

Creative Connections: Embedding Arts and Creativity within Social Prescribing

Dr. Louise Kinlen



Clár Éire Ildánach
Creative Ireland
Programme



Commissioned Social Prescribing and Arts Research Overview

What is the current role and potential development of arts and creative activities, that are taking place as part of HSE funded social prescribing (SP) services in Ireland?



How and to what extent do social prescribing services currently link with arts and creative activities in Ireland



Learning on what works/ doesn't work in relation to arts and creative mechanisms for engagement with creative practice as part of SP



Underlying weaknesses in infrastructure and how to address them



Explore an effective, scalable and sustainable model for the integration of arts and creativity activity within SP



Methodology

- Design & testing of survey
- Distribution to all HSE funded SP Link Workers
- 26 responses

Link Workers Survey



- Interviews with 9 national experts
- 2 Focus groups with Arts & Health Managers (n=11)

National Stakeholder interviews



- 5 case studies - based on survey & recommendation
- Interviews with 13 programme implementers

Case studies



- Policy context
- Grey and academic literature on arts and SP

Literature review



- Presentation of draft results
- Further focus group discussions

Research symposium



- Writing of research findings in final report
- Further dissemination & discussion

Finalisation of report



- *Qualitative, exploratory research framework*
- *Inductive processes – examining from the ground up*
- *Within structure of key research objectives*

What is social prescribing?

Structured approach that enables healthcare and community practitioners to refer individuals to non-clinical supports such as community, cultural, and creative activities to enhance wellbeing, prevent ill-health, and address the wider social determinants of health

Embedded within national policy in Ireland – through **HSE Social Prescribing Framework (2021)**

Referral pathways through professional referrers (and some self-referral) for those 18+ who meet some/all criteria of:

- ☐ one or more long-term conditions
- ☐ need support with their mental health
- ☐ lonely or isolated
- ☐ frequent GP/ED attendees and may benefit from other social supports outside of clinical services

