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The 'Art of Life' project: stakeholder engagement report

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UNIVERSITY
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FACULTY OF NURSING AND MIDWIFERY

THE 'ART OF LIFE' PROJECT

Stakeholder engagement report

AUTHORS

Dr Shuhua Yang, Denise McKernan and Prof Mary Lynch

ART OF
LIFE



Art of Life image by Kim Gaffney Art commissioned by
Creative Cavan

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Shared Island
Initiative

Clár Éire Ildánach
Creative Ireland
Programme



Comhairle Contae
an Chabháin
Cavan
County Council

ABBREVIATIONS

ACP	Advance Care Planning
CPD	Continuing Professional Development
FG	Focus Group
NI	Northern Ireland
ROI	Republic of Ireland
SROI	Social Return on Investment
SWAP	South West Age Partnership

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Background: Engaging in creative activities can have a positive effect on individuals, enabling them to process and express emotion, maintain human connection and make sense of their experiences. The *Art of Life* is a Shared Island project that aims to normalise conversations around death and dying using creative approaches and is delivered during 2024-2025. The *Art of Life* project explores a range of creative approaches to facilitate end-of-life discussions within the community. Creatives will also be upskilled to support and develop delivery. The creatives will form a key part of delivery as they offer a different type of language, the language of metaphor – perhaps a non-verbal language, a visual vocabulary, which is ideal for engaging those hard to reach. These creative providers are socially engaged artists who will engage in reflective practice and with great sensitivity. This report represents the first stage – stakeholder engagement of a Social Return on Investment (SROI) evaluation for the *Art of Life* project.

Aim: The purpose of this initial phase of the evaluation was to guide the design and delivery of the *Art of Life* project and identify wellbeing outcomes, and develop a theory of change to inform the Social Return on Investment evaluation.

Method: Focus group discussions were conducted with stakeholders including creatives, partners from the Irish Hospice Foundation, Compassionate Communities, Cavan Age Friendly, South West Age Partnership (SWAP), Libraries Northern Ireland (NI), Cavan Library Service and end-users of the workshops. Two in-person focus group discussions with partners and end-users of workshops were conducted in Cavan, Co. Cavan, Republic of Ireland (n= 6) and Irvinestown, Co. Fermanagh, Northern Ireland (n= 6). One online focus group discussion with creatives was conducted via Zoom (n= 8).

Results: Key themes from the discussions include the activities delivered through the workshops, stakeholders' expectations and desired outcomes, wellbeing outcomes, personal growth and professional value (creatives), and challenges and lessons learned from the *Art of Life* workshops. A proposed Theory of Change was developed, outlining the inputs, outputs, outcomes, and impacts of the project. This model will inform the full SROI evaluation and help quantify the social and economic value created by the *Art of Life* project.

Conclusion: The findings from this initial phase underscore the transformative potential of the *Art of Life* workshops in normalizing conversations around death and dying through creative engagement. By exploring the unique strengths of socially engaged artists and fostering connections within communities, the project creates a safe space for participants to explore their emotions and build confidence and resilience around end-of-life conversation.

1. INTRODUCTION

1.1. Background

Advance Care Planning (ACP) and discussions about death and dying are vital for empowering and enabling individuals to express their preferences and choices regarding future medical care and end-of-life decisions (Sudore *et al.*, 2017). People are sometimes not willing to engage in end-of-life discussions as there is a perception that the topic is ‘upsetting’ (Carrese *et al.*, 2002) or could raise ‘negative’ issues (Golden *et al.*, 2009). However, evidence suggests the importance of awareness of how more can be done to understand the advanced care wishes among frail and older individuals within society (Sharp *et al.*, 2013). ACP conversations need to be encouraged to provide support and guidance while enabling individuals to make decisions. Research findings indicate that while the majority of older people value the chance to have conversations around end-of-life care, most do not have the opportunity to do so (Sharp *et al.*, 2013). When ACP and discussions about death and dying are avoided, families may face greater distress, often feeling unprepared or conflicted about decisions. On a broader scale, this lack of planning can lead to inefficiencies in healthcare systems, as resources are allocated toward treatments that may not align with patient values (Rietjens *et al.*, 2017). Thus, encouraging conversations about end-of-life benefits individuals, families, and healthcare systems alike.

Open discussions about death and dying can help normalize a subject that is often avoided, helping preparedness and reducing the stigma associated with mortality. Evidence shows that such conversations can improve emotional well-being, providing individuals with peace of mind and clarity about their choices empowering and informing families when making difficult decisions about their loved one’s care (Carr & Luth, 2020). For families, these discussions strengthen relationships by addressing unresolved concerns and encouraging dialogue about personal wishes. In addition, promoting end-of-life conversations at the societal level supports public health efforts, such as the development of compassionate communities, which encourage collective responsibility and improve public awareness of end-of-life issues (MacKenzie & Lasota, 2020). These discussions also help reframe death as a natural part of life, enabling individuals and families to face it with greater resilience.

