



Arts Festivals Summit 2025 Edinburgh

Report: Festivals Care! Arts and Health workshop

29 April 2025, 10.30 AM - 12.30 PM, Edinburgh

Facilitated by: Rarița Zbranca, Cultural Centre Cluj and expert in the field of arts and health

Contributors: Katey Warran, Researcher at the University of Edinburgh; Volker Doberstein, Enjoy Jazz; Caroline Donald, Edinburgh International Festival; Dr Len McCaffer Tonic Arts, NHS Lothian Charity

Location: Quacker Meeting House

Snapshot of the main conclusions

In this workshop, participants came together to reflect on the growing intersection between the arts, health, and well-being. A shared desire emerged to forge stronger ties with the health sector—through models such as "arts on prescription"—and to consider care not only for audiences, but also for those working behind the scenes at festivals.

There was widespread recognition of the value of simply creating space for open dialogue. Participants appreciated the opportunity to connect, share experiences, and spark new collaborations. Inviting healthcare professionals into these conversations was seen as an important next step towards meaningful cross-sector partnerships.

The group called for a dedicated strand within future summits to focus specifically on arts and well-being, and expressed a need to broaden perspectives by showcasing work from non-Western contexts. Questions of inclusion and accessibility also took centre stage: how to reach groups or people often underrepresented in festival audiences and how to bring art beyond traditional venues and into communities.

Other key ideas included learning from existing models of care at other festivals. There was also a strong call for longer-term projects that could establish deeper, more sustained relationships across disciplines, and for further research to better understand the complex impact of festivals on health and well-being. Overall, the workshop affirmed a collective commitment to embedding care more fully into the cultural landscape.

Introduction

The workshop opened with a welcome by Ana Benavides Otero from the EFA team and an introduction by Rarița Zbranca, Programme Director of Cluj Cultural Centre, who was in charge of its facilitation. The agenda included a presentations part beginning with research insights from Katey Warren followed by two festival case studies, and moving into a more interactive part of discussions in small groups for participants to exchange experiences.

Rarița introduced this session as part of the project [CARE – Culture for Mental Health](#), funded by Creative Europe, which aims to harness the potential of arts and cultural experiences to improve mental health and well-being for youth, working-age individuals, and people with disabilities. By bringing together stakeholders from culture, health, education, and business, the initiative develops innovative strategies that provide both personal and systemic solutions.

CARE builds directly on the [CultureForHealth project](#), a Preparatory Action initiated by the European Parliament and Commission to explore whether arts and health should become a focus of EU policy. That project, involving many of the partners from the current CARE project produced [a major report](#) in collaboration with the World Health Organisation, offering scientific evidence and policy recommendations on the impact of the arts on health and well-being.

The facilitator emphasised that while the arts-and-health conversation may seem new, the connection is ancient—embedded in traditions like lullabies, rituals, and healing practices. Today’s work builds on that legacy, using evidence and collaboration to better support both audiences and artists.

First part: Presentations

Arts and Health: The relevance for festivals – Presentation by Katey Warran

Katey Warran, a researcher based at the University of Edinburgh and University College London (UCL), opened her presentation by offering a wide-ranging overview of the growing field of arts and health. Drawing on work from both institutions, she guided the audience through the evolving understanding of how engagement with the arts—both in everyday life and within specific events such as festivals—can positively influence health and well-being.

She began by referencing a landmark 2019 report by the World Health Organisation (authored in collaboration with UCL colleagues), which outlined how the arts can act as complex, multifaceted interventions. This report introduced a logic model that explained how artistic engagement activates various “active ingredients”—from imagination and emotional expression to social interaction and cognitive stimulation. These, in turn, can affect health through psychological, physiological, social, and behavioural pathways. For example, participating in the arts can help build self-efficacy, improve immune function, encourage healthy behaviours, and promote social support networks. While Katey acknowledged the limitations of applying such a structured model to something as nuanced as human experience, she emphasised its usefulness in conceptualising how art might contribute to both the prevention and management of various health conditions.

