



# Dare To Imagine

Artists and care home staff working together  
to embed creativity in care homes

---

Executive Summary



## DEDICATION

This report is dedicated to all those care home residents, staff, families and loved ones everywhere who died or were impacted by the Covid-19 pandemic.

# ARCH programme partners

## Magic Me

Magic Me is an arts charity that brings the generations together to build a stronger, safer community. We always aim to challenge care homes and arts organisations to be adventurous in what they offer to older residents. We also want to better understand and share what it takes to deliver great arts in a care home setting. The ARCH programme reflects these key aims.

[www.magicme.co.uk](http://www.magicme.co.uk) @MagicMeArts

## Anglia Ruskin University

The Anglia Ruskin University (ARU) research team was led by Professor Hilary Bungay and co-led by Professor Carol Munn-Giddings (prior to her retirement in 2021) with Dr Ceri Wilson and Anna Dadswell as co-researchers throughout. Building on their previous work on the Arts Council England-funded *Creative Journeys* project, the ARU team conducted research alongside the ARCH programme and produced key findings, learning, and recommendations.

## Excelcare

Excelcare is a family-run care home management business who instill family values onto our colleagues, the people we care for, their relatives and friends. We provide high-quality, person-centred care at 31 individual and unique care

homes. For the ARCH programme, four Excelcare homes in Essex – Lime Court, Longfield, Sherrell House, and St Fillans – were matched with four arts organisations, and Excelcare supported the residencies throughout.

## Arts organisations

Gecko is an award-winning physical theatre company, led by Amit Lahav. Gecko's mission is to deepen human connection through physical, visual, visceral and ambitious performance and participation. In everything they do, they create opportunities for people to connect to their work and to each other.

curious directive is an internationally touring theatre company, led by Jack Lowe, who develop ground-breaking and award-winning theatre productions exploring a diverse range of science topics.

Matthew Bourne's New Adventures is an iconic, ground-breaking British dance-theatre company, famous for telling stories with a unique theatrical twist. New Adventures create award-winning works that have altered the perception of what is possible when it comes to telling stories without words.

Fevered Sleep create a more caring, curious and compassionate world, one unlikely art project at a time. Led by Sam Butler and David Harradine, they invent new kinds of spaces which invite people to come together and share their experiences of things that matter.

# Introduction

Building on the success of Artists' Residencies in Care Homes 2015-2017 in London, Magic Me sought to expand their support of arts opportunities to underserved care homes and communities in Essex. They developed a Theory of Change for the Artists' Residencies in Care Homes (ARCH) 2019-2023 programme, funded by Paul Hamlyn Foundation.

## ARCH overview

Four leading arts organisations: Gecko, curious directive, New Adventures, and Fevered sleep, were paired with four Excelcare care homes in Essex: Lime Court, Longfield, St Fillans, and Sherrell House. Supported by Magic Me, the arts organisations and care homes delivered innovative participatory arts experiences for residents and staff over three phases:

- **Phase 1: Research and development (R&D)**  
(November 2019 - March 2020)  
Arts organisations spent time in their partner home, getting to know people, learning more about how things worked, and experimenting with creative activities and ideas.
- **Phase 2: Artists' residencies in care homes**  
(April 2022 - March 2023)  
Arts organisations built on the foundations of the R&D to undertake longer artists' residencies, bringing their creative practice to residents and care home staff and collectively creating high quality, meaningful experiences and artworks.
- **Phase 3: Legacy and embedding**  
(October 2022 - March 2023)  
Arts organisations and care homes worked together to identify learning and create legacy from the residencies, including developing

a resource booklet of creatives ideas and approaches that could be used to embed creative practice within the care homes.

The initial timeline was disrupted by Covid-19, which began just after the R&D phase. The various lockdowns and restrictions alongside significant challenges for care homes meant that the phase 2 residencies were postponed until it was safe for artists to enter the homes again in 2022. Further dissemination and development continued after phase 3 and is ongoing.



---

## ARCH aims

- To improve relationships and understanding between staff and residents at four participating Excelcare homes, informed by arts practice.
- To raise expectations of what the arts can be and do in the care sector and inspire and challenge to integrate the arts into the culture of homes and the lives of residents.
- To increase understanding, skills and confidence of arts partners working with care homes and ensure their commitment to building this work into future programmes.
- To strengthen Magic Me with increased evidence, expertise and understanding of the practice and potential of the arts in care homes; strong working partnerships/profile across a wider geography; and better positioning to influence others and attract future investment.