Art and creativity serve as powerful tools for engaging individuals in difficult conversations about death and dying. For example, creative songwriting was used in therapy at end-of-life care to help express people’s thoughts and feelings and to communicate (Heath & Lings, 2012). Creative practices have been integrated into health professional training due to their ability to reduce stress, enhance positive emotions, and encourage reflection through the time involved in the creative process, which may also offer therapeutic benefits (McBain *et al.*, 2015). The integration of art within social prescribing frameworks further enhances its impact. Social prescribing connects individuals to community-based interventions, such as creative workshops, to address social and emotional determinants of health. Studies show that this approach reduces isolation, promotes mental well-being, and encourages healthier lifestyles (Chatterjee *et al.*, 2018).

The benefits of engaging in ACP and integrating the discussions within creative workshops extend to broader social, environmental, and economic systems. Socially, these initiatives help build compassionate communities where open conversations about death and dying reduce isolation and foster support networks. Environmentally, end-of-life planning can encourage sustainable practices, such as green burials and resource-conscious memorials, which reduce the ecological footprint associated with traditional practices (Davies & Rumble, 2012). Additionally, ACP can release pressure on healthcare systems by reducing unnecessary interventions, hospitalizations, and prolonged treatments. By aligning medical care with individual preferences, ACP ensures that resources are used effectively, reducing costs and improving the quality of care (Silveira *et al.*, 2010).

1.2. The 'Art of Life' project

The *Art of Life* is a Shared Island project which aims to normalise conversations around death and dying using creative approaches and is delivered during 2024-2025. The project explores a variety of creative approaches to facilitate end-of-life discussions within the community. As part of its development, creatives will also enhance their ability to support and deliver workshops. The creatives will form a key part of delivery as they bring a unique form of expression – using metaphor, perhaps a non-verbal communication, a visual storytelling – to engage individuals who may be hard to reach. They will be socially engaged artists who will contribute to the project through reflective practice and approaching the participants with great sensitivity.

Conducting a stakeholder engagement is a critical component of the SROI framework. The evaluation approach involves gathering perspectives from individuals and organizations directly involved in or affected by the project. Stakeholder engagement ensures that the evaluation process is informed by those with firsthand experience of the initiative, providing insight into its perceived value, challenges, and potential areas for improvement. For the *Art of Life* project, stakeholder engagement plays a crucial role in understanding how creative approaches facilitate discussions on death and dying. By incorporating the experiences of participants, creative facilitators, and partner organizations, this initial phase of the SROI will evaluate whether the project's activities align with its intended outcomes. Additionally, the findings will contribute to the development of a Theory of Change, outlining the pathways through which the *Art of Life* is expected to generate social impact.

1.3. Theory of Change

Developing a theory of change provides a structured framework for linking an initiative's activities to its intended outcomes, ensuring a clear understanding of how change is expected to occur. As outlined by Connell and Kubisch (1998), the development of the theory of change process begins with identifying desired outcomes, mapping the activities designed to achieve them, and considering the contextual factors that may influence both implementation and success (Connell & Kubisch, 1998). The development of theory of change is instrumental in conducting a full SROI evaluation for initiatives. Interviews, face-to-face workshops often were used for developing and refining the theory of change and helping the understanding of the mechanism of changes in different contexts (Schierhout *et al.*, 2024).

1.4. Aims

This report represents the first stage of an SROI evaluation for the *Art of Life* project. The focus of this initial phase was stakeholder engagement, aiming at capturing the perspectives of those involved to inform the development of a theory of change and guide the next phases of the SROI process. This report will be used by Creative Ireland to monitor the progress of the project and ensure its activities align with the intended outcomes.

2. APPROACH

The initial steps of the SROI are developing and making explicit the narrative of how and why a desired change (here meaning a range of wellbeing outcomes) is expected to happen in a particular context (as a result of the *Art of Life* project). It maps or 'fills in' the middle bit between what a program does (its activities or interventions) and how these program goals will be achieved. The engagement of stakeholders leads to an understanding by first identifying the desired long-term goals and then working back from these to identify all the conditions (outcomes) that must be in place (and how these related to one another causally) for the goals to occur and mapping of the outcomes. This then provides the basis for identifying what type of activity will lead to the outcomes identified as preconditions for achieving the long-term goal.

Therefore, in this phase of the study, a qualitative research approach was employed, utilizing focus group discussions to capture in-depth insights from stakeholders. Focus group research method has been widely used in studies in qualitative research, due to their effectiveness in facilitating dialogue, allowing participants to express their experiences, perceptions, and expectations in an interactive setting and further obtain more in-depth information to achieve the project goals (Then et al., 2014). Focus groups provide participants with a comfortable, respected and permissive environment to share their opinions in the group without being judged. During focus group discussions, the open-ended questions are phased and sequenced, which will help participants to easily understand and prompt the conversation (Krueger, 2014; O. Nyumba, *et al.*, 2018). In the development of a programme, policy or service development, focus groups are normally used to gain understanding from target groups, reflect and further improve the programme (Krueger, 2014).