Katey then shifted focus to longer-term effects, exploring how the arts play a role across the life course. At UCL, researchers have been analysing large-scale longitudinal cohort data—tracking over

320,000 people globally—to investigate how arts engagement at different life stages correlates with health outcomes. This work revealed striking patterns: artistic involvement in childhood was associated with improved social development and fewer risky behaviours, while in adulthood and older age it was linked with greater life satisfaction, a reduced risk of depression, and even protection against conditions such as cognitive decline. These findings underscore the idea that art isn't merely a "nice to have"—it is a public health asset with long-reaching implications.

From there, Katey moved into a deeper exploration of how these impacts occur. She explained that the arts should be viewed not as direct treatments, like medication, but as complex interventions—dynamic experiences shaped by social, cultural, and environmental factors. Festivals, in particular, exemplify this complexity. They are inherently fluid, situated in diverse social contexts, and composed of countless interacting elements. To better understand these dynamics, Katey introduced the multi-level leisure mechanisms model, which expands on the WHO logic model by showing how change occurs across multiple levels: the individual (micro), the group (meso), and broader society (macro). Engagement in festivals, for example, can build personal social networks (micro), reinforce group identity (meso), and promote broader social inclusion and cultural connection (macro).

A key theme throughout the presentation was the role of social mechanisms—those moments of human connection that occur within and around arts activities.

Turning theory into practice, Katey shared two recent case studies.

Healing Arts Scotland (HASS)

The first was Healing Arts Scotland—a nationwide festival initiative produced by Scottish Ballet in partnership with the WHO, New York University, and the University of Edinburgh. With over 11,000 attendees and 376 events, it aimed to integrate arts and health within communities across the country. Katey led the evaluation, which included surveys, interviews, and focus groups. While the sample size was relatively modest, the findings were revealing over 80% of respondents reported a positive impact on their well-being, and 85% felt the festival facilitated valuable networking opportunities. Perhaps even more compelling than the statistics were the personal reflections. Attendees described feeling inspired, supported, and connected. One participant simply wrote, "This is my tribe," capturing the deep sense of belonging and solidarity that the festival fostered.

The Edinburgh Festival Fringe

The second example came from Katey's own doctoral research on the Edinburgh Festival Fringe, the world's largest arts festival. Her longitudinal ethnographic study followed nine production companies and nine community groups through one full Fringe season. She explored two core questions: What makes the Fringe a meaningful experience? And how does it provide opportunities for social solidarity?

Her findings emphasised the emotional intensity of the Fringe—how participants bond through shared challenges, vulnerability, and mutual trust. People spoke of feeling "in it together," navigating stress, exhaustion, and limited resources, while also experiencing moments of joy, excitement, and transformation. These shared experiences led to what Katey described as "collective effervescence"—a term from the sociologist Émile Durkheim to describe the emotional energy that arises when people gather around shared beliefs and values. At the Fringe, this often took the form of a collective belief in the transformative power of the arts.

Although this research did not directly assess health outcomes, Katey pointed to overlapping theories—such as the “social cure” approach—which combine social identity and self-categorisation theory. These theories suggest that identifying with a group can enhance personal well-being. In this light, arts festivals may act as indirect yet powerful public health interventions, by nurturing meaningful group identities and shared emotional experiences.

She concluded with a call for more research in this area. Despite growing interest, there is still a significant gap in understanding how festivals and large-scale arts events contribute to public health. Katey’s hypothesis is clear: festivals offer spaces for social cohesion and community building, and through those social pathways, they may have significant effects on well-being.

She ended her talk with a few open questions for reflection: How can festival organisers design experiences that actively support well-being? What role do access, inclusion, and diversity play in shaping these impacts? And how can we evaluate these effects without reducing the arts to simplistic metrics?

1. Festival Case Study: Festival Fridays by Edinburgh International Festival & Tonic Arts

Dr Len Caffer, Arts Programme Manager at NHS Lothian Charity, shared how Tonic Arts brings arts and culture into healthcare settings across 36 NHS sites in Scotland. With a background in theatre and a strong belief in the UNESCO-declared human right to access culture, Len stressed that recovery and well-being cannot be supported in clinical isolation. Creative expression and a sense of community are essential. Tonic Arts manages a 2,500-piece art collection, commissions public artworks, curates exhibitions, and delivers a wide range of participatory arts activities, including workshops, live music, photography, and filmmaking—always shaped in response to local needs.

