

EFFE Seal Catalogue #2

on Festivals, Health and Wellbeing



EFFE SEAL

for Festival Cities and Regions

An inventory of practices, policies and challenges
developed by the Festivals Care! Working Group



EUROPEAN
FESTIVALS
ASSOCIATION

CARE
— SCALING CULTURE
AND HEALTH INITIATIVES



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Introduction

[The European Festivals Association \(EFA\)](#) connects festivals and festival makers through an interactive and inclusive network at the service of the arts and artists, ready to engage with the alliance of stakeholders that shape the festival sector today.

Through its activities, projects and initiatives, EFA supports community building among festivals through exchange, peer learning, advocacy and cross-sectoral and transnational cooperation. It also offers a platform for dialogue between festivals, artists, policymakers, researchers and local communities. One of EFA's initiatives is the [EFFE Festival for Festival Cities and Regions](#) which aims to bring arts and politics together around the table. It recognises the commitment of city and regional authorities to their festivals and creates opportunities to exchange and explore models of collaboration including at policy level. It provides a forum to discuss and exchange local practices and policies related to festivals with colleagues from all over Europe. In 2024, the European Festivals Association (EFA) together with cities and regions participating in the EFFE Seal for Festival Cities and Regions published the [EFFE Seal Catalogue #1 on Environmental Sustainability](#), which brought together practices, policies and examples from cities and festivals working on the topic of arts, festivals and the environment. Following this initiative, [The Festivals Care! working group](#) launched the next edition: the **EFFE Seal Catalogue #2 on Festivals, Health and Wellbeing**.

This publication marks another step in EFA's journey in relation to the topic of arts, health and wellbeing which began in 2023 with [‘The Time We Spend Together’ retreat in Varna](#) and has continued through workshops, reflection sessions, retreats, the Festivals Care! Working Group and the [CARE – Culture for Mental Health](#) project. As Mahir Namur reflects in his article [The return of care: a living culture takes hold](#), the growing attention to care in festival practice is not accidental, but a response to the conditions of our time and a recognition that festivals can become spaces of connection, healing and shared responsibility.

The content of this Catalogue is drawn from two sources: the Survey for Festivals received 42 responses, of which 40 were usable, while the Survey for Cities and Regions received 14 responses from municipal and regional authorities across Europe, primarily from members of the EFFE Seal for Festival Cities and Regions, with additional contributions from beyond the initiative.

Festival, city and region names are given where respondents agreed to be identified; other responses remain anonymous as requested.

As the catalogue is based primarily on voluntary survey responses, the examples reflect respondents' own experiences, observations, and interpretations. They should therefore be understood as reported practices and perspectives rather than independently evaluated evidence of impact. The catalogue is intended to support reflection, comparison, peer learning, and dialogue rather than to establish a single model of good practice.

The catalogue summarises festival practices as well as the current approaches and perspectives reported by participating cities and regions on the topic in seven chapters:

1. Policy
2. Programming & Artistic Approaches
3. Operations, Care Practices & Accessibility
4. Partnerships
5. Challenges & Needs
6. Learning and Reported Outcomes
7. The Role of the Festival

The names of the practices, initiatives and experiments mentioned by contributors are presented in *italics*, while direct quotes from respondents are marked with quotation marks.

With this catalogue, we did not set out to define the topic of Arts and Health or Arts and Wellbeing as such. The connection between arts, health and wellbeing is becoming increasingly present in the conversations festivals are having, while also receiving growing attention at the European and local policy level. Our intention was to understand how festivals as well as local policymakers engage with it. In doing so, we discovered something equally important: across Europe, festivals have been developing practices of care, often independently and without a common language or opportunities to learn from one another, leaving many with a sense of isolation. This catalogue is therefore less an attempt to prescribe a model than to recognise an emerging community of practice.

Given the attention the topic has received at both European and global levels, it almost took us by surprise that many festivals reported feeling alone in tackling such an important issue. This gave us all the more reason to continue the work beyond the catalogue itself and to think about what festivals were asking for: connection, peer exchange, guidance and training.

As we began working on the catalogue, we knew it could only be meaningful if enough festivals and cities or regions chose to contribute. And at first, the task seemed fairly straightforward, given EFA's extensive network. However, the response was modest, and it was only after the personal involvement of the members of [The Festivals Care!](#) working group that the number of responses increased. We wanted a sufficiently diverse pool of examples to give shape to the catalogue. As the responses grew, it became clear that the catalogue would not simply represent the field — it would also be shaped by it.

The responses challenged the structure we had originally imagined. The practical examples shared by festivals, cities and regions required us to rethink the catalogue, expand its scope and reorganise its chapters. We welcomed those revisions because they confirmed that the catalogue was responding to a genuine need rather than imposing one.

We do not see this catalogue as a finished document, but as the continuation of a conversation among festivals and with policymakers. We hope it becomes a place where festivals can share not only practices and experiences, but also uncertainties, needs and challenges; where they can learn from one another and through peer exchange, while also strengthening dialogue with their local and regional authorities. In that sense, this catalogue is not only a record of existing practices and policies, but an invitation to continue shaping it together.

If this catalogue succeeds, it will not be because it provides definitive answers, but because it enables festivals to recognise their own experiences in those of others, creating the conditions for a stronger European conversation on the role of arts and culture in health and wellbeing.

Ultimately, we hope the catalogue encourages more festivals, cities and regions to reflect on how their work contributes to the wellbeing of audiences, artists, staff and local communities, while reassuring those already engaged in this work that they are part of a wider European practice. We also hope it encourages a more informed dialogue between festivals and local and regional policymakers, making both the benefits and the challenges of this work more visible.

Mirna Gott and Ana Benavides Otero, October 2026.

1 • Policy

The implementation of local and regional policy frameworks plays an important role in shaping relationships between the cultural sector, including festivals, and the health and social-care sectors.

Only a small number of the contributing cities, regions and festivals report having dedicated policies explicitly linking festivals or culture with health and wellbeing. The examples collected show a diverse landscape from explicit strategic policy commitments and targeted funding schemes to emerging initiatives, informal collaborations and advocacy efforts. These examples show how policy recognition, governance structures and funding mechanisms can enable, influence or constrain practices at the intersection of arts and wellbeing across different local contexts.

Explicit local and regional policy mandates

This subsection presents examples where health and wellbeing are explicitly recognised within cultural policy frameworks, strategic plans or municipal priorities.

- **Region Västra Götaland (Sweden):** the regional administration reports that contributing to health and wellbeing forms part of the cultural administration's mandate, although festivals are not specifically identified within the culture-and-health field. A festival receiving long-term regional support has also been invited to present its approach to a dedicated regional culture-and-health network. The Göteborg International Organ Festival operates within this wider policy environment, including the Culture and Health priority of the 2024–2027 cultural plan. This policy context has supported the development of its [Go Back to Sleep](#) restorative concerts, which have expanded from a local initiative to a format delivered in more than 50 locations.
- **Ljubljana (Slovenia):** its Cultural Development Strategy 2024–2027 is the first strategic document to explicitly name mental health and wellbeing as a strategic objective of culture, building on a 2025 pilot public call, *KULTURA ZDRAVI / CULTURE HEALS*, jointly run by the Department of Culture and the Department of Health and Social Care, in which cross-sectoral partnership with a health or social-welfare organisation is a mandatory condition of funding.
- **Ghent (Belgium):** the municipal response describes an integrated framework in which culture is treated as a fundamental right and linked to personal wellbeing, mental health, inclusion, and safer public life. Relevant mechanisms include UiTPAS, a low-cost cultural access pass, and the Ghent Nightlife Council, which addresses safety and wellbeing. Responsibility for Culture and for Social Progress, Health and Elderly Policy also sits within the same alderman's portfolio, creating a degree of alignment at governance level. At the same time, a festival respondent from the region offered a different perspective, reporting a concern about the possibility of being “marginalised” when seeking funding because its artistic focus is not primarily centred on diversity and inclusion.
- **Tampere (Finland):** identifies events and festivals directly as contributors to wellbeing in its City Strategy 2035 ([City of Action](#)), with dedicated municipal guidelines requiring supported events to generate measurable “wellbeing and communality” outcomes alongside economic and image-related benefits, and to be accessible and inclusive for all participants.

- **Body & Soul Festival (Leuven, Belgium):** wellbeing is part of Leuven's policy priorities and implemented through Body & Soul, a long-term, interdisciplinary programme developed by LEF (Leuven Events & Festivals). It is also part of Leuven's trajectory towards European Capital of Culture LOV2030. As part of the same trajectory, the City of Leuven and KU Leuven also initiated an international gathering: the [Culture and Care Conference](#) in collaboration with the Flemish Government and the Culture and Health Platform of Culture Action Europe. It resulted in shared insights, policy recommendations and a growing international network committed to strengthening the relationship between culture, health and care.
- **Victoria, Gozo (Malta):** national, regional and local cultural policies and strategies increasingly recognise the broader contribution of arts and cultural participation, including festivals, to individual and collective wellbeing. The National Cultural Policy 2021 is guided by the vision of embracing culture for the wellbeing of all, linking cultural participation with quality of life, inclusion, community engagement and sustainable development. Arts Council Malta's Strategy 2030 similarly recognises the cultural and creative sectors as contributors to wellbeing and supports stronger connections between culture, health and care. At regional and local level, the Gozo Regional Cultural Strategy 2022–2027 and the Victoria Cultural Strategy 2026–2035 further connect cultural participation with wellbeing, social cohesion, inclusion, community development and a stronger sense of place and belonging. Within these frameworks, festivals can contribute to wellbeing through social connection, creative expression, volunteering, intergenerational exchange and participation in public life. Nevertheless, their contribution is currently recognised more clearly through cultural-policy and community-development frameworks than through mainstream public-health policy.
- **Muğla (Türkiye):** reports that local policies regard festivals as contributors to community wellbeing and social cohesion including through their potential contribution to individuals' social and mental wellbeing.