In this study, three focus group discussions were conducted to engage key stakeholders in the project, including creatives involved in delivering workshops, workshop participants, and partner organizations such as the Irish Hospice Foundation, Compassionate Communities, Cavan Age Friendly, SWAP, Libraries NI, and Cavan Library Service. The focus groups were semi-structured to encourage open discussion while maintaining a guided approach, ensuring all participants had the opportunity to contribute. Ethical approval has been obtained from the Royal College of Surgeons in Ireland Research Ethics Committee (Reference number: REC: 202410011).

The findings from focus group discussions were used to inform the development of the theory of change by capturing the inputs, outputs, outcomes and impact of the *Art of Life* project. By linking stakeholder insights to the theory of change, this approach ensures that the evaluation reflects stakeholders' experiences and social value rather than theoretical assumptions. Stakeholder engagement through focus groups not only facilitates a deeper understanding of the project's impact but also ensures that the perspectives of those directly involved shape its long-term sustainability and refinement.

2.1. Identifying stakeholders

Stakeholders are individuals or organizations directly impacted by the activity and are best positioned to describe the changes it brings. Therefore, it is essential to identify and engage them throughout the analysis to ensure that the perceived value and its measurement are shaped by those who experience or influence the outcomes. The identification of the key stakeholders in this report is presented in *Table 1*.

Table 1: Inclusion of stakeholder groups in focus groups

Stakeholders	Included	Reason
Partners (Including Cavan County Council’s Library Service (ROI) Libraries NI (NI) Cavan Age Friendly (ROI) South West Age Partnership (NI) Irish Hospice Foundation (ROI) Compassionate Communities – Foyle Hospice (NI)	Yes	Supporting the implementation of the <i>Art of Life</i> project. Their insights are essential for understanding the collaborative efforts, resources, and broader community impact.
Workshop participants	Yes	Directly engaged with the activities, offering first-hand experiences and reflections. Their feedback helps evaluate the immediate and personal outcomes of the project.
Creatives	Yes	Delivered and facilitated the workshops. Their perspectives are vital for understanding the design and delivery process, as well as the creative methods used to achieve the project’s objectives.

2.2. Focus group setting

Two in-person focus group discussions with partners and workshop participants were conducted in Cavan, Co. Cavan, Republic of Ireland (ROI) and Irvinestown, Co. Fermanagh, Northern Ireland (NI). In addition, one online focus group discussion with the creative delivery partners was conducted via Zoom, in December 2024 (Focus group schedule is shown in *Appendix 1*). The focus group sessions were designed to explore their experiences, expectations, outcomes of workshops and perspectives of the workshops in the *Art of Life* project. Each focus group discussion was led by an experienced interviewer. The focus group discussion commenced with a welcome and introduction and an explanation by the lead interviewer. Guiding questions were asked at the beginning with follow-up probing questions then asked based on the content or theme of response (Focus group topic guide was provided in *Appendix 2*). Consents were obtained from all participants before the focus group discussion. A transcriber took notes during the in-person focus group discussions. The online focus group discussion was recorded and transcribed verbatim. Qualitative findings from the three focus groups are summarized under themes raised from the discussion and presented in this report.

3. QUALITATIVE FINDINGS FROM FOCUS GROUP DISCUSSION

Three focus group discussions were conducted in December 2024. The first in-person focus group discussion was held in Cavan, Co. Cavan, Republic of Ireland (FG1), with n=6 participants attending, and n=6 participants took part in Irvinestown, Co. Fermanagh, Northern Ireland (FG2). One online focus group discussion with the creatives was conducted via Zoom (N=8) (FG3). The focus group discussions lasted approximately 60-90 minutes. Key themes identified from the focus group discussions are provided in the following sections.

3.1. Key themes from focus group discussion with participants and partners

3.1.1. Activities delivered in the Art of Life project

The workshops delivered as part of the *Art of Life* project encompassed a variety of creative and reflective activities designed to engage participants emotionally, artistically, and practically. Participants took part in sessions that included singing, dancing, poetry, reminiscence therapy, memory box creation, drumming, etc. ACP workshops were also delivered.

For some participants, the memory box creation was particularly meaningful, as it allowed participants to reflect on their legacies and leave behind something memorable for their families.

Participant 2 (FG1) described the memory box as a way to include “*important pieces inside*”. Participant 2 (FG2) said, “*Making a memory book – put anything you liked in it, things important you the story of your life- as part of the process of preparing for end of life. What made you think about your legacy*”.

Participant 1 (FG2) shared how making a memory book became a tool for ensuring family unity during emotionally challenging times: “*When the family is emotionally upset, you cannot remember my wishes where if it is written in a book they will remember. At time of stress the mind goes funny.*” “*I hope to use it when the time comes so that there will be unity in my family*”.