Caroline from the Edinburgh International Festival (EIF) then described how the Festival has deepened its partnership with NHS Lothian. Moving beyond one-off performances, EIF introduced a residency model—notably with the London Symphony Orchestra—allowing artists to spend more time engaging with communities. From this, the “Festival Fridays” initiative was born: monthly, high-quality live performances delivered in hospitals, ensuring that world-class cultural experiences reach people unable to attend events in the city centre.

Based on ongoing feedback, the initiative evolved into the more adaptable “Festival Sessions,” allowing greater flexibility in scheduling. In 2024 alone, 98% of participants said the sessions had a positive impact on their health and well-being. The programme has reached patients, staff, families, and visitors alike—offering not just entertainment, but emotional connection, moments of calm, and a stronger sense of shared humanity within clinical spaces. By bringing the arts to people, the Festival becomes part of their everyday environment—helping them see it not as something distant or exclusive, but something that belongs to everyone.

2. Festival Case Study: Enjoy Jazz Festival by Volker Doberstein

Volker, Artistic Project Developer of the Enjoy Jazz Festival in Germany, introduced the topic by linking health and well-being to the third UN Sustainable Development Goal, emphasising that it stands alone while connecting to all other SDGs.

He pointed out that festivals are not medical facilities, yet they have a role to play because health and well-being are also social and cultural issues. He cited the 2023 Democracy Index from *The Economist*, which reported only 7.8% of the global population living in full democracies, while 39.4%

lived under dictatorships. He posed the question: if health and well-being are social concerns in a time of multiple crises, who is responsible for healing?

He referenced the German Music Council, which recently called on the federal government to develop a national strategy for culture and health together with civil society. He then turned to the festival's practical measures.

In 2024, the Enjoy Jazz Festival adopted "Healing" as its theme—not with a medical focus, but in response to a complex, multi-crisis global situation. The programme included concerts, workshops, and participatory formats, alongside long-term projects with regional schools.

Volker said that 2024 was the most successful festival edition to date, with no negative feedback about the theme. The main challenge was to live the motto throughout the whole festival edition without forcing it into every event.

The festival introduced a unique form of Well-being Concert developed by Carnegie Hall's Education Department, with guidance from NYU professor Nisha Sajjani. This ritualised yet open format allowed the audience to experience the music freely—sitting, lying down, or even sleeping—while a host offered spoken reflections. The festival was the first outside Carnegie Hall officially authorised to present this concept.

Artists focused on healing and justice were featured, including South African pianist and scholar Nduduzo Makhathini, and jazz musician Jowee Omicil, whose album *Spiritual Healing* honours the Haitian Revolution.

A key highlight was Emmanuel Witzthum's overnight multimedia work *Let this Darkness be a bell tower*, held in a former church, inviting attendees into an unbroken healing journey from sunset to sunrise.

The festival's poster was created by MacArthur Fellow Maria Magdalena Campos-Pons, whose art addresses themes like forced migration and ancestral trauma—further anchoring the event in a spirit of reflection and restoration.

Breakout Groups

Group 1

1. Motivations for Engaging in Arts and Health

Participants expressed a range of motivations, from practical to more abstract ones, for working at the intersection of arts and health:

- While not all organisations work explicitly in this space, many recognise that the relationships built—artistically or organisationally—can have a meaningful impact on societal well-being.
- For some, health and well-being are deeply tied to the festival's identity as a community-based event, with programming shaped through ongoing dialogue with the local context.
- Personal experiences with mental health, especially during and after the COVID-19 pandemic, highlighted the importance of using festivals to support young people's well-being.

- Core values such as community, connection, and internationalism were named as foundational. Health and well-being were understood as needs that naturally align with these values, particularly in response to gaps identified by communities themselves.
- Public institutions acknowledged a strong responsibility to improve access to culture, particularly for groups that are often excluded.
- In some cases, this work is shaped by specific national or historical contexts—for example, traditions that link theatre and healing in ancient Greek culture.
- Others spoke of the value in offering alternative models of care, beyond clinical approaches—opening up new spaces, including within medical practice.

