

# Streetwise Community Circus CIC

## Ageility NI Project

### End of Project Evaluation Report

#### February 2024

Dr Nick McCaffery

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## Section 1: Background and delivery of the Ageility NI project in 2023-24

The final year of the Ageility NI project was the first year in which there had been no restrictions in place due to a global pandemic. However, the effects of the previous years of isolation and restrictions continued to have a negative impact on many of the people with whom Streetwise Community Circus worked, and this guided our practice throughout the year.

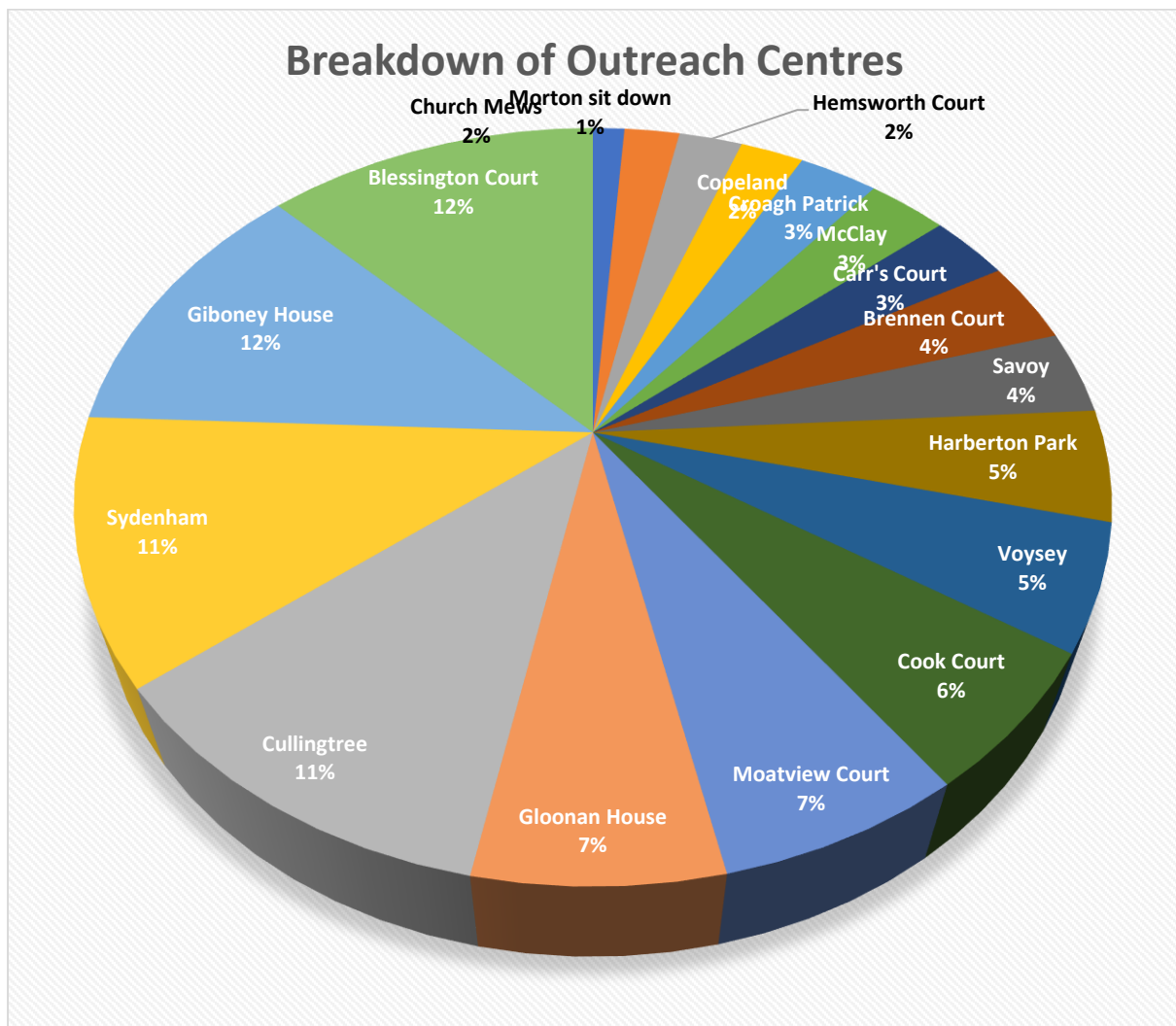
The Ageility NI project continued to provide social circus workshops for older adults across Northern Ireland using a combination of zoom classes, and both 'sit down' circus workshops and 'stand-up' workshops in halls and common rooms. Some of these participants were independent and able to travel to the four core centres of Fermanagh, Whitehead, Millisle and Lislea; but the majority of our participants were based in sheltered accommodation, or care homes, and included those with and without dementias.