Poetry emerged as another significant activity, enabling participants to explore different journeys in life. One participant found the process deeply reflective, describing death as “*death is not the end but maybe the start of something new, boarding a ship and leaving this shore behind and going to another shore and meeting those people gone before you*”. - (Participant 3, FG1)

Drumming and singing were also appreciated by participants for their therapeutic and communal benefits. Participants expressed how these activities allowed them to enjoy, and offered emotional release and connection with others. Participant 4 (FG1) said, “*I couldn’t sing, but I could dance. I went to the singing group, and I lost myself in it*”. Drumming was described as “*brilliant*”.

Despite the overall positive experiences, some participants noted initial confusion about the purpose of the workshops, particularly during the logo development activity. Participant 1 (FG2) reflected, “*... not a criticism, we were not picking up on what we were being asked to do*”. The participant mentioned they would have appreciated more information about the follow-up workshops, as the process sometimes felt “*piecemeal*”.

The workshops not only offered creative expression but also highlighted the value of discussing end-of-life planning in a supportive environment. Participant 5 (FG1) emphasized how the artistic components in ACP workshops, “*felt the artistic side of the programme gave people an outlet to tell their stories*” while simultaneously addressing practical matters.

3.1.2. Stakeholder expectations and desired outcomes from the Art of Life project

Participants involved in the *Art of Life* workshops had varied expectations and generally had a desire to better understand and prepare for end-of-life planning, as well as to grow confidence in having open conversations with families, etc. The workshops provided a safe and supportive environment to explore topics that are often avoided, such as personal wishes, and the emotional burden on loved ones.

Participant 2 (FG1) said, “*...celebrate instead of mourning- workshop enabled this, provided a space to have conversations about losses we have had and think about what you would like for your own death*”.

Participant 1 (FG1) emphasized the importance of documenting wishes, explaining, *“Families have other ideas and don’t think about what the person was like and so it is important to write it down”*.

Project partners also shared that the open conversation around end-of-life is an important thing to do for the family: *“My response to people who find it hard in the workshops is that this is not about you it is about the people you are leaving behind”* (Participant 5, FG2).

Participants found that attending the workshops was useful for initiating conversations with friends, neighbours, and family members. The activities, particularly reminiscence therapy and creative exercises like poetry and drumming, made it easier to broach sensitive topics. As Participant 1 from FG1 said, *“Talking more about it has led to more conversations”*. Participant 6 (FG1) shared, *“Reminiscence therapy sparked those conversations—felt easier through the art.”* Participant 2 (FG2) remarked that the workshops encouraged deeper family discussions, noting, *“... because of this book, I’ve talked to my children a lot about things...”*.

The workshops also highlighted the value of practical planning for end-of-life scenarios. A participant shared a story about a friend who had prepared everything for her funeral in advance: *“A friend died recently and she had everything ready for the funeral in a bag, clothes, photo, funeral service all ready”* (Participant 2, FG2).

Project partners organizing the workshops emphasized the importance of combining creative and practical elements, stating that compassionate conversations should include actionable advice such as ACP and organizing personal affairs. Participant 5 in FG2 noted, *“Creative workshops are a soft launch into this. People like the practical stuff - (they’re more) receptive to it”*.

For some participants, the workshops prompted reflections on their personal legacies and how their preparations would affect future generations. The journal-making activity was seen as a valuable tool for documenting life stories and wishes. Participant 3 (FG2) said, *“The journal to me is the ideal opening because it shows the journey of my life and also my wishes might be the final chapter. It’s good to have conversation with even small children because it helps them. Hopefully, the journal will help my grandchildren”*.

In addition, some participants acknowledged that not everyone is ready to engage fully in conversations about end-of-life planning. As Participant 4 (FG1) said, *“Some people didn’t want to get into discussions about end of life, but they still came along. It’s good to look ahead and make plans”*.

Others highlighted the need for a more gradual approach to introducing these conversations, with one partner reflecting, *“delivering sessions they didn’t realise what they were coming to and when I explained faces dropped, they didn’t have to talk about it. I learned from facilitating it that we need a softer approach.”* – (Participant 5, FG2). However, Participant 6 in FG2 said: *“Sometimes we are too gentle in our approach”*.

3.1.3. Wellbeing outcomes

The workshops had a noticeable impact on participants’ emotional and mental well-being. Creative activities provided a safe space for self-expression and emotional release, helping participants process feelings of loss and hope. Participant 4 (FG2) said: *“Having a what matters conversation. It brings you out of yourself”*.

The workshops also fostered a sense of connection, both within families and among participants. Reminiscence therapy, in particular, sparked conversations that felt easier through art.

“We didn’t get to talk about the focus of the group within my small group but it did open other conversation. It opened up the idea of what I would put into the box we made and how my children would feel about it”, explained Participant 2 (FG1).