2. Challenges and Gaps

A number of challenges were identified:

- Audience imbalance was a recurring issue, with low engagement from boys and young men. This was discussed in relation to broader issues such as masculinity, the influence of figures like Andrew Tate, and societal expectations around merit and success.
- Mental health was flagged as a major concern—not only among audiences, but also among artists and arts workers themselves. Supporting well-being within the team is a growing pressure.
- The gender imbalance in festival audiences (e.g. 75% women, 25% men) was cited as a practical concern that should influence how programmes are designed. How to reach more men to attend?

3. Pressures and Concerns

- While there was no consensus on external pressure to engage in health work, there was an awareness that charities and social services are under increasing strain due to funding cuts. Arts organisations are often expected to step in without formal recognition or support.
- There were concerns around lacking the necessary expertise to engage in health-focused projects, and a lack of shared understanding about how art and health can intersect in different ways.
- Some projects touched indirectly on well-being (e.g. mask-making camps, shared meals), suggesting that not all relevant work needs to be labelled as “health”.
- The need for long-term thinking was highlighted. Healing is not always gentle—it can bring up deep or difficult emotions, and this requires careful support.

4. Priorities for Future Exploration

Participants suggested several directions for future EFA engagement:

- Simply having space to talk—creating a forum to exchange ideas and experiences—was seen as valuable in itself.
- Strong interest in connecting more directly with medicine and healthcare professionals, to establish cross-sector partnerships.
- Exploring models such as “arts on prescription” was proposed as a concrete area for development.

- Recognising the short-term nature of most festivals, participants were keen to learn how to link into broader healing arts movements, and explore how deeper, lasting connections could be fostered.

Group 2

1. Motivations for Engaging in Arts and Health

- Global context: War (in Ukraine).
- To create a sense of connection.
- International work and relations
- Breaking free from the frames
- Access
- Instrumentalisation of arts in western contexts. Having to fit within the boxes of the governments.
- Natural disasters
- Nature and health; creative health, combine everyday things with creativity.
- Being busy, human doings vs human beings
- Festivals as activist spaces for radical being instead of doing
- Bringing the festivals to the audiences
- Dialoguing between what we offer and what is needed.
- Did the festivals replace the carnivals, are festivals more transactional and less relational?
- Well-being in general is also linked to sustainability
- Art for the arts sake vs participation
- Is theatre healthy: triggers, trauma... how do you protect your audience in the theatre experience?
- Healing beyond thinking
- Experiencing a show even sad, can provoke a thinking process, which is healing in a way.

2. Challenges and Gaps

- Many working in the arts, particularly artists and festival organisers, face mental health challenges. Supporting both the artists and the audience requires significant resources, and this put added pressure on the teams managing these events. A critical question is how to take care of those responsible for others' well-being.

3. Priorities for Future Exploration

- Propose creating a focused segment within the Summit dedicated to exploring the intersection of the arts and health, with a particular emphasis on well-being.
- Extend invitations to healthcare professionals to contribute to discussions about the connection between health and creative practices.
- Explore how both audiences and festival staff can be supported, ensuring that everyone involved in the event has their well-being considered.
- Establish a working group to curate a festival/showcase experience centred on care
- Incorporate global perspectives by inviting projects from non-Western countries, offering diverse insights into creative approaches to health and care.

- Attend other festivals that can inspire us and experience different forms of care-work in festivals

Group 3

1. Motivations for Engaging in Arts and Health

- Music events have used sound journeys as immersive well-being experiences.
- Some festivals aim to foster connection through accessibility and symbolic physical presence. Others are produced in partnership with organisations dedicated to promoting well-being.
- Cultural engagement is used as a central theme to encourage participation and reflection.
- Municipal programmes have expanded cultural participation through formats like stand-up comedy, with national reach.
- Youth-focused festivals combine social work, education, and mental health support, creating safe environments for emerging artists.
- Large-scale events and organisations are beginning to consider how health and well-being might be integrated into future programming.
- A project in Portugal involves team members who mediate and engage the audience, initially launched in daycare settings. It has expanded to include a choir, demonstrating that when given the opportunity to participate, individuals often seek further engagement.