Policy still absent, informal, or only emerging

Not all respondents operate within policy environments where arts, culture, health, and wellbeing are explicitly connected as in those mentioned above. In these contexts, activity often develops through individual initiatives, informal collaborations and project-based approaches, rather than through dedicated policy frameworks or stable institutional support.

- **Munich (Germany):** reports no dedicated policy or funding line, but it is developing a direct partnership with its own Health Department, including a joint conference, *Caring Culture. Cultural Education and Health*, planned for November 2026.
- **Leicester (UK):** reports that culture and wellbeing are not explicitly named in city council strategy, but the city runs an annual Creative Health festival directly with local arts and healthcare organisations.
- **Greenhouse Film Festival (Toruń, Poland):** reports that regional cultural policy continues to focus on classic indicators (audience numbers, heritage, economic impact). Within this framework, initiatives related to wellbeing and accessibility are expected to be accommodated into standard cultural/event budgets rather than dedicated health or inclusion funding lines.

- **International Shakespeare Festival in Gdańsk (Gdańsk, Poland):** notes that regional funding remains strictly tied to hard, quantifiable outputs (number of performances, ticket sales). There is no structural support at policy level for “soft” practices addressing staff and audience wellbeing.
- **Ogni Altro Suono (Castrignano dei Greci, Italy):** situates itself within Puglia’s regional cultural-economy policy ([Puglia Creativa](#)), a network of 150 cultural attractors). According to the respondent, dedicated policy explicitly linking arts to health and wellbeing remains underdeveloped in Italy compared to northern European countries.

Funding pathways beyond formal policy frameworks

Even where explicit policy support is limited, alternative funding mechanisms and cross-sector initiatives make the arts-and-wellbeing work possible. This subsection examines examples of how municipalities, health institutions and local authorities support festivals, cultural programmes and initiatives that work at the intersection between arts and wellbeing through dedicated programmes or pilot projects.

- **Bergen (Norway):** reports that there is no concrete funding scheme for festivals working specifically with arts, health and wellbeing, but that the municipality supports cross-sectoral collaboration between culture, health and care services. The respondent mentions the intergenerational festival Generasjon, developed as an ageing festival, as well as the [Cultural Schoolbag](#) and [Cultural Walking Stick](#) programmes, which bring professional culture into schools and nursing homes respectively.
- **Rotterdam (the Netherlands):** reports that the Municipality of Rotterdam offers funding lines for accessibility projects, while Rotterdam Festivals support several initiatives through their innovation budget, combining arts, culture and health/wellbeing. It is also mentioned that there are plans within the Municipality of Rotterdam to broaden their funding possibilities.
- **Mentalfest (Rijeka, Croatia):** has received continuous financial support from the City of Rijeka since its founding, and its collaborative model (built together with people with lived experience of mental health difficulties) has led local authorities to provide both funding and public space and has been used as a reference by other Croatian institutions moving away from a purely medical model of care.
- **Local representative from Ireland:** reports no formal national policy, though some festival outreach into care settings is funded through local health budgets rather than cultural budgets — an informal, health-sector-led route to the same outcome.
- **Varese, Lombardy (Italy):** Regione Lombardia and ASST Valle Olona have launched an experimental cultural welfare pilot project aimed at integrating arts and culture into healthcare and prevention pathways. With an initial regional investment of approximately €29,300, the project aims to assess whether cultural welfare can become a scalable and sustainable model for integrating health and cultural policies.
- **Valletta (Malta):** although there is currently no funding line dedicated specifically to festivals working in health and wellbeing, the Maltese Islands have introduced targeted funding for cultural initiatives operating across the arts, health, care and social sectors. [The Culture and Health Platform Fund](#) for the Maltese Islands, issued jointly by Arts Council Malta and ARC Research & Consultancy as part of

the European CultureAndHealth Platform led by Culture Action Europe, supports project funding, international mobility, training, capacity building, peer exchange and opportunities to present work. Arts Council Malta has also issued a thematic call under its Arts Support Scheme – [*Right to Culture \(Culture and Health\)*](#), supporting artistic, research, participatory and community-based initiatives connecting cultural participation with physical, mental, emotional, social, cultural and environmental wellbeing.

All these examples reveal that while some cities and regions are beginning to embed health and wellbeing within cultural strategies, many continue to rely on project-based initiatives and informal collaborations. Across these different contexts, a common aspiration emerges: greater policy recognition of the contribution that arts and culture can make to individual and collective wellbeing.

2 • Programming & Artistic Approaches

This chapter explores the artistic and programming formats, practices and experiments developed by different festivals that engage with health, wellbeing, inclusion and social connection. The examples portray a wide range of practices: from artistic responses to contemporary challenges such as stress, loneliness or climate anxiety, to participatory formats, intergenerational activities, inclusive creative processes and cultural experiences designed to encourage rest, reflection, dialogue and belonging. They demonstrate how wellbeing can be embedded in artistic content, audience participation and the ways festivals activate spaces and communities.

Solving an existing, particular problem

In these examples, artistic programmes are designed in response to an identified challenge.

- **Göteborg International Organ Festival (Gothenburg, Sweden):** [*Go Bach to Sleep*](#) responds to the widely felt problem of “chronostress” and the “always-on” nature of modern life by deliberately inverting the concert format: quiet organ registrations, horizontal seating, blankets and pillows, so that the audience is invited to rest, even fall asleep, rather than perform attentiveness.
- **CULMEA: Film and Environmental Education (Braşov, Romania):** uses film with children and young people to address climate change, biodiversity loss and the human–nature relationship, while deliberately avoiding fear- or guilt-based messaging. Post-screening debates are guided by trained cultural mediators, helping children speak about the emotions raised by the films and turning climate anxiety into shared conversation, understanding and a sense of agency.



CULMEA: Film and Environmental Education © Mihai Barbu

- **Le Petit Festival (Dubrovnik, Croatia):** *Le Petit Wellbeing Atelier* is a series of guided creative workshops combining expressive arts (painting, mask-making, simple movement), reflective group dialogue, and short guided meditations designed to help participants explore personal truth, love, and life purpose. Each session closed with a communal sharing circle and a symbolic ritual. Participants placed a written intention into a communal “Book of Knowledge” or offered a small object to signify an insight gained.

Rethinking the use of existing spaces

These examples show how festivals transform everyday, overlooked, or non-cultural spaces into places for artistic encounter and social connection.

- **Konstnatten Falbygden (Falköping, Sweden):** an outdoor exhibition of art and sculpture staged in Tomtens Kalkbrott, a former limestone quarry that is normally not used for cultural activity. Presented during the dark autumn period, the combination of the quarry setting, lighting design and artworks created a special atmosphere, and the event attracted around 30,000 visitors over three days.
- **Music & More SummerFest (Trebinje, Bosnia and Herzegovina):** *Market Place Welcoming Concert* opens the festival in Trebinje's market, among fruit and vegetable stands, bringing classical music by composers such as Mozart, Bach, Grieg and Copland into an everyday public space. The practice lowers the threshold for participation by placing the concert in a familiar setting, and creates an atmosphere of unity, friendship, cultural exchange and human connection, with local residents and many children taking part.
- **Noorderzon Festival (Groningen, the Netherlands):** uses an open festival park with free entry as the base for spontaneous, low-cost activity, deliberately lowering the threshold for participation by people who do not already identify as "culture-goers."

Using a space in its original way, with an innovative twist

The examples in this section show how festivals use familiar spaces in ways that remain connected to their original purpose while introducing a new artistic dimension.

- **Göteborg International Organ Festival (Gothenburg, Sweden):** Swedish churches, spaces historically built for stillness, reflection and communal ritual, become the setting for concerts where the audience lies down under blankets to sleep. The Church of Sweden itself shifted from being a passive venue-provider to an active co-producer of the format, scaling it nationally.
- **Wianki w Krakowie (Krakow, Poland):** *Garden of Respite Experiment* created a hidden low-stimulation garden in the busy city centre during a large public festival. The space offered amplifier-free relaxing concerts, silent reading and craft activities, including wreath-making and repainting sick trees. Visitors of different generations used the space to rest, with some even sleeping during the concerts. The practice responded to overstimulation by offering nature, quietness and gentle artistic activity inside an otherwise crowded urban festival.
- **Sacrum Profanum (Krakow, Poland):** *Kultura Fizyczna/Physical Culture* is a concert series that fuses contemporary composition with movement, inviting the audience to move rather than sit still — including a version brought into corporate offices, functioning simultaneously as a cultural interlude and a cardio session for office workers.

Inclusion and participation through activities around and in artistic performances

The activities below are designed to involve people (in some cases focusing on those belonging to vulnerable groups) not only as audiences but as active participants and even co-creators of the festival, expanding the opportunities for cultural participation and artistic experiences across age groups and communities.