For many, the workshops shifted their perspective from fear or anxiety about death to a more positive and proactive approach. *“The journal is the ideal opening—it shows the journey of my life and my wishes as the final chapter”* shared Participant 3 (FG2). Another reflected, *“It changed the focus to a more positive outlook rather than a negative worry about being left behind or leaving a significant other behind.”*- Participant 6 (FG1).

3.1.4. Challenges and lesson learned

Several challenges emerged during the workshops, including societal resistance to discussing death and varying levels of participant readiness. Participant 5 in FG2 recounted, *“I was told I was bringing death to her door, and a few others rejected it when they heard what it was about”*. Others noted that some participants struggled with the concept of end-of-life planning but still attended, finding value in the process.

Another challenge was participants’ initial confusion about the purpose of the workshops. Participant 1 (FG2) shared, *“Initially, (we were) unaware why we were there...The way it was presented was piece meal.”* Suggestions for improvement included clearer communication about workshop goals and follow-up sessions.

Partners learned that balancing creative and practical elements was key to success. While the artistic activities drew participants in, many also valued the practical aspects, such as ACP. As explained by Participant 5 (FG2), *“People like practical stuff...funeral directors might be useful to get involved”*.

3.2. Key themes from focus group discussion with creatives

3.2.1. Collaboration and shared learning

A central theme that emerged from the focus groups was the importance of collaboration and the shared learning that occurred among creatives during the *Art of Life* workshops. The creative participants expressed how the project offered an opportunity to break the solitary nature of their practices and work together across different art forms.

Participant 7 (FG3) remarked, *“I was at a point where I was looking to collaborate with other people... this is a lovely marriage”*. Participant 1 (FG3) shared, *“Writers have a reputation for being solitary..., I've worked in lots of different projects, which has been so valuable”*.

Participants frequently mentioned that the diverse backgrounds of creatives enriched their experiences and inspired future collaborations and emphasized the richness of working across disciplines.

“For the Art of Life project so far I engaged with groups with singing and others, I really benefited from meeting all the other artists so I'm really keen to work collaboratively across our forms and I think it's a really fantastic project to do this and it's wonderful to have this opportunity to connect with others —it's just fundamental for well-being to be able to talk about death in a healthy way”. – Participant 7 (FG3). Participant 5 (FG3) then added, *“...collaboration is something we would all start. And it's familiar to all of us I would say... as practitioners this is very rich because there's a wide range of different forms”*. Participant 7 (FG3) said, *“I wanted to collaborate with people... this allowed me to look at this possibility within this group...”*.

For some, the collaborative aspect extended beyond the workshops themselves, leading to ongoing projects and plans. Participant 2 (FG3) explained, *“We collaborate anyway as a small arts group...but*

the connections made here have been incredibly useful going forward definitely". Participant 5 (FG3) added, *"(This experience) may be an opportunity to cherry-pick (ideas) and meet other people and see whether we're all singing off the same page"*.

The workshops also allowed creatives to reflect on their own creative practices and explore new artistic realms. As Participant 6 explained, *"I've written poetry since I was young, but never thought I was using it... It (workshop) was a safe space to explore this realm"*.

Through the *Art of Life* workshops, collaboration became more than just a method of delivery—it was a deeply enriching process that facilitated growth, learning, and meaningful connections among creatives.

3.2.2. Expectations and desired outcomes

The creatives involved in the *Art of Life* workshops had distinct expectations for the project, focusing on both their professional growth and the transformative impact on participants.

One of the primary desired outcomes among creatives was to encourage meaningful conversations about death and dying in a safe and approachable way. Creatives saw the workshops as an opportunity to foster intergenerational dialogue, particularly through creative activities.

Participant 7 (FG3) noted, *"This really feels like it's a way that I can finally sort of engage and give something back truly from myself but also hopefully contribute in a positive way to other people's lives through my creativity and through this very important topics"*. As one creative explained, *"we had one in particular who wanted to speak to her children about her wishes but they were refusing to speak and she just found a very awkward to bring up the conversation"*- Participant 2 (FG3).

Participant 6 (FG3) said: *"I place many values with this(workshops) and because I think it changes you as a person it changes your life"*. *"we're constantly trying to think up new and different ways to bring creativity to people because we know that doing something creative is good for you in whatever form that takes..."* *"it can be done with people thinking about end of life it can be done with people at any stage in their life..."* said Participant 3 (FG3).

Participant 2 (FG3) shared, *"...it's really personal touches that really we found really good and emotional"*, *"it's about your personal wishes and we've learned a lot from this workshop on a lot from the people that we did the workshops with"*.

3.2.3. Personal growth, and professional value

The workshops were described as transformative, not only for workshop participants but also for the creatives who delivered the workshops. The focus group also revealed how the project enriched the professional and personal lives of the creatives.