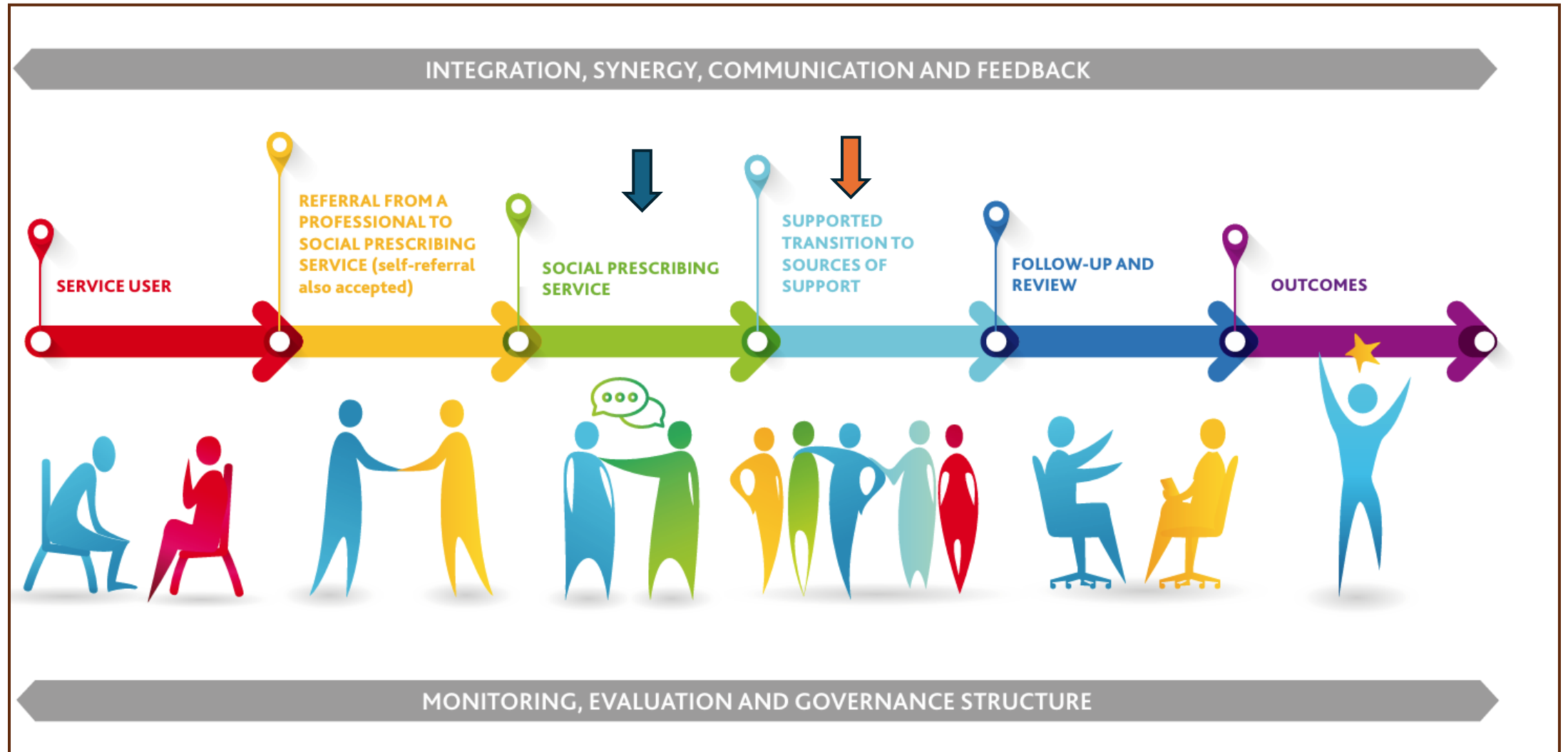


Arts & Social Prescribing – the context

- **International evidence** (WHO, 2019; Fancourt & Finn, 2019) show arts engagement improves mental health and reduces stress, enhances social connections and community belonging and contributes to prevention, promotion, and management of health conditions
- Evidence **supports the integration of arts into social prescribing** programmes
- **International studies of ‘Arts on prescription’** show professionally facilitated arts groups may provide a therapeutic environment for participants (Stickley et al. 2012;)
- Evaluations & reports of **social prescribing & arts programmes in Ireland** demonstrate similar positive results (Whyte and Kelly, 2022; Ní Dhubháin, 2023; Keenaghan, 2023).

- 🎵 **Ensure arts activities are bespoke and cater to the diverse needs of the group**
- 🎨 **Incorporate role of professional artists & potential transfer of knowledge to other facilitators where appropriate**
- 🔗 **Need for Link Workers to provide ongoing support to participants**
- € **Need for sustainable funding and project support**
- 🏰 **Further exploration of the connections with local cultural heritage**



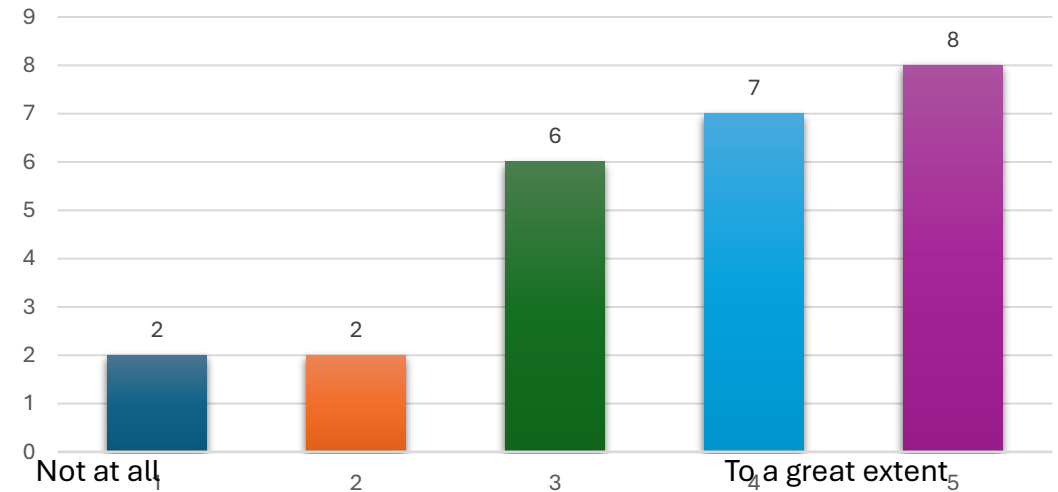


Social Prescribing referral pathway (HSE, 2021) – potential for creativity/arts as part of supported transition & identified through SP service

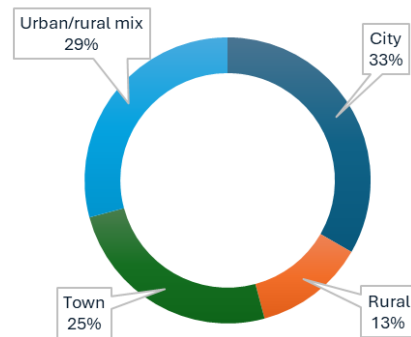
What did SP Link Workers tell us? (survey data)



Have you referred participants to arts and creative activities?