## Structures and support

Magic Me held Cohort Days, initially in-person and later online, that brought together the arts organisations, often with Excelcare (though they were unable to join during the pandemic) and ARU. These allowed for sharing of experiences and reflections on learning, with discussions around best practice, challenges, and support needs. Magic Me also provided bespoke and responsive support and training (bringing in outside expertise where relevant) throughout ARCH. From early 2021 monthly Zoom meetings became a space for artists to share experiences, questions and learning as they experimented with remote and in-person work.

## Getting started and changing plans

The introduction Cohort Day in September 2019 included discussions around expectations and preparing for working creatively within care homes. Further introduction days involved each arts organisation visiting their partner care home along with Magic Me, Excelcare, and ARU in Autumn 2019 to meet staff and residents, join some care home activities, and give an introduction to their creative practice. Magic Me then worked with Excelcare, Care Home Managers, and the arts organisations to develop a clear agreement of the roles and responsibilities of each partner. The R&D phase highlighted the excitement, potential challenges and opportunities, and importance of relationships in bringing creative practice into care homes. However, the Covid-19 pandemic meant postponing the artists' residencies.

The ARCH programme stopped completely for 2020. From early 2021, Magic Me brokered online meetings for arts organisations and care homes to reconnect and in some cases arts organisations were able to deliver or support with remote or socially distanced arts activities. Due to

---

staff turnover and a loss of momentum, the R&D phase was repeated, supported by an additional emergency grant from Paul Hamlyn Foundation. Phase 2 artists' residencies and phase 3 legacy and embedding became wrapped up together through 2022 and 2023.

## Research approach

Using qualitative methods, the research explored how artists and care home staff worked together to deliver and embed creative arts in care homes. Each dataset was explored through thematic analyses to identify key themes, best practice, and challenges for artists' residencies.

- **Phase 1: Research and development (R&D)**  
(November 2019 - March 2020)  
Across the introduction days, the 'sticky notes' method, focus group discussions, and observations explored hopes and expectations, potential challenges, and reflections on the support provided and still required. Telephone interviews with Care Home Managers explored their strategic perspective. At the end of the R&D, online focus groups with each arts organisation, care home, and Magic Me reflected on their experiences and learning.
- **Phase 2: Artists' residencies in care homes**  
(April 2022 - March 2023)  
Online interviews were conducted pre- and post-residency with arts organisations, care home staff leading on ARCH (Lifestyle Coordinator and/or the Care Home Manager, sometimes joined by wider care home staff), Excelcare, and Magic Me.
- **Phase 3: Legacy and embedding**  
(October 2022 - March 2023)  
Online focus groups were conducted with the arts organisations, care home staff, and Magic Me at the evaluation day. The 'sticky notes' method explored what they wish they had known at the start, key learning points, and what they will take forward in the future.