Several participants emphasized how the workshops increased their awareness of mortality and the importance of planning for end-of-life scenarios. As Participant 6 (FG3) said: *"It makes you hyper-aware of the preciousness of your own mortality... also to know that we're in control to a point of our planning"*. Some found the sessions therapeutic, both for themselves and the participants they worked with. In addition, Participant 6 (FG3) indicated that, *"It was humbling to watch it was (sharing, the emotional release from participants) and how seriously they talked..."*. Participant 1 (FG3) shared, *"I reprioritize things...we are not gonna live forever, it's great doing things for other people you know, that's what we are here for, also do what you need to do as well"*.

Participant 4 (FG) shared: *"I adopted dance for people that they are in wheelchairs or there is no access for them in other you know another place of the space for dance. and It is unbelievable how people*

change so quick...” “...at the end everybody was dancing, everybody was singing so (the) experience was unreal including some of the occupational therapies they say”.

Participant 8 (FG3) said: *“I have found myself making definitely a stronger connection with people... this (project) has definitely informed me and has strengthened my delivery of what I do as helps me engage with people.”*

Creatives appreciated the respect and value placed on their work. As Participant 6 (FG3) said, *“Respecting artists’ time and paying us is a huge demonstration of respect—it means a lot and shows this project values what we bring”*. This participant also added, *“Professionally I think it’s going to change the trajectory of my social engagement work”*; *“I’m seeing this through line and how different aspects of me are coming together and clicking together”*.

3.2.4. Challenges and lesson learned

The focus group highlighted challenges faced by creatives and provided insights for improving future workshops. A recurring challenge was low participant numbers in some workshops, which initially caused concern. However, creatives found that smaller groups allowed for more meaningful engagement.

Participant 3 (FG3) shared, *“We were a little bit concerned about the numbers that signed up but the small groups that we had - it really benefited the people in those groups... we had the time to talk to people and move around and chat individually as well as everybody chatting as a group, everybody felt really comfortable”*.

Facilitators faced logistical difficulties, particularly in nursing home settings. Participant 4 (FG3) shared her experience of having a dancing workshop in a nursing home: *“I had people that they had stroke, (they) can move just one hand, and with this lady was dancing, she was completely in full energy, she was delighted... after the class, she said, oh I never I never could think that (I could dance again)”*. This participant noticed a situation where *“sometimes people that were sitting in the sitting room with everybody, they were allowed to attend an activity but most of the time because of the medication or maybe for the illness or for other reasons they are not allowed anymore to come back into the sitting room”*. Participant 4 (FG3) also added, *“...we need to have more knowledge about how people can be involved into the activity.”* Participant 6 (FG3) shared, *“Staff often assumed residents couldn’t participate, but we found that with small adjustments, they could contribute meaningfully.”*; *“Staff are sometimes hesitant to engage due to fear of management—it’s a systemic issue.”*

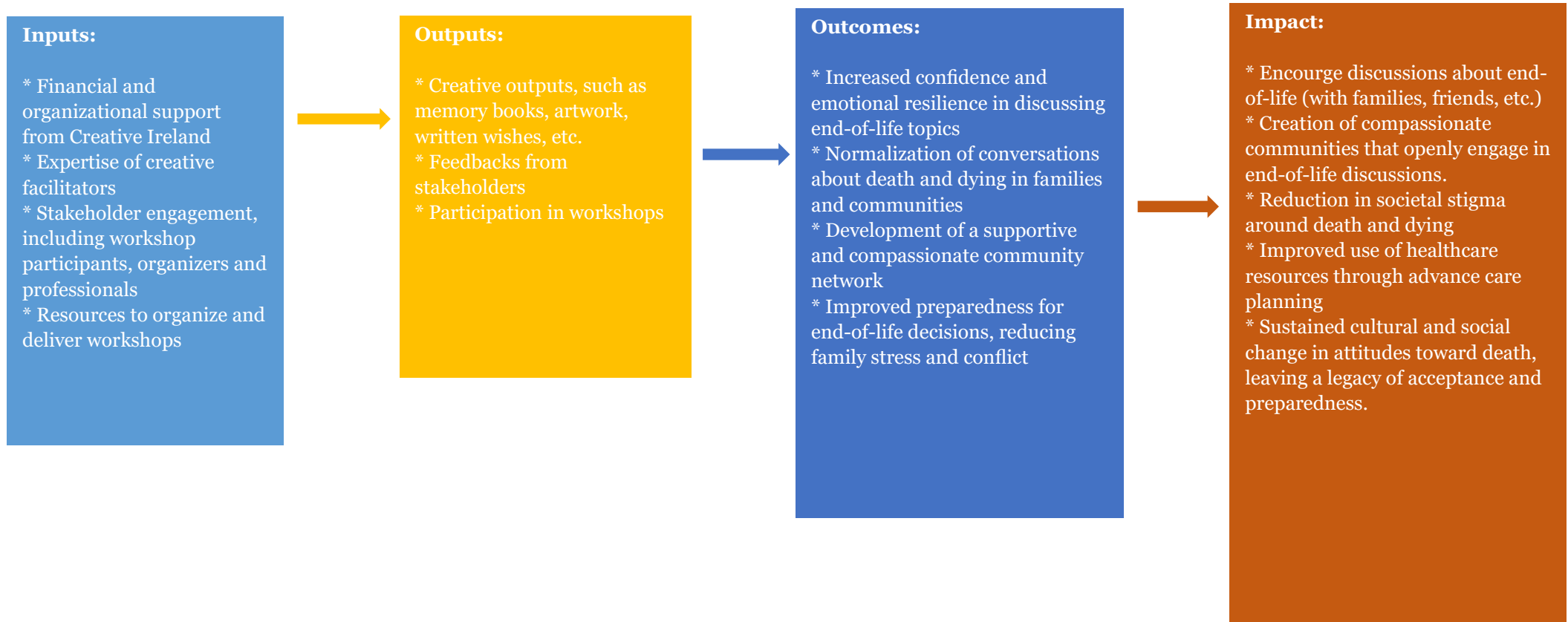
The project highlighted the need for age diversity in future workshops. Several participants suggested lowering the age range to include younger people, as they felt this would normalize conversations about death earlier in life. Participant 2 (FG3) said: *“It would be really good to push it back a little bit so it’s open to more people. It’s not just the older groups. I think you would have more people coming to them too... (the project) would benefit from them”*. Also, Participant 2 (FG3) reflected, *“I think we could lower the age because we have mainly elderly people on the (workshops) 55, 60 up...I think too it would be really good to have people from 40s or 30s up. There is a lot of people out there that don’t talk about these issues...if you could get a younger sort of cohort in as well I think that would be really beneficial”*. Participant 1 (FG3) added: *“They might want to bring in their parents for you know younger grannies”*.