Type of location of service



Survey Question:

What are the main types of arts and creative activities have you signposted participants to in the last year?

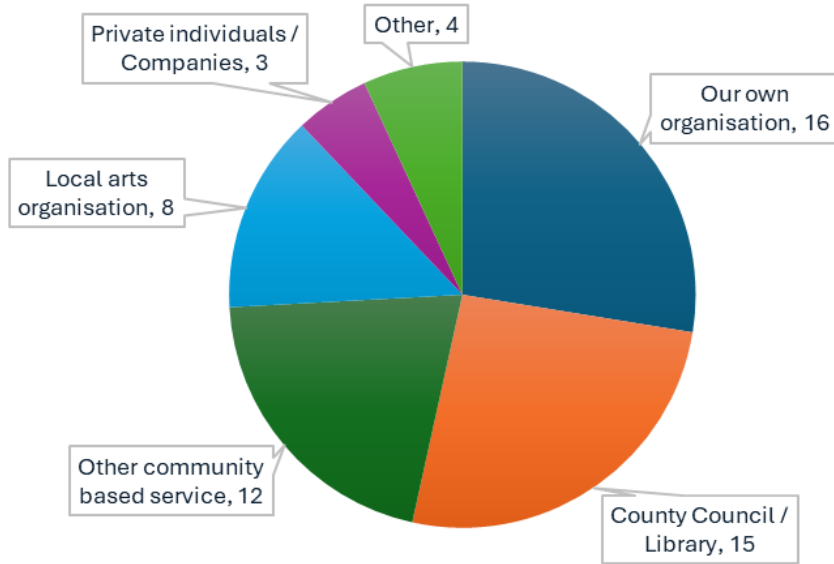


Activity	No
Art Classes/Painting	10
Creative Writing	7
Music Lessons/Groups	6
Crafts	6
Knitting/Crochet	4
Pottery	3
Drama	3
Choir/Singing Groups	3
Jewellery Making	2
Basket / willow	2
Weaving	
Flower arranging	2

*‘Laugh and craft’
‘Weaving worlds together’
‘Creative cafes’
‘One town one voice’*

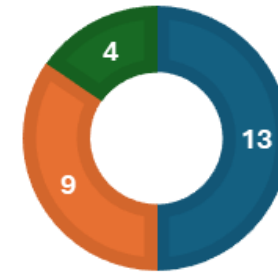
Other activities include: mindful colouring, mindfulness and nature, journal making, mosaics, photography, ceramics, mandala art

Main providers of arts and creative activities



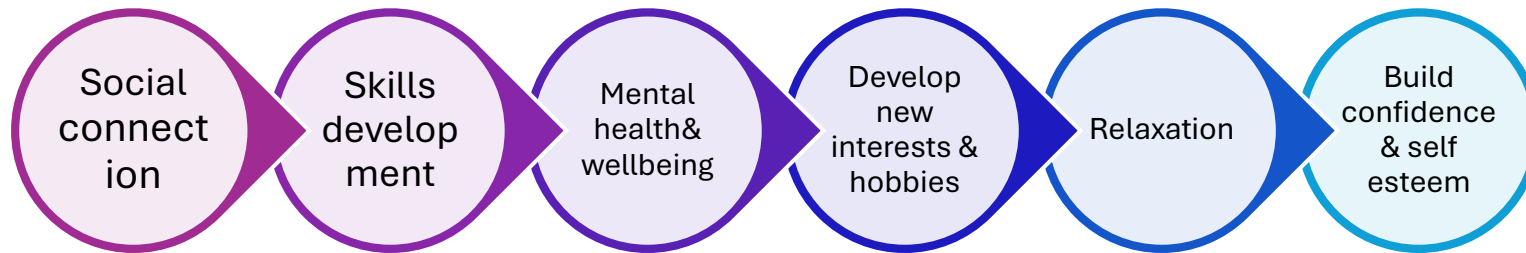
Have you been involved in delivery/co-ordination of arts activities?