- **Uhvati Film (Rijeka, Croatia):** combines film screenings with discussion, educational activities and creative participation. Through the project [*Tajni Agent 010*](#), young people with disabilities take part in acting, storytelling, improvisation and film production alongside professional filmmakers and artists. The approach emphasises people with disabilities as performers, collaborators and creators, not only as subjects represented on screen or merely audiences.
- **Dance Week Festival (Zagreb, Croatia):** *Empowering Dance* workshops held in schools and museums around and during the festival, built on a multi-year, multi-country embodied-research collaboration among EU dance organisations, aimed at building soft skills, community and a sense of belonging through movement.
- **Autori in città (Padua, Italy):** [*Sempreverdi*](#) is a festival strand dedicated to illustrated books and reading practice inside residential care structures for the elderly. Developed together with a clinical psychologist, it includes seminars for caregivers, psychologists and staff working in residential care facilities on the use of illustrated books with elderly people experiencing cognitive decline and has led to the involvement of care facilities in exhibitions and reading activities.



Autori in città © Marika Ambrosino

- **International Shakespeare Festival in Gdańsk (Gdańsk, Poland):** alongside its theatre programme, the festival developed a series of accompanying wellbeing activities designed to make participation in culture more accessible and provide opportunities for relaxation, emotional expression and social connection. These included the *Festival Breakfasts*, bringing together artists, audiences, volunteers and festival workers in an informal setting; *Botanical Plant Trail Walks*; *Wreath for Ophelia* workshops; and a *Silent Disco* offering a playful form of movement and stress relief. These activities were programmed with the aim to lower barriers often associated with high culture and create welcoming spaces for encounter, mental relaxation, joy and creative participation.
- **Festival World Literatures – Fabula (Ljubljana, Slovenia):** *Bibliotherapy sessions* organised with libraries and cultural institutions create guided spaces where participants reflect on literary texts and connect them to personal experiences. The festival also organises intergenerational reading activities with elderly audiences and creative reading workshops for children and young people, using literature to encourage dialogue, exchange, participation and engagement with themes such as identity, belonging and democratic values. In addition, workshops and activities addressing LGBTQIA+ literature and other underrepresented voices and communities contribute to more inclusive literary spaces, expanding opportunities for perspectives that remain insufficiently visible in mainstream literary programming.



Festival Fabula © Festival Fabula

Participatory strands for children, youth, families and adults

Alongside their core artistic programmes, many festivals develop dedicated participatory strands to invite people of different ages to engage directly with artistic practice and with each other.

- **Music Biennale Zagreb (Zagreb, Croatia):** *MBZ PLAY* is the participatory and educational strand of this long-running contemporary music biennial founded in 1961. Launched in 2025, it creates hands-on encounters with contemporary music for children, young people and families through workshops, participatory activities and performances. A one-day professional symposium is also organised for artists and educators working in music and dance for young audiences. Following its successful first edition, *MBZ PLAY* has secured a dedicated two-day “Playground” programme for the 2027 edition, and the festival reports unexpected demand for equivalent participatory activities from adult audiences as well.
- **Festival of Ecological Theatre for Children and Youth – FEP (Bačka Palanka, Serbia):** forms an annual *Children’s Jury and Youth Jury*, developed in long-term partnership with a local preschool institution and a drama studio. Guided by theatre professionals and educators, participants attend performances, discuss them, and collectively decide the award winners thereby building confidence, critical thinking and a lasting sense of ownership of the festival; many later return as volunteers or young cultural professionals.



Festival of Ecological Theatre for Children and Youth – FEP © Jovana Semiz

Artistic practices supporting mental health, wellbeing and social connection

The examples in this subsection connect more explicitly artistic practice with mental health, emotional wellbeing, care and social connection.

- **Jednaki u kulturi – Tjedan inkluzije na Ribnjaku (Zagreb, Croatia):** art-therapy and dance-based workshops for elderly people, including people living with dementia and Alzheimer’s disease, developed in collaboration with nursing homes and care institutions. Through artistic creation, movement and participation, the programme encourages communication, emotional expression and social connection. Activities sharing similar goals also include training for artists and care professionals led by

art therapist Maja Čečuk and the interactive Kamishibai Theatre programme of the Kozlići Association.

- **Mentalfest (Rijeka, Croatia):** *Kuc Kuc Cabaret (Knock Knock Cabaret)* is a theatre piece created through year-round drama workshops with around 15 people with lived experience of mental health difficulties, culminating in a public performance; Living Library is an activity in which people with lived experience of mental health difficulties become “human books” and share their personal stories with “readers”, openly discussing their recovery journeys, challenges and life experiences. Many also express themselves through poetry, music and live performances, using creative forms of storytelling to communicate emotions and experiences that may be difficult to describe in conventional ways.
- **Body & Soul Festival (Leuven, Belgium):** *Arts on Prescription* connects cultural and healthcare organisations by offering guided cultural trajectories outside traditional care settings for people experiencing psychosocial challenges, while *Folded Memory* uses textile-based artistic practices to explore remembrance, grief and collective reflection in collaboration with care organisations and local communities.
- **Festival Perelada - Campus Perelada (Perelada and Barcelona, Spain):** *Dit-Dit* is a dance and movement practice for people living with Alzheimer’s disease and other types of dementia, developed by Fundació Castell de Perelada through the Health Campus of Campus Perelada, at Ace Alzheimer Center Barcelona, and designed and led by CondeGalí. Participants explore forms of communication and expression beyond verbal language through movement, touch, music, bodily memory and guided improvisation. The sessions combine physical activity, cognitive and sensory stimulation, and emotional wellbeing, creating a shared space for participants, relatives, health professionals and artists. All of these examples show that there is no single artistic model for supporting wellbeing. Festivals adapt artistic practices to their own communities, spaces, audiences and local contexts, producing a wide variety of approaches that play with their experimentative and creative character and share similar objectives around participation, connection and inclusion.



Festival Perelada © Miquel González

3 • Operations, Care Practices & Accessibility

While the previous chapter focuses on artistic content and programming, this chapter examines the practical and organisational measures that support participation, inclusion and wellbeing. The examples illustrate how festivals address barriers related to disability, sensory needs, financial constraints, psychological safety and working conditions, demonstrating that accessibility and care are often shaped as much by operational decisions as by artistic programming.

Accessibility for people with disabilities

This subsection presents measures designed to remove physical and communication barriers to cultural participation.

- **International Theatre Festival Kontakt (Toruń, Poland) and Festival World Literatures – Fabula (Ljubljana, Slovenia):** the first one provides live audio description for blind and visually impaired audiences, audio introductions available in advance online, Polish Sign Language interpretation, subtitles and induction-loop systems. Across different editions, accessibility support has been provided for between five and twelve performances. Fabula Festival has also started to provide sign-language interpretation at its main festival events, and its principal venues are accessible to people with reduced mobility.



International Theatre Festival Kontakt © Piotr Nykowski

- **Wonderfeel (Baarn, the Netherlands):** works with the national accessibility organisation HandicapNL to improve physical and sensory accessibility of the festival site.

Sensory accommodation and psychological safety

The examples in this subsection focus on reducing barriers experienced by people with sensory sensitivities, anxiety or other support needs, while also preventing these barriers from appearing in the first place. These practices help create conditions in which participants can engage with cultural experiences in ways that feel safe, comfortable and responsive to their individual needs.

- **Greenhouse Film Festival (Toruń, Poland):** *The Greenhouse Safe Space Initiative* is an organisational approach designed to create a stress-free and inclusive environment for young filmmakers and audiences. As the festival does not use a competition or judging format, activities take place in a relaxed and supportive atmosphere. Measures include pre-event forms to identify sensory needs, regular breaks between workshops, noise-cancelling headphones, sign-language interpretation, and a dedicated Hospitality Coordinator. The initiative aims to create a safe environment where participants feel comfortable, supported and free from the pressures often associated with traditional film festivals.
- **International Theatre Festival Kontakt (Toruń, Poland):** prepares trigger/content notes for potentially difficult material, framed explicitly as a means of enabling audiences to make informed choices in light of their own mental wellbeing, sensitivities, experiences, and boundaries, rather than as a way of limiting artistic content.
- **Wonderfeel (Baarn, the Netherlands), Greenhouse Film Festival (Toruń, Poland) and The Night With... (Glasgow, UK):** these three festivals have created dedicated quiet/decompression spaces away from the main programme, recognising that even high-energy events need a place to withdraw to. Some offer a quiet room, while others provide additional activities. Wonderfeel's *In de Luwte* ("In the Shelter") area, for example, offers yoga sessions, sound-bath experiences, and massages.

Care for festival workers, artists and crew

Accessibility and wellbeing also depend on the conditions under which festivals are produced. These examples illustrate how festivals support artists, staff, volunteers and collaborators by creating sustainable working environments for everyone involved.

- **Prapremiery Festival (Bydgoszcz, Poland):** *SOMA* is a somatic-practice workshop led by a company member trained in yoga and with a background in psychology. It is open to spectators, creative teams and the administrative team alike, explicitly framed as "care for all the people involved in the festival", allowing the group to relax, stay connected to one's body and find positivity.
- **Cro Art & Culture Festival (Cres, Croatia):** a signed code of conduct is required of performers, artists and crew before the festival, intended to set shared expectations for how people treat one another and to keep the environment safe.
- **International Theatre Festival Kontakt (Toruń, Poland):** holds an internal reporting procedure and whistle-blower protection policy, extending "care" beyond the audience to employees, collaborators, artists and partners.

- **Festival World Literatures – Fabula (Ljubljana, Slovenia):** carefully designs scheduling for authors and literary professionals to ensure a sustainable, respectful working environment alongside residency and professional-development opportunities.