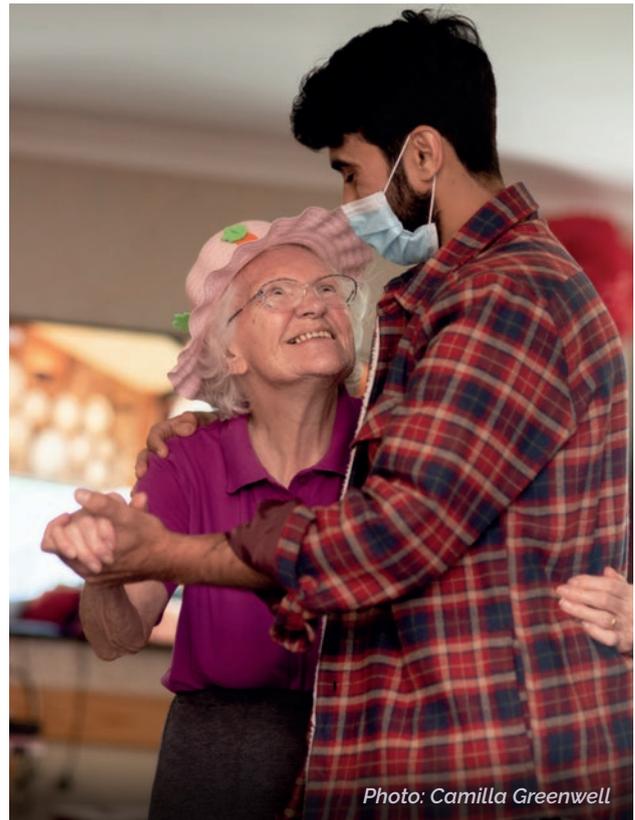


Photo: Camilla Greenwell

## Artists' residencies

The artists delivered workshops, performances, and staff training sessions, both inside the homes, in outside spaces, and via Zoom, interactive films, and activity pamphlets. The artists used various artistic mediums including dance, movement, touch, stimulation, textiles, music, performance, film, virtual reality, digital storytelling, science experiments, and photography. Some created films with residents and staff and held film premieres and screenings. In some of the homes, artists installed soundscapes, sensory rooms, videoscapes, and film studios. Artists left behind creative outputs and digital workshops or activity boxes that care home staff could use with residents after the residencies had ended. This included interactive films, scrapbooks, photobooks, sound installations, and tactile objects.

# Research findings

## Power of the participatory arts

- Participatory arts was powerful in fostering engagement and meaningful moments with residents; care home staff were proud of their involvement and artists' realised the importance of their practice, particularly in the context of the pandemic.

*It was the power of moving in her way, but moving with us and moving over time... It was really her expressing herself.*

**Arts organisation post-residency**

*We can do the basic stuff... But what I've found with this... was the impact it has had on everybody... It was art to another level.*

**Care home post-residency**

## Setting up for success

- Magic Me played a vital role in structuring and supporting ARCH, connecting and building trust between partners, facilitating mutual learning, and providing specialist support.
- Forging new partnerships between arts organisations and care homes involved consideration of different cultures, practicalities, and alignment of personalities and values.
- Expectations required careful negotiation and clear communication to establish shared

understandings of the vision for ARCH and the engagement needed from care homes.

- Building trusting and collaborative relationships between artists and care home staff was essential, but required communication, time, and effort to get to know each other; challenges arose particularly due to staff turnover and the strain of the pandemic.

*The important thing, initially, is to get to know those people as people, that home as a home. What happens, what they're interested in, that's much more important [than your artistic endeavour]...building the relationship with everyone in the care home – staff, residents, families, and your team.*

**Arts organisation post-residency**



Photo: Rich Rusk

## Artists and care home staff collaboration

- Collaborative working was supported by valuing care home staff knowledge and expertise and making time for check-ins, sharing ideas, and mutual feedback between partners.
- Artists' creative skills, confident communication, human and empathetic approach, adaptability, and "being bold" were key to engaging residents and the success of ARCH.
- Lifestyle Coordinators were crucial to keeping momentum between sessions and engaging care home staff but had competing priorities and needed Care Home Manager support.
- Artists encouraged care home staff to think beyond their usual role and be creatives, but challenges like staff shortages, turnover, and time constraints hindered their consistent involvement, leading to artists often delivering the residencies with limited staff support.

*What we planned allowed that equality of that relationship to be there. There was enough time for us to reflect with them, listen to them, check in with them and make sure that day-to-day impact on their home worked well...*

**Arts organisation post-residency**

*I just wish we had more time to be able to really take this to the next level... I just had to prioritise other things...*