- Yes, provided by our SP service
- Indirectly through supporting others to provide
- No, we only signpost to others



Provision of arts & creativity in SP

Survey respondents views.. Benefits



"Arts and creative activities consistently enhance the health and wellbeing of our social prescribing participants by fostering connection, reducing anxiety, and promoting positive mental engagement."

"We also refer regularly to other activities such as arts & crafts, choirs, talks etc provided by other community organisations in the area which is of course part of our individual and person-centred focus with participants"

"Feedback from clients trying something new and going home with something they made, but most of all it's the company of others and the cup of tea. Companionship is the most important."

Survey respondents: Challenges



“It would be great to have a funding source to dip into as creative ideas emerge from our participants/clients so that we can respond to people's needs in a ground-up way.”

“Time and cost can be factors as it is important to note that our supported programmes require a good bit of involvement with a social prescriber and project staff at each session, regular reminders to participants to encourage a high level of attendance, follow-up if attendance drops and 1-1 support alongside the sessions if needed.”

"Wish there were more options, specifically for younger people (18-50) and men. There is little art available for clients in my area, whereas there are various craft and other activities. A big challenge is that older women tend to be willing to try new activities, so can be the majority of the group, which can be off-putting to a minority of younger women/younger men/older men."

Focus Groups / Interviews

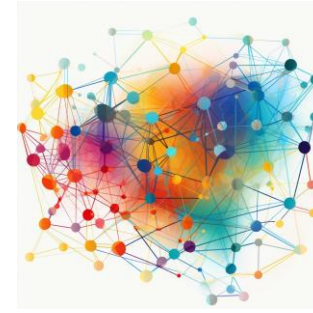
Perspectives

- Evidence of high levels of collaboration between SP projects & wide range of arts & cultural institutions, local artists & engagement with local heritage
- High degree of diversity and local adaptation – based on both person centred nature of SP & local offerings
- Funding for arts & creativity sought from range of sources – with Creative Ireland playing a key role (often delivered through the SP service in conjunction with partners)

“Partnership is key. Strong, formalised relationships between the HSE, local authorities, arts organisations, and community groups are seen as the foundation for success. Dedicated roles are needed: link workers as facilitators, arts officers as coordinators, and professional artists as deliverers.” (national stakeholder)



Referrals & interconnected roles



Social prescribing as an **interconnected web with multiple partners and person at the centre**. Role of inward referrals & what people are referred out to crucial elements

“You know, often, when you're working with GPs or even consultants here, like they're listening with a very specific lens, yeah? And they're not thinking like, Okay, well, maybe this person's memory issues are because they're not leaving the house. So kind of, I think the more awareness of the value of being engaged in creative activities, recreational activities as a priority”

Link workers can play dual role and may signpost /refer, support and may organise/ deliver some interventions

“It was never really the vision for Link workers themselves to be the intervention delivering arts and creativity based initiatives, the idea, and what we'd be striving for, really, in the long term, is that link workers would be facilitating the connection between members of the public and those arts and creative based activities. And that's, that's what link workers want, because, the idea of them being the intervention just isn't sustainable, and it's too much of an ask on top of a very busy role”

Some **arts & health practitioners have appropriate arts offerings** & would welcome opportunities to engage more with social prescribing

Role of professional artist & defining creativity

- Development of innovative practice & moves towards greater training and professionalisation of role of artists within health sphere (but more needed)

“That ecosystem requires artists with specific skills and sensibilities, which aren't universally available.”