Festival Fabula © Festival Fabula

Flexibility

- **Uhvati Film (Rijeka, Croatia):** explicitly names flexibility as a working method: the creative process cannot follow a standard production model because participants have different abilities, rhythms and needs, and this flexibility becomes a creative strength rather than a limitation.
- **Sweden-based festival:** works with a different partner organisation each year specifically “to keep it alive,” prioritising adaptability over a fixed format.

Accessible pricing and low-threshold participation

Financial cost and geographical distance remain significant barriers to cultural participation. The initiatives presented in this section explore how to broaden access through different schemes and collaborations.

- **Festival World Literatures – Fabula (Ljubljana, Slovenia), Zmaj Children’s Games (Novi Sad, Serbia), and Kulturnatta & Sommarunderhållningen (Gothenburg, Sweden):** all (among others) offer full free entry or low-threshold opportunities as a deliberate accessibility measure, removing socio-economic barriers to participation. They also take place in different parts of the city or even in different cities (Fabula Festival) to reach more people and decentralise cultural content.
- **Wonderfeel (Baarn, the Netherlands):** *Give an Encore / Geef Een Toegift* is a ticket-donation programme, developed with local partners such as Stichting Leergeld, giving access to visitors with limited financial means.
- **Enjoy Jazz Festival (Heidelberg, Germany):** in cooperation with Kulturparkett Rhine-Neckar, the festival makes free ticket contingents available for many of its

concerts. Through the Culturepass scheme, people with low incomes can access these tickets and attend Enjoy Jazz concerts for free, lowering the financial barrier to participation.

The measures described in this chapter demonstrate that accessibility and care are not only values but also practical choices. In many cases, relatively small adjustments to environments, working methods or organisational structures can significantly influence how people experience and participate in the arts.

4 • Partnerships

Across many of the contributions from festivals, cities and regions, partnerships emerge as an important enabling factor for arts-and-wellbeing initiatives. The examples presented in this chapter show how festivals, cities and regions work with each other as well as with health and social-care organisations, researchers, educational institutions, social enterprises, public authorities, European and international networks to reach new audiences, develop specialised expertise, secure resources and create programmes that would be difficult to deliver alone.

Cultural × health / social-care partnerships

The examples in this subsection bring together collaborations between festivals/cultural organisations and health, care or social-sector partners.

- **Jednaki u kulturi – Tjedan inkluzije na Ribnjaku (Zagreb, Croatia):** partners with nursing homes in Zagreb, the Autism Center Zagreb, and the Kozlići Association applying art therapy approaches to support older people, people living with dementia, people with cognitive disabilities, and people in palliative care.
- **Mentalfest (Rijeka, Croatia):** is organised through a partnership involving the City of Rijeka, Radio Rijeka, the NGOs Vida and Podrška, and the Public Health Institute of Primorje-Gorski Kotar County; the *Kuc Kuc Cabaret* and *Living Library* activities themselves grow directly out of the therapeutic work of the Dom Turnić institution.
- **Body & Soul Festival (Leuven, Belgium):** the [*Culture and Care Conference*](#) brought together artists, cultural organisations, healthcare professionals, researchers, community organisations, and policymakers to explore wellbeing as a shared societal challenge. The initiative positions arts and culture alongside health and care sectors as part of a long-term effort to develop pathways towards individual and collective flourishing, with contributions from organisations such as the World Health Organisation and the European Commission.
- **Festival Perelada – Campus Perelada (Perelada and Barcelona, Spain):** [*Dit-Dit*](#) brings together Fundació Castell de Perelada, Ace Alzheimer Center Barcelona and the artist-led CondeGalí team in a collaboration involving people living with dementia, relatives, healthcare professionals, researchers and artists.
- **Ravenna Festival (Ravenna, Italy):** is working with the MADER network (Museums for Dementia and Alzheimer's in Emilia-Romagna), established in Ravenna in 2024 together with AUSL Romagna, the regional public health authority, to explore how cultural welfare practices developed for people living with ageing-related neurodegenerative conditions can be transferred from museum environments to festival contexts.
- **Enjoy Jazz Festival (Heidelberg, Germany):** has used the Sammlung Prinzhorn, an art collection created by psychiatric patients, housed at Heidelberg University Hospital's psychiatric clinic, as a festival venue. By staging concerts within the Sammlung Prinzhorn, Enjoy Jazz aims to bring music into dialogue with a body of art created outside the mainstream, inviting audiences to experience jazz in a space that itself challenges conventional boundaries between art, illness, and creativity.



Enjoy Jazz Festival © Rebekka Marx

Academic and research partnerships

Several festivals collaborate with universities, conservatoires, research institutions and academics to develop, test or strengthen their work. These partnerships provide specialised knowledge, research perspectives and educational opportunities as presented in the examples from this section.

- **Göteborg International Organ Festival (Gothenburg, Sweden):** developed in close connection with the Academy of Music and Drama at the University of Gothenburg. The festival's [*Go Bach to Sleep*](#) format emerged from artistic and pedagogical exploration of how concert rituals can be adapted to support rest, reflection, and wellbeing, linking artistic practice with research-informed experimentation.
- **Ogni Altro Suono (Castrignano dei Greci, Italy):** formal partnerships with the Università del Salento, the Accademia di Belle Arti di Catania and the Conservatorio Tito Schipa di Lecce. These partnerships contribute research expertise, educational exchange, and opportunities for student and academic engagement, supporting the festival's work at the intersection of art, territory, community, and wellbeing.
- **Wianki w Krakowie (Krakow, Poland):** [*Garden of Respite Experiment*](#) developed with the Academy of Fine Arts in Kraków as part of the SCT HUB project combining artistic design, public space experimentation, and reflection on rest, nature, and urban wellbeing.
- **Ghent (Belgium):** [*Wij zijn de Walvis*](#) developed through collaboration involving Ghent University (UGent), HOGENT, Artevelde University of Applied Sciences, cultural organisations, and health-oriented partners around themes of mental wellbeing, resilience, and social connectedness.
- **Valletta (Malta):** the contribution highlights a 2026 collaboration between Festivals Malta and the University of Malta's Research, Innovation and Development Trust, involving the Valletta Baroque Festival, Carnival, Mużika Mużika, Festgħana and the Malta Jazz Festival. The partnership aims to bring university research closer to festival audiences and is framed around research, innovation, quality of life and the contribution of arts and creativity to the wellbeing of present and future generations.

Social enterprises and inclusive employment

The examples in this section show how festivals work with social enterprises and organisations supporting people facing barriers to employment or participation.

- **Wonderfeel (Baarn, the Netherlands):** collaborates with the Dutch asylum agency COA to include young asylum seekers in its volunteer team and works with social enterprises such as D.R.O.P., employing young people with Down syndrome, and the Gooische Bierbrouwerij, where people who face barriers to employment help produce the festival's WonderBeer. Through partnerships with organisations such as Stichting Leergeld and PIT Baarn, the festival also runs its [Give an Encore / Geef Een Toegift](#) ticket donation programme. Wonderfeel describes these initiatives as “small in scale, but meaningful in creating encounters between people who might not otherwise meet.”

International and European networks

Festivals do not operate only within their local contexts, they also participate in international networks, European cooperation projects, and cross-border partnerships.

- **Body & Soul Festival (Leuven, Belgium):** the [Culture and Care Conference](#) was developed within Culture Action Europe's Culture & Health Platform, with international Open Calls structured around Young People & Mental Health, Older Adults & Intergenerational Initiatives, and Community-Rooted Programmes.
- **Wonderfeel (Baarn, the Netherlands):** co-initiated [Festivals for Compassion](#), a European festival network through which festivals commission and present new music as expressions of solidarity during times of crisis, from the COVID-19 pandemic to the war in Ukraine. Wonderfeel also collaborates through international sustainability networks including [European Festivals Forest](#) and [Green Deal Circular Festivals](#), connecting cultural participation with environmental responsibility and wellbeing.
- **Uhvati Film (Rijeka, Croatia):** exchanges guest programmes with “sister” festivals in Croatia and internationally, noting that “these exchanges help connect different audiences, artistic approaches and social issues”.
- **Festival World Literatures – Fabula (Ljubljana, Slovenia):** is connected to the European fwd platform, which supports emerging literary voices, particularly authors and translators at the beginning of their careers. The initiative contributes to professional development and access to opportunities for people whose position within the literary and publishing sector can be especially vulnerable.

Municipal, regional and cross-sectoral partnerships

This subsection focuses on collaborations involving festivals, local and regional authorities, public institutions and health-sector actors.