In addition, creatives also felt that the learning they have achieved from the project both as part of the CPD (Continuing Professional Development) days and learned experience from delivery, should be shared. The creatives also expressed an interest in participating in a full ACP workshop.

3.3. Developing a Theory of Change

A Theory of Change model was created to identify the expected changes experienced by the *Art of Life* workshops. Often used in programme development and evaluation, Theory of Change models illustrates the links between the inputs, outputs, outcomes, and impact (*Figure 1*).

Figure 1. Theory of Change Model



4. DISCUSSION

The findings from the three focus group discussions highlight the multifaceted impact of the *Art of Life* workshops on participants, facilitators, and communities. By engaging with stakeholders in creative and reflective activities, the workshops were effective in fostering meaningful end-of-life conversations and increasing the confidence and emotional resilience of participants in discussing end-of-life topics.

Creative activities served as a key medium for encouraging discussions about death and dying in this project. Participants reported that activities such as poetry, memory box creation, and drumming provided a safe space to process emotions and reflect on their lives. These creative methods allowed individuals to navigate deeply personal topics in ways that traditional approaches might not achieve. Creatives also emphasized the value of art in bridging gaps in communication, particularly in addressing end-of-life planning. This highlights how creative engagement can act as a catalyst for broader conversations, making difficult topics more approachable.

Stakeholders expressed diverse expectations and outcomes from the workshops. For participants, the workshops provided an opportunity to articulate their wishes and engage in meaningful conversations with family members. However, some participants shared challenges in broaching these topics, particularly with family members who were hesitant or resistant. Project partners recognized this and highlighted the importance of balancing creative and practical elements to encourage participation. For creatives, the workshops were both professionally and personally transformative. Many described how the experience deepened their understanding of mortality and its impact on individuals and communities.

Despite the positive feedback, several challenges emerged. Some participants initially struggled to understand the purpose of the workshops. This suggests a need for clearer communication and structured follow-up sessions to ensure participants fully understand the objectives and flow of the program. Creatives also encountered logistical challenges, particularly in engaging nursing home residents and addressing staff hesitancy. These findings underscore the importance of tailoring approaches to different demographic groups and settings. There is also a need for age diversity among participants. While the workshops primarily attracted older adults, several stakeholders suggested targeting younger age groups to normalize conversations about death earlier in life.

The insights gained from this initial phase of stakeholder engagement provide a strong foundation for developing a comprehensive SROI evaluation in the future. The workshops demonstrated significant potential for creating social value by normalizing end-of-life discussions, increasing emotional resilience, and building compassionate communities. Future phases of SROI evaluation will focus on quantifying these impacts using financial proxies and robust evaluation frameworks to capture the full scope of outcomes from the *Art of Life* project.

5. CONCLUSION

The stakeholder engagement by means of focus group discussions conducted in this evaluation revealed the profound impact of the *Art of Life* workshops had on participants, creatives, and communities. Through creative engagement, the workshops succeeded in facilitating and opening conversations about death and dying, empowering individuals to articulate their wishes, and encouraging deeper connections with loved ones.

This report represents the first stage of an in-depth evaluation of the *Art of Life* project, focusing on stakeholder engagement and the development of a theory of change. The findings underscore the importance of integrating creative and practical approaches to ACP and highlight the workshops' potential to create lasting social, emotional, and economic value. The continued engagement of

stakeholders and the incorporation of feedback from this initial phase will be crucial in refining and expanding the workshops.