- Objectives within health / arts / social prescribing may differ – need for common understandings
- Framework / guidelines on embedding arts within social prescribing would be welcomed *“Maybe this toolkit idea... would help link workers to take on more projects, because they'd be more deliverable.”*



5 Case Studies of Arts and Social Prescribing

1. Kerry – Social Prescribing & arts in 4 FRCs
2. Mayo – Family Centre, Castlebar – Flourish Social Prescribing
3. DLR – Southside Partnership & DLR Libraries – Community & Creative Cafes
4. Dublin - MISA, St James – Social Prescribing & Creative Life Centre
5. Monaghan -Teach na Daoine FRC Social Prescribing



**Flourish Social Prescribing
Programme, Family Centre,
Castlebar**
<https://youtu.be/jwibebHbv8Q>

- 1st Social Prescribing service established in Ireland (2012)
- Arts & creativity are an integral part of it – delivered in conjunction with local artists and arts centres (e.g. Linenhall)
- Incorporates both internal & external engagement in arts – broadening access to arts e.g. Creative cafés to taster sessions in local galleries, flower arranging, pottery, craft workshops & theatre.
- Weekly Music Circle – supportive exploration & playing/ appreciation of music



Kerry Arts & Social Prescribing

- You Me Creativity Programme (Creative Ireland funded) delivered in 4 FRCs in Kerry in 2023
- Weaving Worlds Together (Creative Ireland funded) is current cross border initiative building on findings & exploration of toolkit on arts & social prescribing
- Diverse person centre array of interventions such as felting, weaving, nature based art projects, music (singing, music and dance), ceramics, theatre visits and art for wellbeing
- Arts programme now supported by project co-ordinator across 4 FRCs - based on evaluation findings

DLR 'Libraries and Community Creative Cafe' Programme

- **Led by Southside Partnership & DLR Libraries**, funded by HSE and Creative Ireland
- **Weekly creative 'taster sessions' and longer courses:** activities include writing, weaving, felting, heritage, music, drumming, crafts, painting, dance, and more
- **Inclusive, person-centred approach:** sessions co-produced with participant feedback, tailored to diverse needs
- **Wrap-around support:** staff provide ongoing communication, transport, and personal assistance, especially for vulnerable participants
- **Outcomes:** increased confidence, new friendships, personal development, and greater engagement with local libraries
- **Challenges:** transport barriers, short-term funding, and administrative workload managed through teamwork and flexible planning

"It made me more mindful and I have made new friends"

"The freedom to let my creativity flow"

"This course has helped me as I negotiate a tricky chapter in my life."



Creative Life at MISA, St. James

Only hospital based SP service – linked with Creative Life programme

Strong integration with referrers, ongoing communication & mapping of community assets (LAMP)

Outcomes:

Increased confidence, wellbeing, and emotional health.

- ✓ Reduced perception of pain and discomfort.
- ✓ Enhanced social bonds and rediscovery of interests.
- ✓ Support for cognitive function, especially for dementia.
- ✓ Greater stakeholder engagement and partnerships.

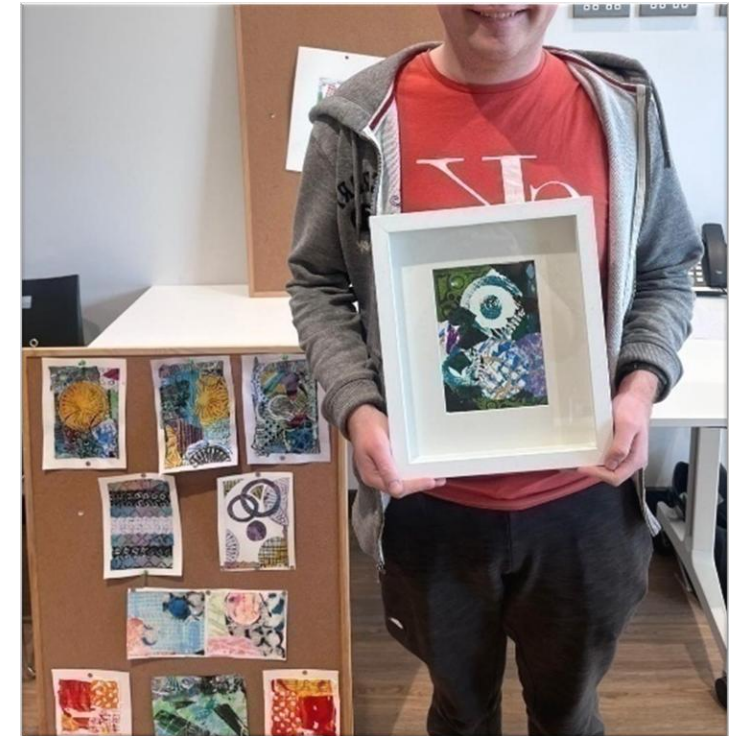
*'You are heard, I'm hearing you. Your memory will be my memory too
In years and years and years, your life has changed.
You might have left the choir, the dance room, and the stage.
But the memory never fades. Your story's always worthy to be seen.'*