- **Rotterdam (the Netherlands):** Rotterdam Festivals runs a dedicated accessibility programme uniting 14 festivals, and several of its festivals partner directly with care and nursing homes: the North Sea Round Town jazz festival, the Circusstad Festival (bringing circus performance into care homes) and the O. Festival (opera, music and theatre).
- **Ghent (Belgium):** the city hosts a broad partnership ecosystem. The Ghent Nightlife Council, established in 2021, brings festival organisers together with policymakers and venue operators to address safety, inclusion, and wellbeing. NTGent's [Care Cure Comfort Lab](#) (2024) explores care practices and human connection through performance. In the health and social-care field, Museum Dr. Guislain brings psychiatry, mental health, and contemporary art together through initiatives such as [PsychoJazz](#). The TOOPen network, a legacy of Ghent's bid for European Capital of Culture 2030, connects artists and care partners through projects including CAMPO's [Circus of Care](#), which explores different meanings and experiences of care, and the intergenerational [Wij zijn de Walvis](#) ("We Are the Whale"), a large-scale interdisciplinary project exploring the vulnerability of humans and nature.
- **Ljubljana (Slovenia):** structures partnership as a funding requirement: its *CULTURE HEALS* public call requires applicants from the cultural sector to partner with a health, social-welfare or other professional mental health organisation, with the Ljubljana Health Centre and the National Institute of Public Health among the named public sector partners.
- **Leicester (UK):** co-delivers its annual Creative Health festival with local arts and healthcare organisations, and University Hospitals of Leicester NHS Trust also operates a creative health service. The LLR Creative Health Network is bringing together health and care institutions with arts and heritage practice.
- **Tampere (Finland):** reports two established health–culture partnership models: the long-running *Sairaalaklovnit* ("Hospital Clowns") programme, and a formal "service coordination for cultural wellbeing" pathway through which the Wellbeing Services of the County of Pirkanmaa order cultural activities directly for their clients.
- **Varese / Lombardy (Italy):** situates its cultural welfare pilot (Regione Lombardia and ASST Valle Olona) within the European Commission Joint Research Centre's [Decoding Depression](#) science-for-policy framework, which treats cultural participation as one of several protective factors, alongside social connection and community-based resources, against depression and isolation; the respondent also points to the JRC's dedicated SciArt platform for art–science collaboration.
- **Music Biennale Zagreb (Zagreb, Croatia):** developed [MBZ PLAY](#) with research and seed funding from the Art Mentor Foundation Lucerne, and subsequent support from the City of Zagreb's *Art in the Community* funding programme; it is now building further connections with mental health organisations focused on teenagers and young people, though describes cross-sectoral partnership in this area as still "developing" rather than established.



Music Biennale Zagreb © Matej Grgić

- **Bydgoszcz Opera Festival (Bydgoszcz, Poland), Music & More SummerFest (Trebinje, Bosnia and Herzegovina), Kulturnatta & Sommarunderhållningen (Gothenburg, Sweden) and a Croatian-based festival:** all rely on close cooperation with city or regional authorities (municipality, ministry of culture, tourist board) for logistics, infrastructure and public funding, illustrating how municipal partnership underpins much of the wellbeing-adjacent programming even where health is not an explicit policy category.
- **Victoria, Gozo (Malta):** provides several examples of collaborations between cultural and health or care organisations. These include the Malta Dementia Society's *Kuluri u Tifkirket*, combining visual art, collective memory and Gestalt therapy for people living with dementia and their carers; the St Jeanne Antide Foundation's *Umama*, using art therapy with women and children affected by domestic violence; Theatre Anon Arts Foundation's *Restorying Lives*, introducing people living with dementia to creative storytelling; and the *Deep Shelter Project*, supported by Arts Council Malta and developed together with healthcare professionals and artists.
- **FAB – Festival international des Arts de Bordeaux métropole (Bordeaux, France):** through the *INSPIRATIONS* project, the festival applies a *One Health* approach, bringing together researchers, artists, residents, technicians, local elected officials and non-profit partners around the intersection of biodiversity, climate change, environmental conditions, and human health in the Médoc region.

Across the examples presented here, partnerships do more than provide resources. They often act as bridges between different sectors, forms of expertise and communities, helping festivals to work with groups and issues that would otherwise remain beyond their reach.

5 • Challenges & Needs

Throughout the contributions, a number of recurring challenges were identified. These challenges affect the ability of festivals to develop, sustain and expand arts-and-wellbeing activities. Although these challenges emerge in different contexts and disciplines, they can be grouped into three broad clusters. The first concerns funding and recognition, including difficulties securing appropriate resources and demonstrating the value of this work within existing policy frameworks. The second relates to capacity and knowledge, including needs for training, peer exchange, research partnerships and appropriate evaluation and measurement methods. The third cluster focuses on ethical and relational boundaries, bringing together questions about the role of festivals in relation to health and care, artistic autonomy, responsibilities towards participants and communities, and the practical realities of creating accessible, inclusive and sustainable forms of participation. Together, these challenges highlight both the potential value of arts-and-wellbeing work and the conditions respondents believe are needed for it to develop further.

Cluster A: Funding & recognition

The challenges gathered in this cluster relate to the difficulty of sustaining and legitimising arts-and-wellbeing work within existing cultural, policy and funding systems.

Cross-disciplinary work not fitting existing funding categories

- **Uhvati Film (Rijeka, Croatia):** describes its own work as “at the same time artistic, educational, social, inclusive and community-based,” which makes it harder to explain and fund within institutional frameworks organised around single categories.
- **Ogni Altro Suono (Castrignano dei Greci, Italy):** reports that health and social-care organisations are entirely absent from its partnership landscape, reflecting the lack of a funding home for work that sits between the cultural and health sectors in Italy.
- **Another Croatian-based festival:** notes that institutional funding frameworks “often do not fully recognise care, wellbeing, or community-building as measurable outcomes,” making it difficult to secure dedicated resources for these dimensions of the programme.

Funding and sustainability

- **Nearly all respondents** cite funding as their principal constraint; several such as **Festival FONS (Ljubljana, Slovenia)**, **Ogni Altro Suono (Castrignano dei Greci, Italy)**, **Autori in città (Padua, Italy)**, **Greenhouse Film Festival (Toruń, Poland)** specifically ask for multi-year rather than single-edition grants, so that wellbeing-oriented work can move beyond pilot status.
- **Konstnatten Falbygden (Falköping, Sweden):** reports difficulty securing regional engagement despite broad local cooperation and significant visitor numbers, stating that it is often difficult to get municipalities and regions to commit staff time and resources.
- **Borås International Poetry Festival (Borås, Sweden):** also highlights the challenges of relying on temporary project funding, volunteer engagement, and partnerships, all of which can make continuity more difficult.

- **Prapremiery Festival (Bydgoszcz, Poland) and Na-Knap Festival (Ljubljana, Slovenia):** note that participatory activities, workshops, and immersive experiences require additional resources for coordination, facilitation, and technical support compared to traditional performance presentations. With scarce funding and human resources, it is challenging to provide these valuable extra activities while also ensuring the delivery of the main programme and taking the crew's wellbeing into consideration.

Partner expectations and silo culture

- **Ogni Altro Suono (Castrignano dei Greci, Italy):** identifies this directly: municipalities are willing but resource-poor, academic partners bring legitimacy but not funding, and health/social-care actors are simply missing from the table, each sector operating in its own silo.
- **Body & Soul (Leuven, Belgium):** reports that one of its main challenges was building a shared language between sectors that arrived with "different languages, priorities, funding structures and ways of working."
- **Festival World Literatures – Fabula (Ljubljana, Slovenia):** highlights the challenge of identifying and maintaining suitable long-term partnerships, particularly with therapists and organisations working with specific communities.
- **Dance Week Festival (Zagreb, Croatia):** reports a "lack of understanding among the arts community that this IS relevant and much needed artistic practice in itself" and notes difficulties finding hosts and partners who recognise participatory and wellbeing-oriented artistic work as legitimate artistic practice.

Cluster B: Capacity & knowledge

Many respondents highlight the need for additional knowledge, skills and support structures to strengthen work at the intersection of arts, health and wellbeing.

Need for peer exchange and networking

- **Festival World Literatures – Fabula (Ljubljana, Slovenia), FEP (Bačka Palanka, Serbia), Greenhouse Film Festival (Toruń, Poland), International Theatre Festival Kontakt (Toruń, Poland), CULMEA: Film and Environmental Education (Braşov, Romania) and Ogni Altro Suono (Castrignano dei Greci, Italy):** all explicitly request more structured peer-exchange platforms; several note they currently feel they are "operating in a vacuum" or "reinventing the wheel" locally. They also showed interest in building partnerships with researchers and practitioners working at the intersection of arts, education, health, and community development.

Need for education and training

- **Mentalfest (Rijeka, Croatia):** asks specifically for formal peer-support training for its service users who also work as peer workers to strengthen their skills and enhance the quality of recovery-oriented support they provide, plus training in dance/movement-based performance which would enrich their creative and arts-based recovery programmes.
- **Greenhouse Film Festival (Toruń, Poland):** asks for specialised staff training in psychological safety, sensory processing and mental health first aid, since its team are cultural animators rather than licensed therapists.
- **CULMEA: Film and Environmental Education (Braşov, Romania):** requests training for cultural mediators specifically on facilitating conversations around difficult topics such as climate anxiety.

- **Jednaki u kulturi - Tjedan inkluzije na Ribnjaku (Zagreb, Croatia):** the organisers note that work with people living with dementia, cognitive disabilities and palliative-care users requires additional time, specific knowledge and continuous education for artists and collaborators.



CULMEA: Film and Environmental Education © Mihai Barbu

Need for shared evaluation and impact frameworks

- **Music Biennale Zagreb (Zagreb, Croatia):** names this directly as an unmet need: shared methodologies, indicators and tools that can capture artistic and social/ wellbeing outcomes together, since many organisations in this field are “still exploring how to meaningfully assess impact beyond attendance figures”.
- **Greenhouse Film Festival (Toruń, Poland), Way Out West (Gothenburg, Sweden), Kulturnatta & Sommarunderhållningen (Gothenburg, Sweden), Le Petit Festival (Dubrovnik, Croatia), Uhvati Film (Rijeka, Croatia) and Bydgoszcz Opera Festival (Bydgoszcz, Poland):** raise a shared concern about how to measure the deeper and longer-term effects of cultural participation on wellbeing. While practical outputs such as attendance, feedback forms or accessibility tools can be counted, respondents stress that changes in confidence, emotional wellbeing, social connection, perception or trust are much harder to capture. As Greenhouse Film Festival puts it, the challenge is to demonstrate what the respondent describes as the “deep, health-related impact of a non-competitive arts space” without falling back on “cold, rigid statistics”; similarly, Uhvati Film notes that many important changes appear in small moments, such as someone becoming more confident, speaking publicly for the first time, or a group building trust over time.