2. Challenges and Gaps

- There is a notable tension between the perceived value of the arts and the expectations of funders.
- Advocacy is required to demonstrate cultural rights' impacts due to their intangible nature.
- Scientific research serves as a valuable tool to recognise and acknowledge the significant contributions of cultural initiatives.
- Festivals are under pressure to validate their contributions in terms of health and culture.
- Some cultural organisations are compelled to fill gaps left by government support.
- Audiences increasingly demand a higher degree of empathy and consideration in festival experiences, including aspects like accommodation and food quality.
- A significant challenge in cultural policy is the shift toward prevention and protection, which requires advocacy for government funding for curation.
- While projects impacting health are crucial, they often take a backseat to the festival line-up.

Researcher Pascal Gielen emphasises that cultural activities foster common good and urban intimacy, enhancing a sense of shared values.

3. Priorities for Future Exploration

- Explore cultural prescriptions in Brussels, examining their medical implications and the benefits of field projects.
- Investigate practices that focus on the art of listening with children, aiming to enhance well-being.
- Develop well-being teams within festivals that prioritise team care, facilitate more collaboration, and organise additional meetings for shared learning experiences.

Mentimeter results

What is one idea or insight from your group discussion that you found most valuable?

Interesting specific examples	How can we unite clinicians and festival makers more closely to build collaborative practice?	Special curated day on healing of arts	Such an interesting discussion! Enjoyed taking about listening, resonance and embodiment. How can we connect to arts festivals and health through these concepts?
Connecting arts and health professionals	Healing arts both for audiences as cultural organisations	Be able to bring art to specific audiences that are usually not engaged with arts	How to include audience and having impact on society in its all

What is one idea or insight from your group discussion that you found most valuable?

Pressure on arts organisations to take up the role of health professionals (who lost their funding) without enough expertise	can we do some work around boys and young mens mental health	The dialogue between health care professionals and the arts
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What is your main takeaway from this workshop?

Want to have more	Talk on meta label what is wrong with our so framed art practices	Exchanges with other structures	More long term projects
The importance of having voices from all over the globe represented	There are many ways to promote well being through the arts.	Importance of alliances between the art and the health/wellbeing people	connection with peers is so important

What is your main takeaway from this workshop?

Working in collaborations

Health issues in regions of conflicts and war

How hard it is to find ways of researching and evidencing impact of culture on health & wellbeing which are accessible for general public and really capture something ephemeral

Experiencing the arts is a human right

It is best to find partners who can provide insight and help. One festival maker cannot do everything themselves. Also heard interesting examples.

We should compare our different researches. But also have attention for different perspectives from different countries

Mentimeter

What is one question that you are leaving with?

How to make policy makers understand this

How can we, with our specific programming, contribute to the well being of the community

How can I as a policy maker better support local festivals without putting on too much pressure to lean away from quality programming?

Have more presence in daily life letting being be stronger then doing

How can we find new ways of approaching and analysing arts festivals and health that allow us to delve into the nuances of these experiences?

How cases can inspire festival people changing their own ways of working

How can we work as Festivals to recognise the intrinsic work we do which connects to enshrining health and wellbeing - and not silo it as "community engagement" but rather audience experience

How to connect and study more on it, together.

What is one question that you are leaving with?

Is there an overarching organisation (in the UK) that can help festivals deliver arts to local centres of people outside of society?

Frame the framer of power structures in art practices

Which arts & health themes should future EFA events explore?

Cultural medical prescription.	Young people's health and wellbeing in context of festivals	Symbolic accessibility	Transformative process, healthier environment,
Gender disparity in audiences and how to program for this	Bringing festivals outside their venues to the communities	Toxic masculinity and artistic practices	Coproduction, policy contexts, different health and wellbeing practices in different cultural contexts

Which arts & health themes should future EFA events explore?

Share projects/experiences to the workshop participants. Spread results of studies that have been or are being done.	boys and young mens mental health	Arts and health within cultural and festival organisations (for the people working there)	Cognitive and neurological sound and music works.
Best practices from all over Europe, from different perspectives	(Male) loneliness epidemic. Disabled artists and supporting them. Increasing participation in marginalised groups or culture-distant groups.		

Credits

This workshop was part of the Arts Festivals Summit 2025 of the European Festivals Association's (EFA) hosted and co-organised with the Edinburgh International Festival, Festivals Edinburgh, and the City of Edinburgh Council. It is part of the Creative Europe-supported project [CARE – Culture for Mental Health](#).