**Care home post-residency**

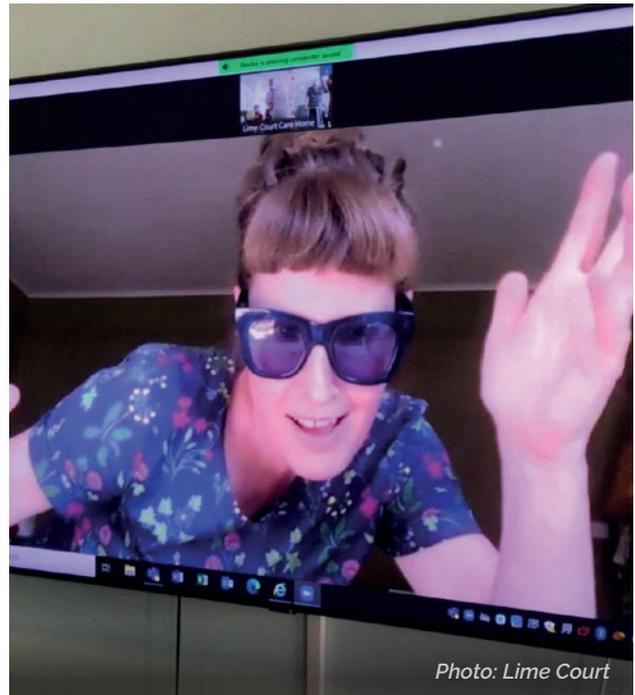


Photo: Lime Court

## Creative practice in care home contexts

- Arts organisations carefully adapted their creative practice to the care home context, which was new and exciting, yet challenging.
- Artists and care home staff used spaces in the homes in creative and inclusive ways, moving beyond the communal areas to have more control over the space. This caused care home staff some initial concern, prior to seeing the creative practice or output.
- There were many examples of inclusive creative practice that included residents with dementia, those who were immobile, and those who did not usually engage. Artists were supported in this by care home staff and tailored training organised by Magic Me.
- Artists and arts organisations experienced lots of learning and development, which they will take forward into future work. This was supported through responsive training, monthly meetings, and the time spent doing the creative work.

- The ARCH programme helped to support care home staff wellbeing, bringing joy, and providing opportunities for emotional release.

*We commandeered a room in the home and we made a film set...in that main space there are a lot of distractions. That's their main living space. So there was always...a desire to have a bit more control over our space...*

**Arts organisation post-residency**

*...it has just brought nothing but joy. And... It has taught me to be able to take on that emotion that we sometimes block. We deal with a lot of sadness within the home...and I don't think we ever really deal with it in a way that perhaps we should...just having that piece of music and...turning my back on all that's going on, and just dealing with that emotion. And it's okay to cry, it's okay to show emotion...*

**Care home post-residency**

## Legacy and embedding

- The ARCH programme built in legacy from the outset and is ongoing.
- Artists spending time physically in the care home and sharing skills with care home staff was vital for embedding legacy. As was leaving something tangible behind in the form of creative outputs.
- Embedding creativity in care homes was facilitated through building relationships with care home staff, building staff confidence, involving them in ARCH, and engaging them with the power of participatory arts.

*...having [artists] doing things with the residents and our staff observing and seeing ...what a difference it will make...once you guys leave... they can say... "How great it was for the residents...let us try and continue."*

**Care home pre-residency**

*...there has always got to be something [residents] can...take away with them, be that like an object, or something they're shown, or something that they've done. I think that tangibility...is important...it has ripple effects.*

**Arts organisation post-residency**

*When [residents] say "...I want to go in the garden to touch the leaves"...from [ARCH] we learnt that actually they don't need to go in the garden to do that. We can bring the garden to them...somehow to help them achieve that... to support them rather than saying, "You can't go, it's not possible," at least say, "We'll do something about that"...that will be the vision of the care plans as well.*

**Care home evaluation day**



Photo: Uzo Onyejiaka

# Key learning and recommendations

The findings emphasised the power of high-quality participatory arts practice to make meaningful impacts for care home staff and residents. The findings provide some excellent examples of best practice for artists working in care homes, as well as illuminating some challenges in bringing together arts organisations and care homes to deliver high-quality arts programmes. We make the following recommendations for best practice:

1. There are vital **leadership and project management roles** that need to be fulfilled for artists' residencies in care homes to be successful. Leadership is needed to oversee the residencies, mediate between artists and care homes, keep momentum going, ensure people's needs are being met, and develop and enact a clear communication strategy from the start that ensures that:
  - (i) All partners are aware of the purpose of the programme as a whole and its phases.
  - (ii) The collaborative process is responsive to the needs and priorities of the care homes and co-created between artists/care home staff and residents.
  - (iii) The roles of all involved: artists and care home staff including the Lifestyle Coordinator, and wider care home staff, are clearly defined.
  - (iv) The collaborative process that artists intend to use is as clearly defined and is feasible for care home staff and residents.

- (v) The 'endings' of sessions and different phases of the project are considered from the start.
- (vi) Any protocols required such as safeguarding are agreed and discussed with artists before going into the homes.
- (vii) Ways to keep in touch between phases and sessions are agreed and shared between the arts organisations and care homes (including back up/handover plans in the event of staffing changes).

In this case, the programme had the advantage of an expert host organisation – Magic Me – who took on these roles. However, if a host organisation is not available then consideration from the outset of who will take on these roles is needed.

2. Early acknowledgement and negotiation of the similarities and differences between the arts and care sectors in their expectations and approaches to working, is important in **building shared understandings** and mitigating potential challenges in working together.

Facilitated through:

- careful 'matching' of care home and arts organisation (considering energies, personalities, ethos/values, location, size and resources).
- ensuring prior awareness of arts organisations' practice amongst care home management.