Cluster C: Ethical & relational boundaries

The examples in this cluster bring together questions that extend beyond funding and expertise. They reflect on how festivals can contribute to wellbeing without becoming substitutes for therapy or social services, how to care responsibly for audiences, participants and staff, how to reach people who are most excluded from cultural participation, and how to balance accessibility, participation and growth with artistic quality, autonomy and meaningful relationships.

Ethical boundaries between wellbeing/care and professional therapy

- **Uhvati Film (Rijeka, Croatia):** names this as an open dilemma: how to speak about wellbeing “without reducing artistic and inclusive work to therapy or social service,” while still preserving its measurable positive effects on confidence and belonging.
- **Greenhouse Film Festival (Torun, Poland):** frames the same issue from the staff perspective: its Hospitality Coordinator is a cultural animator, not a licensed therapist, raising the open question of where proactive care ends and psychological intervention requiring specialised training begins.
- **Le Petit Festival (Dubrovnik, Croatia):** raises the ethics of symbolic/ritual elements in expressive-arts workshops, asking how to respect diverse cultural and spiritual beliefs “without making therapeutic promises.”



Le Petit Festival © Z.Tutnjevic

Building awareness among the local communities, public authorities and other sectors

- **Cro Art & Culture Festival (Cres, Croatia):** reports that part of the local community actively resists the festival’s approach to safety and openness, describing an ongoing effort to “share, explain and educate.”
- **Konstnatten Falbygden (Falköping, Sweden):** similarly reports that wellbeing is “rarely linked” to its work in local and regional discourse, despite its practical relevance.

Caring for festival workers as well as audiences and artists

- **International Shakespeare Festival in Gdańsk (Gdańsk, Poland):** articulates this most sharply, calling it an “internal vs. external care paradox”: the festival actively promotes audience and artist wellbeing while its own core team faces burnout risk from an intensive 11-day production schedule.
- **Prapremiery Festival’s SOMA workshop (Bydgoszcz, Poland) and Cro Art & Culture’s code of conduct (Cres, Croatia):** are both direct organisational responses to this same need ([see Chapter 3](#)).

Responsibility to the local social environment between festival editions

- **Ogni Altro Suono (Castrignano dei Greci, Italy):** raises this as an open question: artist residencies create “intense but temporary connections” with a place; the festival asks what responsibility it holds toward communities once the artists leave, and how relationships can deepen across editions rather than being rebuilt from scratch each year.
- **Festival of Ecological Theatre for Children and Youth – FEP (Bačka Palanka, Serbia):** notes the same structural fragility: continuity of youth mentorship depends on project funding and volunteer engagement rather than guaranteed year-round support.
- **Music Biennale Zagreb (Zagreb, Croatia):** frames the same dilemma from a biennial festival’s structural position: it is explicit that “MBZ is not a school, educational institution or health service provider,” and sees its role as a catalyst that initiates collaborations and tests new models, while the harder open question is how to hand over continuity and long-term impact to appropriately resourced local partners once the festival edition ends.



Festival of Ecological Theatre for Children and Youth – FEP © Jovana Semiz

Reaching the most isolated population groups

- **Ogni Altro Suono (Castrignano dei Greci, Italy):** states plainly that “the people who might benefit most from arts and wellbeing practices... are often precisely those least likely to walk through the door, even when admission is free.”
- **Kulturnatta & Sommarunderhållningen (Gothenburg, Sweden):** identifies the same pattern: those already engaged with culture find their way to public-space events regardless, while reaching genuinely new participants requires outreach beyond the traditional cultural sector.
- **Noorderzon Festival (Groningen, the Netherlands):** has spent 25 years deliberately building trust across the city’s diverse communities, and reports that people feel welcome mainly when they see “other people like them” already attending, underlining how slow and relational this work is.

Maintaining high quality of the artistic programme while widening participation

- **Croatian-based festival:** notes that the intensity of festival preparation and the technical demands of historic performance venues limit how far experimental or participatory wellbeing content can be developed without compromising artistic and logistical standards.
- **Na-Knap Festival (Ljubljana, Slovenia):** names the same tension explicitly: balancing artistic ambition, experimentation and accessibility “requires continuous adaptation of formats, communication strategies and audience engagement activities.”

Scaling up while preserving intimacy and care

- **Le Petit Festival (Dubrovnik, Croatia), Greenhouse Film Festival (Toruń, Poland), Noorderzon Festival of Performing Arts & Society (Groningen, the Netherlands) and Göteborg International Organ Festival (Gothenburg, Sweden):** highlight a shared challenge: how to grow while preserving the qualities that make wellbeing-oriented festival experiences effective. As festivals expand their audiences, activities, or geographical reach, there is a risk of losing the intimacy, safety, and sense of care at the core of these practices. Le Petit Festival asks how to “scale access while keeping sessions intimate and emotionally safe.” Similarly, Greenhouse Film Festival questions whether a larger festival can maintain the “quiet, safe, and uncrowded environment” and “cozy, stress-free greenhouse atmosphere” that underpin its wellbeing strategy. Göteborg International Organ Festival raises concerns about how to “protect the soul of the experience” as its [Go Back to Sleep](#) format expands to more than 50 locations, highlighting the risk of “concept drift” and the challenge of preserving its “quiet and restorative” focus while scaling up. Noorderzon Festival reflects on the challenge of how to accommodate growth while ensuring that “everyone should be comfortable.”

Many of the challenges identified in this chapter are closely connected. Difficulties related to funding, recognition, collaboration, evaluation and long-term sustainability frequently reinforce one another, pointing to a need for structural responses from policymakers and co-funders that go beyond individual projects or organisations. At the same time, several festivals have developed practical responses to some of these challenges through accessibility measures, care practices, staff-support initiatives and flexible working methods, some of which are described in [Chapter 3](#). These examples suggest that, while structural barriers remain, some festivals are also actively testing ways to address them.

6 • Learning and Reported Outcomes

Alongside challenges and needs, festivals also reflected on what they have learnt through their experiences and on the changes they have observed among participants, audiences, communities and organisations. While the examples come from very different artistic disciplines and contexts, several recurring topics have emerged. These include increased confidence and empowerment, stronger social connections, reduced stigma and isolation, growing demand for participatory and restorative cultural experiences, and a recognition that some of the most meaningful impacts of arts participation often develop gradually and indirectly rather than through predefined outcomes or indicators.

Confidence, empowerment and agency

These examples describe how participation in artistic activities can strengthen confidence, self-expression and a sense of agency.

- **Mentalfest (Rijeka, Croatia):** in *Kuc Kuc Cabaret* participants gained confidence and a stronger sense of belonging; positive audience reception, driven by humour and authenticity, gave participants a strong sense of achievement and pride.
- **FEP (Bačka Palanka, Serbia):** participants from the *Children's and Youth Jury* become more confident expressing their views and often return to the festival in new roles over the years as volunteers, collaborators or cultural professionals.
- **Uhvati Film (Rijeka, Croatia):** participants from the [Tajni Agent 010](#) project move from being represented on screen to actively creating their own work, gaining confidence, communication skills and a sense of being a full member of the community.
- **Jednaki u kulturi — Tjedan inkluzije na Ribnjaku (Zagreb, Croatia):** reports a sense of autonomy and the ability to make their own decisions, even in small matters. The return of minimal freedom (choosing a colour, material or activity schedule) helps the person feel valuable and competent.

Reduced stigma and stronger dialogue

Several initiatives report that artistic participation creates opportunities for conversations that might otherwise be difficult to initiate.

- **Mentalfest (Rijeka, Croatia):** *Living Library* readers reported gaining a deeper understanding of mental health and challenging their own assumptions; one reader told a participant, “You have just saved my life,” which the respondent interpreted as illustrating the practice’s capacity to reach people who may not yet be ready to seek support themselves. It is also mentioned that both institutional/public stigma and participants’ own self-stigma decreased visibly over more than ten years of consistent practice.
- **Uhvati Film (Rijeka, Croatia):** observed that humour and fiction can open conversations about disability more naturally than formal discussions, helping audiences engage with more complex and diverse experiences.

Reduced isolation and intergenerational connection

A recurring outcome across different festivals is the creation of meaningful connections between people who might not otherwise meet.

- **Festival World Literatures – Fabula (Ljubljana, Slovenia):** they learned that intergenerational formats are particularly impactful. Activities such as reading hours with elderly participants not only reduce feelings of isolation, but also create valuable moments of exchange, where different life experiences meet through literature. They also noticed that participants respond strongly when they feel their perspectives are heard and when literature is connected to their everyday realities.