6. RECOMMENDATIONS

Based on the findings from stakeholder engagement, several recommendations are proposed to strengthen the *Art of Life* project and ensure its long-term impact:

- **Enhancing participant engagement and communication.** Some participants expressed initial uncertainty regarding the purpose and structure of the workshops, suggesting that clearer pre-workshop communication, such as introductory materials or short videos, could improve understanding and preparedness. Additionally, follow-up engagement, such as post-workshop discussions, digital resource sharing, or online community spaces for sharing, could help participants integrate their experiences into daily life.

- **Expanding the target groups of workshops.** The current workshops have primarily targeted older people, but several stakeholders emphasized the benefits of including younger participants to normalize conversations around death and dying across generations. Future outreach efforts may explore ways to engage a more diverse demographic, including intergenerational groups and communities, to broaden the project's impact.

- **Strengthening facilitator support.** Creatives highlighted logistical barriers in certain settings, such as nursing homes, where engagement with residents was sometimes limited. More structured collaboration with healthcare professionals and nursing home staff could improve accessibility and participation.

- **Integrating practical planning elements.** While creative expression was a key part of the workshops, some participants suggested more discussions on ACP. Future workshops may consider continuing to balance creative and practical components.

- **Long-term monitoring and evaluation.** It is suggested to track long-term outcomes for participants and assess sustained impact over time, such as pre- and post-workshop surveys, and longitudinal follow-ups.

7. LIMITATIONS

While the focus group findings provide valuable insights into the *Art of Life* project, several limitations should be acknowledged. The findings are based on a relatively small number of focus groups (three focus groups, N= 20 participants), which, while rich in qualitative detail, may not fully capture the diversity of perspectives across different demographics. Future evaluation may consider expanding the participant groups to ensure broader representation. Another limitation relates to self-selection bias. Participants who chose to engage in the focus groups may have already been open to discussing death and dying, meaning that the insights gathered may not fully reflect the experiences of those who are hesitant or resistant to these conversations. This could limit the ability to identify barriers that prevent individuals from participating in such discussions.

8. NEXT STAGE OF THE EVALUATION (SROI) DURING 2025

This stakeholder engagement phase is the foundation for the next stage of the assessment of the *Art of Life* project, when an SROI evaluation will be conducted in 2025. The SROI evaluation will involve post-workshop questionnaires, further focus groups, along in-depth interviews with participants to gain insight into their lived experience of the *Art of Life* project. The next phase will focus on the development of impact indicators that align with the Theory of Change. These indicators will assess factors such as increased emotional resilience in discussing death, the extent to which participants have end-of-life conversations within their families, and changes in confidence regarding end-of-life conversation and planning. To determine the economic value of these outcomes, financial proxies will be applied to estimate potential cost savings. This may include reductions in healthcare expenditures, as well as the broader social and economic benefits.

The findings will inform recommendations for sustaining the *Art of Life* project, integrating it into wider public health and social care initiatives, and ensuring its long-term viability. The SROI evaluation will provide a robust evidence base to guide future improvement and present the impact of the *Art of Life* project.

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APPENDICES

Appendix 1. Focus group interview schedule

Focus group	Location
Focus group 1	Event Space, Johnston Central Library, Cavan, Co. Cavan, Republic of Ireland
Focus group 2	Arc Healthy Living Centre, Irvinestown, Co. Fermanagh, Northern Ireland
Focus group 3	Online (Zoom meeting)

Appendix 2. Focus group questions and mapping of outcomes and questionnaire development

Inputs

- How are you involved in the Art of Life workshops?
- What did you contribute to the activity (and how much)?
- What activity/activities did you think you will experience?

Outcomes

- What changes do you think you will experience?
- What do you think will be different as a result of the Art of Life workshops?
- Do you think there will be positive changes?
- Do you think there will be negative changes?
- Do you think anyone else will experience any changes as a result Art of Life workshops?

Indicators

- How would you let someone else know that you experienced any changes and what would we show them? What would it look like?
- Could you measure it?

Deadweight

- What would have happened to you if you didn't taken part in the Art of Life workshops?
- Would you have found something else later?

Attribution

- Who else provides something like this in your local area?
- Do you think that anyone else contribute to the experience/change?

Displacement

- Do you think that you will have to give up anything to take part in the Art of Life workshops?
- Are you getting similar support from somewhere else?

Duration

- How long do you think the change will last?
- Imagine we are 2 years or 5 years from now, do you think you'll still be experiencing the change?

Valuation

- How important do you think this change to you?
- Can you compare it to something else just as important to you?
- Can you put these changes in a priority order of how important they are to you? Which are worth most / least to you?
- Which of these changes will make the biggest difference to you?

General feedback

- Which other ways might you/your organisation achieve the same changes?



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