- clear and open communication early on about the values and vision of the programme, including to wider care home staff (see point 1).
  - Introduction days where artists can meet staff and residents and tour the home, care home staff can experience a 'taster' of the creative activities, providing opportunities for mutual experiential learning.
3. The **support and commitment from senior management** – Excelcare head office and Care Home Managers - is key for successful implementation. It is very helpful to have designated 'link staff' who promote the importance of the work in care homes and emphasise the support for the programme from senior management.
  4. **Lifestyle Coordinators have a key role** in keeping momentum, advocating for the work to wider care staff, and serving as a lynchpin in the relationships between the arts organisation and the care home. However, they should not be solely responsible for the programme and need to be supported in this role by care home management.
  5. **Allow time for building care home staff confidence** to promote engagement.

Facilitated through:

- Introduction days with creative activity taster session.
- R&D sessions prior to residency.
- Artists spending time being present in the care home.
- Artists providing additional sessions with care home staff.
- Artists' approach to working (see point 6).
- Care home management allowing time for and encouraging staff engagement.

6. **Artists bring essential experience and skills** (creative, organisational, communication) to the programme. Impact is achieved in care homes through artists taking an ambitious, humane, flexible and adaptable approach, and seeing residents and care home staff as creatives. Artists should also carefully consider how to best utilise space in care homes for their creative practice.
7. Creating opportunities for **peer support and learning between the artists** and arts organisations builds the partner community and enables ongoing sharing of good practice.  
  
Facilitated through:
  - Regular catch ups with all arts organisations and host organisation (if available).
  - All participant evaluation days at key milestones in the programme (including separate break out rooms for artists and care home staff).
8. Ensuring the arts organisations and **artists are prepared and supported to work in care home settings**, to work with people with dementia and other physical and cognitive impairments, and in supporting care home staff who have endured trauma through the pandemic, is essential for building artists' confidence, protecting their wellbeing, and helping to ensure inclusive practice.



Facilitated through:

- Training for artists (prior to visiting care homes and ongoing).
- Arts organisation managers providing ongoing support, and opportunities for reflection, with freelance artists .
- R&D sessions in the care home.
- Having **time** to engage with and be present in the care home.



9. Ensuring facilitation of and time for **building trusting and collaborative relationships** between partners is essential for the programme to have a meaningful impact.

Facilitated through:

- Introduction days for artists in care homes (including taster activity for staff, tour of home for artists, and opportunities for open discussions).
- Time for artists to be present in the home for R&D sessions prior to the residency.
- Identifying key points of contact in care homes (with handover plans in the event of staffing changes) to facilitate regular maintained communication.
- Mediation (where required) from host organisation (or person allocated this role).
- Regular check-ins, debriefs, and other opportunities for feedback and sharing.

- Host organisation (or person allocated leadership role) promoting a culture of valuing each other's expertise and the value of mutual learning.
- Communication strategy (see point 1).

10. **Ensuring a legacy** from artists' residencies in care homes is facilitated through artists spending lots of time physically being present in the care home and creating and leaving something tangible behind. This promotes care staff learning and skill development, helps staff see the positive impact of the arts which provides impetus to enact new skills and learning, and helps embed creativity in the care home culture.
11. Both arts organisations and care homes need to be aware of and plan for the **additional time and resource that is needed for building relationships** as the foundation for a meaningful experience and for **ensuring legacy** from the artists' residencies. Both care homes and arts organisations need to be prepared to re-introduce the programme to new staff to support relationships and momentum through staff changes and turnover.
12. **Funders and commissioners need to recognise the time and resource** that is needed to build relationships, maintain communication, and embed legacy, as well as the time for conducting the actual activities themselves, and allow for this in their allocation of funding.

This supports the ethos of the ARCH programme in recognising that older people in care need opportunities for creativity and expression and contribute to the ways in which creative practice can be embedded in the fabric of care homes. The findings highlight the time investment needed from artists, care home staff and management, and those with leadership and project management roles, for residencies to have meaningful impact in care homes.



Photo: Susan Langford, Magic Me

The first Cohort Day September 2019 with people from all the partner organisations:  
Anglia Ruskin University, curious directive, Excelcare, Fevered Sleep, Gecko, Magic Me, New Adventures.

The Artists' Residencies in Care Homes project was funded by Paul Hamlyn Foundation with financial contributions from Excelcare and Essex County Council.



Magic Me is an ACE National Portfolio Organisation



Supported using public funding by  
**ARTS COUNCIL  
ENGLAND**