Festival Fabula © Festival Fabula

- **International Shakespeare Festival in Gdańsk (Gdańsk, Poland):** *Festival Breakfasts* dissolved social, generational and language barriers, producing what the respondent calls a “deconstruction of hierarchies” among international artists, staff, volunteers and local residents.
- **Göteborg International Organ Festival (Gothenburg, Sweden):** by gathering a diverse audience ranging from international scholars to local residents, the festival creates a sense of “collective effervescence.” The festival reports that this shared experience of live performance mitigates social isolation and strengthens community identity. For participants in workshops and lectures, the festival provides a sense of purpose and intellectual growth, which are key pillars of long-term psychological wellbeing.
- **Perelada Festival – Perelada Campus (Perelada and Barcelona, Spain):** the third edition of *Dit-Dit*, in which 26 people with Alzheimer’s and other dementias participated, showed a slight improvement in the participants’ perceived quality of life and physical balance, also contributing to their emotional wellbeing and socialisation. These are the results of a study conducted, but in addition, the organisers and healthcare professionals observed less tangible benefits such as connection, camaraderie, and a sense of community among the participants: they looked forward to the sessions, encouraged others to join, and noticed when a member was absent. The study was conducted by the team at Ace Alzheimer Center Barcelona.

Wellbeing as an indirect, often spontaneous outcome rather than a stated goal

Not all festivals have wellbeing as an explicit objective in their strategy or mission. Several respondents note that experiences of relaxation, belonging, enjoyment, connection or personal growth often emerge naturally through participation in artistic activity, without being designed as therapeutic interventions or separate programme goals.

- **Croatian-based festival:** observes that wellbeing “does not appear as the primary goal of the audience when coming to a concert,” but develops spontaneously through the shared aesthetic experience — evidence, in the respondent’s words, that art is “an indirect but powerful tool” for wellbeing.
- **Na-Knap Festival (Ljubljana, Slovenia):** similarly frames wellbeing as an integral outcome of artistic participation rather than a separate programme strand.
- **Another Croatian-based festival:** the festival’s long-term presence has also contributed, in the respondent’s view, to broader cultural and social change by increasing the visibility of queer culture within Croatian society, promoting greater acceptance of diversity, and helping to create a more open and inclusive public sphere. These effects support community wellbeing and contribute to a healthier, more equitable cultural landscape.

High demand for restorative, low-stimulation and participatory formats

A number of festivals report particularly strong audience interest in formats that offer opportunities for active participation, reflection, rest or social interaction.

- **Wianki w Krakowie (Krakow, Poland):** reports the [*Garden of Respite Experiment*](#) was “a huge success”; visitors of all generations were, in the respondent’s words, “craving for connection with nature,” with some visitors even falling asleep during the amplifier-free concerts.
- **International Shakespeare Festival in Gdańsk (Gdańsk, Poland):** observed “overwhelmingly high turnout and enthusiasm” for all of its wellbeing-focused accompanying events, evidence of “massive, growing demand for cultural spaces that also offer a mental and emotional recharge.”
- **Music Biennale Zagreb (Zagreb, Croatia):** the first edition of [*MBZ PLAY*](#) confirmed strong appetite for hands-on, playful formats among children and families, and produced an unexpected finding: demand for equivalent participatory activities also came from adult audiences, suggesting the desire for active engagement with contemporary music is not limited to younger age groups.
- **Na-Knap Festival (Ljubljana, Slovenia):** learned that people respond positively to embodied and shared experiences, regardless of their previous knowledge of dance. Participatory and interdisciplinary formats attracted diverse audiences and created spaces for dialogue, reflection, creativity, and social interaction.

The value of process over final product

Several respondents emphasise that the most significant outcomes often appear during the creative process itself rather than coming out of the final result.

- **Jednaki u kulturi – Tjedan inkluzije na Ribnjaku (Zagreb, Croatia):** its art-therapy framework states explicitly that “the most important thing is not what is created at the end, but what happens along the way.”
- **Uhvati Film (Rijeka, Croatia):** makes the same point about its inclusive film **production process:** trust, confidence and communication built during the process matter as much as the final film.

One of the strongest messages emerging from these examples is that some of the most significant outcomes are often the most difficult to measure or to predict. Confidence, trust, belonging, dialogue and personal growth are frequently described as developing gradually through participation, relationships and shared experiences over time.



Le Petit Festival © Z.Tutnjjevic

7 • The Role of the Festival

This final chapter addresses a recurring question raised independently by respondents working across different countries, disciplines, and organisational contexts: what is the role, and where are the boundaries, of festivals in relation to health, wellbeing, and care?

Throughout the catalogue, respondents describe positive outcomes associated with artistic participation, including confidence, belonging, social connection, accessibility, and inclusion. At the same time, several festivals express uncertainty about how far their role should extend. Their reflections converge around a common question: how can festivals contribute meaningfully to wellbeing without becoming substitutes for therapy, healthcare, education, or social services?

These responses do not reject the relationship between arts and wellbeing. On the contrary, many of the practices described throughout the catalogue demonstrate a strong commitment to accessibility, inclusion, participation, community engagement, and collaboration with health and social-care sectors. At the same time, respondents repeatedly emphasise the importance of retaining the artistic nature of festival practice. They ask how festivals can support wellbeing while preserving artistic autonomy, avoiding therapeutic claims, and maintaining space for experimentation, challenge, and critical reflection.

This tension is already explored by Elena Polivtseva in [*Festivals in Context: The Role of the Arts in Local Cultural Policy*](#) in particular in the chapter of ‘Festivals as catalysts of wellbeing’. Elena Polivtseva argues that festivals increasingly operate in a context where culture is expected to contribute to health, social cohesion, inclusion and other public-policy goals, while simultaneously facing pressures linked to funding, sustainability and the instrumentalisation of culture. For this reason, her research suggests understanding festivals as spaces that can create the conditions for encounter, participation, dialogue, meaning making and belonging, while working alongside, rather than replacing, health and welfare systems. The survey responses collected for this catalogue resonate strongly with this perspective. Many festivals describe their role not as delivering care directly but as creating opportunities: opportunities for people to meet, participate, express themselves, feel recognised, challenge stigma, build confidence, share experiences or engage with difficult social issues through artistic practice.

- **Music Biennale Zagreb (Zagreb, Croatia):** is the most explicit: “MBZ is not a school, educational institution or health service provider.” It frames its own role as a catalyst — initiating collaborations, testing new models, bringing visibility to a field — rather than a provider of ongoing education or care, and identifies the handover of continuity to appropriately resourced partners as the open, unresolved part of that role.
- **Uhvati Film (Rijeka, Croatia):** names the same boundary from the inclusion side: how to speak about the wellbeing effects of its work “without reducing artistic and inclusive work to therapy or social service.” The festival recognises that confidence, belonging and visibility may emerge from participation, but stresses the importance of preserving the “artistic, playful and sometimes critical nature of the work.”

- **International Theatre Festival Kontakt (Toruń, Poland) and Greenhouse Film Festival (Toruń, Poland):** the former formulates the dilemma through the relationship between audience care and the artistic role of theatre. The respondent notes that “theatre is not necessarily a safe space” and reflects on the tension between safeguarding audiences’ wellbeing and autonomy, and preserving the transgressive, unsettling or transformative potential of art. The festival’s open question is how to find a middle ground: caring for audiences without neutralising the artistic force of theatre. Similarly, Greenhouse Film Festival faces the ongoing question of “where to draw the line so that safeguarding sensory and mental wellbeing does not accidentally lead to self-censorship among the young filmmakers”.
- **Ogni Altro Suono (Castrignano dei Greci, Italy):** describes the dilemma as one of “authenticity versus instrumentalisation”. The respondent identifies a tension between using art as a tool for social and community wellbeing and maintaining the artistic integrity and experimental ambition that make the festival distinctive. The central question is when community engagement enriches the artistic process, and when it risks constraining it.
- **Borås International Poetry Festival (Borås, Sweden):** reflects on the balance between artistic freedom and social responsibility. As festivals increasingly engage with wellbeing, inclusion and social issues, the respondent asks how they can respond sensitively to community needs and vulnerabilities while still preserving artistic independence. Here, the role of the festival is understood as socially aware, while not being subordinated to social or instrumental aims.
- **Festival FONS (Ljubljana, Slovenia):** poses the question at the level of principle: how can a festival contribute to wellbeing “while preserving artistic autonomy and avoiding simplified impact narratives”? The festival reflects on the challenge of addressing questions of health and wellbeing through artistic practice without reducing art to an instrumental or therapeutic function. It also identifies the difficulty of creating meaningful participation and accessibility without over-structuring the artistic experience. As an organisation whose primary remit remains artistic and cultural, Festival FONS further questions how festivals can meaningfully engage with wellbeing while remaining within the competencies, responsibilities and resources of a cultural organisation.

These examples do not produce a single answer to the question of what the role of a festival should be. Instead, they emphasise an ongoing reflection within the sector itself about how festivals can contribute to wellbeing while remaining rooted in their artistic, cultural and community-based missions.

Conclusion

This catalogue shows that festivals across Europe are already engaging with health and wellbeing in many different ways: through artistic programming, participation, accessibility, community engagement, partnerships, and organisational practices of care. The examples contributed by festivals, cities, and regions reflect a wide range of artistic disciplines and local contexts, while also revealing a number of common concerns and needs.

One of the clearest findings is that wellbeing is not always approached as a separate programme strand or an explicit therapeutic objective. In many cases, respondents describe it as something that emerges through artistic participation itself: through opportunities for expression, encounter, dialogue, reflection, social connection, and belonging. This suggests that the relationship between arts and wellbeing cannot be understood solely through dedicated health interventions; it is also connected to the conditions in which artistic experiences are created and shared.