Make Your Mark, Teach na Daoine

- **Inclusive Community Art Programme:** Launched by Monaghan Social Prescribing Service in partnership with Teach na nDaoine and Clones FRCs to address loneliness and social isolation.
- **Creative Arts as Wellbeing Tool:** Used art-making (collage, journalling) to foster connection, self-expression, and emotional wellbeing among diverse participants.
- **Accessibility & Support:** Sessions held in an accessible venue, led by an artist experienced in sensory needs, supported by a social care intern and a translator to ensure full participation.
- **Barrier-Free Participation:** All materials provided free, with a focus on sustainability and removing financial obstacles.
- **Positive Outcomes:** Participants reported improved wellbeing, new skills, and a sense of belonging; many continued creative activities independently or shared with others.

“Raised my awareness of the benefits of creativity for mental wellbeing”



Summary of key findings

Funding & policy development

- Need for strategic, sustainable, and nationally coordinated approaches, **including better governance, funding models, and integration into health and arts & health policies**
- **Clarify partnerships and roles stakeholders such as** HSE, Healthy Ireland, Arts Council, Creative Ireland, Health Local Authorities, Community organisations, arts organisations etc.
- Funding described by some as fragmented, short-term, and administratively burdensome. Call for more **sustainable, mainstream funding, and for models that allow for local flexibility and innovation** including idea of ‘participant bursary’

"Increase allocation of funding for areas with a simple application process for the funding for link workers. Promote cooperation with local agencies i.e. the library, Arts Centre."

"Creative Ireland funding is not available everywhere. There is no programme budget within social prescribing and it is needed."

"Having an MOU and having that standardised so that you know that the funding is accessible, accessible to the same types of groups, you know, regardless of the actual same governance."

Overall integration of arts & social prescribing

- This research demonstrates that the **integration of arts and creativity within social prescribing in Ireland has evolved significantly**
- At a national policy level, the establishment of the **HSE Social Prescribing Framework** has provided some clarity of an approach for social prescribing services across the country over the past decade
- The overall intersection of arts and health and wellbeing has been recognised through the cross-sectoral **Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) between Creative Ireland, the Department of Health, the HSE, and the Arts Council**



Good Practice- Arts and Social Prescribing

- Link workers tailor referrals and accompany participants, providing ongoing encouragement.
- Strong relationships with local authorities, libraries, arts organisations, and community artists expand opportunities.
- Creative activities improve mental health, reduce isolation, and build confidence and social connection.
- Programmes include Creative Cafés, hospital-based arts, heritage initiatives, and professional artist involvement.
- Services leverage limited resources to create bespoke, locally relevant activities.
- HSE and Creative Ireland enable adaptability and innovation in programme delivery.
- Ongoing training and resources help practitioners engage diverse groups effectively.



Challenges & overcoming them



Funding for creative activities is often project-based, short-term inconsistent, and administratively burdensome,



Access to arts and creative opportunities varies widely across regions - depending on the presence of local champions,.



Link workers face heavy caseloads - challenges in seeking funding /co-ordinating & delivering or deliver creative activities in addition to their core roles



The need for a **level of support and some bespoke stepping stone interventions** raised by link workers. **Transport, cost, and limited local options**



Need for clearer governance, streamlined funding mechanisms, and more consistent integration of arts and creativity in health and wellbeing policy



Artists and arts based organisations/ arts and health managers may unaware or unable to access the pathways.

Recommendations



Integration of National & Local Policy

- Build sustainable partnerships between HSE, local authorities, libraries, and arts organisations.
- Enable arts partners to engage with social prescribing participants, including outreach and online activities.
- Update the HSE Social Prescribing Framework to explicitly include arts and creativity.
- Embed social prescribing and creative health in local and national strategies for joined-up policy.

Resourcing Arts & Social Prescribing

- Link HSE-funded social prescribing to dedicated funding streams for creative arts and health.
- Support individual access to creative activities (e.g., transport, materials, course fees).
- Streamline and align funding mechanisms to reduce administrative burden.
- Increase resources for national coordination, including a full-time coordinator role.

