for arts activity for this age group, and the supply?

The data tells us that arts and cultural engagement has increased among over 65s but it also tell us that older people aged 75 or more are less likely than younger groups to engage with the arts. Again there are a number of reasons for this: health, transport, finance, no one to go with, are but a few – and I'm sure we can speculate and guess many more. When thinking about this; that there are a group of people who want to engage, and previously have engaged with arts and culture but for one reason or another when they reach 75 years old they stop engaging, or engage less frequently - what issues does this pose for policy makers, governments, social care providers, artists, and others?

The context in which we are working is important. The care and welfare of children and young people and the elderly are huge service areas. Predictions in England indicate that by 2022 some local council's will not have enough income to fund solely children and young people's service and adult social care, let alone arts and cultural provision. As many of us know the arts can be an effective way to tackle some issues encountered by older people, such as loneliness, but they are often overlooked by older people's services².

¹ In England the DCMS, along with Arts Council, English Heritage and Sport England commission the Taking Part survey, this is a continuous face to face survey with adults aged 16 and over. It has been running since mid-July 2005.

² The Arts Council is currently undertaking some work around cultural commissioning. This is to help the arts and cultural sector to better engage with public sector commissioning and also to support public service commissioners to develop awareness of the potential of arts and culture to deliver their outcomes.

When talking about art and cultural engagement for older people there is often a tendency for these services to look at medical outcomes, and as we have heard it is widely acknowledged that the arts can have health benefits but what about the opportunities for older people to engage in the arts for art's sake, and to consume the arts through choice for personal enjoyment, and to achieve artistic outcomes?

In England we hear a lot about the personalisation agenda, we have personalised budget for some service users, particularly in mental health. In terms of consuming arts and culture personalisation is an interesting concept. This is most familiar in television and media, where we can get TV on demand, pod casts and catch ups for shows we have missed. We can watch episodes of 'breaking bad' back to back and 'binge' on serial shows instead of waiting until the next week for the next instalment. So what does this mean for how we all consume the arts? And when thinking of older people, what does it mean for that group? How can older people engage with the arts on their terms? In their homes – where they feel safe? At times when they want to – if they don't want to go out in the evening? What does this model of arts provision look like?

The Arts Council is currently undertaking a project with the Baring Foundation where we are jointly funding four projects that are partnerships between arts organisations and care homes. We are putting art at the heart of these care homes, and enabling people to access this provision on their terms. Some of these projects are also looking at taking people out of the homes, to visit arts exhibitions, performances etc. For those who can't leave the home and the art has to come to them, on their terms, in their environment - are they getting the same kind of experience? What impact does working in care settings have on aspirations of artistic excellence? How can we ensure that older people in care are getting the best art and cultural experiences?

I've not spoken much about digital technology, it's an obvious point but in the past not many older people were accessing the internet, and to a degree this is still the case, however, this profile is also shifting with time as generations' age. We now have 'silver surfers' so in the future could digital technology as a way of accessing arts and culture, on your own terms, be the solution to some of the issues I have spoken about? And what might that look like?

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