The catalogue also highlights the importance of relationships. Many of the practices described depend on collaboration between festivals, local and regional authorities, health and social-care organisations, universities, community organisations, and other partners. Such cross-sectoral relationships can provide expertise, access, resources, and continuity that festivals may not be able to sustain alone.

At the same time, respondents identify recurring challenges. These include short-term funding, limited policy recognition, insufficient organisational capacity, the need for training and peer exchange, and the difficulty of evaluating forms of change that are gradual, relational, and not easily captured through conventional indicators. Several respondents also emphasise that care must extend beyond audiences and participants to include artists, staff, volunteers, and festival workers.

A further question concerns the limits of the festival's role. Festivals can create conditions for encounter, participation, expression, and connection, but they are not substitutes for healthcare, therapy, education, or social services. The examples collected here repeatedly point to the need to preserve artistic autonomy while developing responsible approaches to access, care, and wellbeing. This means recognising the contribution that festivals can make without reducing artistic practice to an instrument for achieving predetermined social or health outcomes.

The catalogue therefore does not propose a single model for how festivals should engage with health and wellbeing. Instead, it presents an evolving landscape of practices, partnerships, questions, and experiments. We hope it can serve as a starting point for further dialogue, research, policy development, peer learning, and cross-sectoral cooperation, while recognising the diversity of approaches already emerging across Europe.

A reflection shared by Mahir Namur during the Festivals Care! process captures one of the ideas running through many of these contributions: "Art festivals amplify this experience. They create temporary ecosystems where artists, audiences, ideas, and emotions come together. In these shared spaces, people experience a collective sense of belonging and connection." Many of the practices described in this catalogue can be understood as different ways of creating and sustaining such spaces of connection.

Methodological remarks

This catalogue was created based on the answers to two complementary surveys that explored the relationship between festivals, health and wellbeing: a survey for festivals and a survey for cities and regions. The two surveys were designed for different target groups, and therefore reflect different perspectives and levels of responsibility. Festival responses tended to focus on initiatives, practical experiences, experiments, challenges and organisational realities from working with artists, other sectors (in particular the health sector) and local communities. City and regional responses described policy frameworks, funding mechanisms, strategic priorities and institutional initiatives. These two perspectives should be understood as complementary. In some cases, festivals and cities describe the same local context from different viewpoints, providing a richer understanding of how policy ambitions, funding structures and artistic practice interact. For this reason, examples included in the catalogue should be read as individual perspectives of practice and experience rather than as evaluations of local cultural ecosystems as a whole.

The catalogue is based on voluntary survey responses and reflects the experiences, priorities and interpretations of those festivals, cities and regions that chose to participate. It does not aim to provide a comprehensive mapping of all arts-and-wellbeing practices in the festival landscape of Europe and should therefore not be considered representative of entire cities, regions, countries, disciplines or policy environments.

The diversity of contributors is one of the strengths of the catalogue, bringing together festivals of different sizes, artistic disciplines, governance models and geographical contexts. At the same time, participation across countries and sectors was uneven. Some countries are represented primarily through festival responses, while others are represented through municipal or regional perspectives. Similarly, some artistic disciplines and wellbeing approaches are more visible than others due to the composition of the responses received.

The examples should not be understood as exhaustive evidence, but as a collection of practices, reflections and experiences that illustrate how different actors across Europe are currently engaging with questions of arts, culture, health and wellbeing.

The examples have been presented as much as possible using respondents' own descriptions and terminology. The catalogue aims to remain close to the original responses while organising them into broader thematic categories to facilitate comparison and learning across contexts. The thematic structure should be understood as just one analytical framework selected for the purpose of this publication rather than as a strict classification of practices, many of which could also fit into more than one category.

Our objective with this catalogue was to document the diversity of existing practices, identify recurring themes and challenges, and contribute to an ongoing dialogue between festivals, policymakers, researchers and practitioners working in this evolving field.

Acknowledgments

The European Festivals Association (EFA) has been exploring the relationship between arts, health and wellbeing for several years through conversations with festivals across its network. The first important step in this journey was [The Time We Spend Together](#), a pilot workshop and retreat organised in 2023 at the Varna Summer International Music Festival, which created a space for festival professionals to slow down, reflect and reconnect with their personal and professional motivations. This was followed by further exchanges, workshops, retreats and reflections, and strengthened in 2024 with EFA's participation in the [CARE-Culture for Mental Health](#) project supported by the Creative Europe programme of the European Commission and carried out by an international consortium led by the Cluj Cultural Centre and joined by seven partners across Europe. This Catalogue is part of the CARE project.

EFA would particularly like to thank the members of the [Festivals Care! Working Group](#), a peer-learning space created within EFA (also part of the CARE project) to exchange experiences, questions and challenges around care, accessibility, inclusion and collaboration with the health sector. The idea for this catalogue emerged directly from the group's discussions and collective wish to learn from one another and offer a conversation starter for the EFA community and the wider sector. We are particularly grateful to [Mirna Gott](#), whose dedication and commitment have been key in writing and shaping this catalogue, as well as to [Ana Benavides Otero](#), coordinator of the arts and wellbeing trajectory in EFA. We also thank [Davinia Galea](#) for her valuable support in proofreading this publication.

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The cities and regions part of the [EFFE Seal for Festival Cities and Regions](#), an initiative by the European Festivals Association, have also been important partners in this process.

Finally, this catalogue would not have been possible without the generosity, openness and commitment of the festivals, cities and regions that contributed their experiences, reflections, practices, policies and challenges. We sincerely thank all respondents for sharing their work and helping to build a collective resource on the relationship between arts, culture and wellbeing. A full list of participating festivals, cities and regions that agreed to be publicly acknowledged is included below.

Festivals:

- [Autori in città](#) (Padua, Italy)
- [Body & Soul Festival](#) (Leuven, Belgium)
- [Borås International Poetry Festival](#) (Borås, Sweden)
- [Bydgoszcz Opera Festival](#) (Bydgoszcz, Poland)
- [Cro Art & Culture Festival](#) (Cres, Croatia)
- [CULMEA: Film and Environmental Education](#) (Braşov, Romania)
- [Dance Week Festival](#) (Zagreb, Croatia)
- [Enjoy Jazz Festival](#) (Heidelberg, Germany)
- [FAB – Festival international des Arts de Bordeaux métropole](#) (Bordeaux, France)

- [Festival FONS](#) (Ljubljana, Slovenia)
- [Festival of Ecological Theatre for Children and Youth – FEP](#) (Bačka Palanka, Serbia)
- [Festival World Literatures – Fabula](#) (Ljubljana, Slovenia)
- [Festival Perelada – Campus Perelada](#) (Perelada and Barcelona, Spain)
- [Greenhouse Film Festival](#) (Toruń, Poland)
- [Göteborg International Organ Festival](#) (Gothenburg, Sweden)
- [International Shakespeare Festival in Gdańsk](#) (Gdańsk, Poland)
- [International Theatre Festival Kontakt](#) (Toruń, Poland)
- [Jednaki u kulturi – Tjedan inkluzije na Ribnjaku](#) (Zagreb, Croatia)
- [Konstnatten Falbygden](#) (Falköping, Sweden)
- [Kulturnatta & Sommarunderhållningen](#) (Gothenburg, Sweden)
- [Le Petit Festival](#) (Dubrovnik, Croatia)
- [Mentalfest](#) (Rijeka, Croatia)
- [Music & More SummerFest](#) (Trebinje, Bosnia and Herzegovina)
- [Music Biennale Zagreb](#) (Zagreb, Croatia)
- [Na-Knap Festival](#) (Ljubljana, Slovenia)
- [Noorderzon Festival](#) (Groningen, the Netherlands)
- [Ogni Altro Suono](#) (Castrignano dei Greci, Italy)
- [Prapremiery Festival](#) (Bydgoszcz, Poland)
- [Ravenna Festival](#) (Ravenna, Italy)
- [Sacrum Profanum Festival](#) (Krakow, Poland)
- [The Night With...](#) (Glasgow, UK)
- [Uhvati Film](#) (Rijeka, Croatia)
- [Way Out West](#) (Gothenburg, Sweden)
- [Wianki w Krakowie](#) (Krakow, Poland)
- [Wonderfeel](#) (Baarn, the Netherlands)
- [Zmaj Children's Games](#) (Novi Sad, Serbia)

Cities and Regions

- Bergen (Norway)
- Ghent (Belgium)
- Leicester (UK)
- Leuven (Belgium)
- Ljubljana (Slovenia)
- Muğla (Türkiye)
- Munich (Germany)
- Region Västra Götaland (Sweden)
- Rotterdam (the Netherlands)
- Tampere (Finland)
- Varese, Lombardy (Italy)
- Valletta (Malta)
- Victoria, Gozo (Malta)

Further resources

The following resources provide links to platforms, programmes, working groups on the topic, for all interested parties to have easy access to, including some research on the topic of measuring the impact of art and culture on health and wellbeing.

Taikusydän – Arts & Health Coordination Centre in Finland. (n.d.). *Practical instructions for cultural wellbeing professionals*. <https://taikusydan.turkuamk.fi/yleinen/kaytannon-ohjeita-kulttuurihyvinvoinnin-ammattilaiselle/>

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Warran, K., Burton, A., & Fancourt, D. (n.d.). *Worksheet to identify the active ingredients of arts-for-health activities: Active Ingredients Worksheet*. UCL. Worksheet: <https://osf.io/cgdtx>; example: <https://osf.io/mt2kq>

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