Further recommendations

Improvement of Practice & Referral Pathways

- Clarify roles and responsibilities among all partners.
- Prioritise inclusive, locally accessible creative activities for underrepresented groups.
- Raise awareness of the benefits of creativity for health among referrers and stakeholders

Further Learning & Engagement

- Expand training and professional development for arts and social prescribing practitioners.
- Promote networking and sharing of good practice at national and regional levels.
- Develop systems to capture data on creative activities delivered.
- Build a national repository of good practice and research.
- Continue national research and evaluation to inform ongoing improvement.

Social Prescribing & the Arts

Research Forum

IMMA, DUBLIN, 15/0ct/25

Welcome!
Catherine Abbot

Arts Council

Sinead O'Reilly

participation in CREATIVITY BENEFITS PEOPLE'S HEALTH

We encourage a HOLISTIC approach to health

Growing Body of Research showing the Benefits

HSE

Dr. Christopher Carroll

I want to acknowledge the Arts Councils work in developing ACCESS in participating in the ARTS

Sundara O'Higgins

partnership is essential

IMMA

We believe the museum should be an INCLUSIVE space

Driving participation

CASE STUDY PRESENTATIONS

Katy Fitzpatrick
Creative Community Engagement Officer

LIBRARY = a place for everybody

DLR Library

Southside Partnership

Lisa Sieger-Jamison
Link Worker

LIBRARY sessions we bring people into the LIBRARY & show them what we offer

CLASSES, GROUPS, ETC.

We BUILD CONFIDENCE so people can come by themselves

Roisin Nevin
MISA, St. James's Hospital

We let the Link Worker know

Can be on a 1 to 1 basis mostly people over 60

WE NEED TO GET MORE MEN !!

Artists work with patients to create Art

We might have an artist in residence for 6-10 weeks

FUNDING, EDUCATION IS NEEDED TO GET INFO OUT AND MORE PEOPLE IN

Embed Social Health into College (Education)

Louise Kinlen overview of interim findings & presentation

Survey of LINK workers

25

National Stakeholder Interviews

9 Experts

Case Studies & Lit Review

ONGOING

Connecting people to creativity in the Community

PERSON CENTRED

LINK WORKER

BENEFITS

SOCIAL CONNECTION

RELAXATION

BUILDING SELF ESTEEM

SKILLS DEVELOPMENT

Need for Specific Skills & Training Artists & Art Workers

An interconnected web of multiple partners with the PERSON IN THE CENTRE

Local Authorities

Health Professionals

Libraries

Link Workers

The Cup of Tea & Chats

BEST PART

CHALLENGES

FOLLOW UP MORE FOR MEN & BOYS

INFRASTRUCTURE DIFFERS BETWEEN EACH COUNTY



References:

- Fancourt, D., Finn, S., 2019. What is the evidence on the role of the arts in improving health and well-being? A scoping review (No. 67), Health Evidence Network Synthesis Report 67. WHO.
- Health Service Executive, Creative Ireland, Arts Council, 2022. The art of being healthy and well: Report of National Symposium. Dublin.
- Keenaghan, C., 2023. Celebrating Creativity in Community: A Review of the Impact of Creative Ireland Funding on Flourish Social Prescribing Service in North and West Mayo. Flourish, Castlebar
- Ní Dhubháin, M., 2023. You Creativity Me: A report on the Creative Ireland Kerry Social Prescribing Pilot Project delivered in partnership with the National Family Resource Centre's Mental Health Project, Kerry County Council Arts Office, and Cork Kerry Community Healthcare.
- Robinson, D., McGowan, B., Gallagher, E., Sheridan, A., Boyle, G., 2024. Social Prescribing in Ireland: From Ad Hoc to Universal Provision, in: Bertotti, M. (Ed.), Social Prescribing Policy, Research and Practice. Springer International Publishing, Cham, pp. 115–129. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-031-52106-5_8
- Stickley, T., Hui, A., 2012. Social prescribing through arts on prescription in a UK city: Participants' perspectives (Part 1). Public Health 126, 574–579.
- WHO Regional Office Europe, 2019. Intersectoral action: the arts, health and well-being. WHO.
- Whyte, A., Kelly, 2022. Culture on Prescription: National Report Ireland. DCU.