While it remains a key priority for Streetwise Community Circus to develop means to enable participation in core centres in key locations across the country, the projects delivered in 2023-24 enabled Streetwise Community Circus to develop stronger working relationships with partner organisations in several outreach locations. This led to a short pilot project in the late Summer funded by the National Lottery's Awards For All investigating both the impact of social circus workshops in sheltered accommodation, and also the potential for increasing attendance at core centres (see Appendix A "summary of findings from the Awards For All Pilot Project")

This last year of the project saw Streetwise Community Circus develop showcase events at each of our four core locations. These were a great success and were enjoyed thoroughly by participants and audiences alike. Streetwise Community Circus believes that the *process* of developing a social circus project is always more important than developing a *product*, but in this case having a showcase event to celebrate the development of our participants' skills was certainly considered to be a good idea. We hope that events like this will become a regular aspect of the communities in these 4 areas, as Streetwise Community Circus continue to find ways to develop circus projects with our partners.

### How the project was delivered from 2023 to 2024.

From January 2023 to March 2024 Streetwise Community Circus planned and delivered over 600 social circus workshops. Approximately  $\frac{1}{4}$  of these were delivered to core centres with the remaining  $\frac{3}{4}$  delivered to our outreach partners. Of these outreach workshops 27% were conducted via zoom. These zoom workshops fell into 2 categories – developing skills for independent older people, or hosting warm-up sessions for several care homes at once. The latter category was developed by Streetwise Community Circus tutor Paul Taylor who worked with staff at each of these locations to encourage participation among the residents. The 337 face to face workshops delivered to Outreach Partners is broken down below:



Location	Partner	Category	Number of workshops
Zoom workshops	Independent/sheltered and care homes	n/a	123
Fermanagh	Independent	n/a	35
Millisle	Independent	n/a	40
Lislea	Independent	n/a	42
Whitehead	Independent	n/a	44
Sydenham court, Belfast	Clanmil/Belfast HSC Trust	Supported Housing (dementia)	38
The Savoy, Bangor	Clanmil	Retirement housing (supported)	12
McClay Fold, Bangor	Radius	Accommodation for over 55s (Supported)	10
Voysey, Belfast	Abbeyfield	Sheltered housing (older people)	18
Gloonan house, Ahoghill	Clanmil	Retirement housing (supported)	22
Croagh Patrick, Donaghadee	Beaumont Care Homes Ltd	Nursing home	10
Harberton Park, Belfast	Abbeyfield	Sheltered housing (older people)	16
Copelands, Millisle	Belfast City Mission	Care home (incl. Dementia)	8
Cook Court, Newtownards	Clanmil	Retirement housing (supported)	20
Morton (Sit Down) Belfast			4
Hemsworth Court, Belfast	Radius/Belfast HSC Trust	Accommodation for over 55s (Supported)	8
Giboney House, Belfast	Clanmil	Housing with care	40
Brennen Court, Magherafelt	Clanmil	Housing with Care	12
Moatview Court, Ballymena	Clanmil	Retirement housing (supported)	22
Blessington Court, Belfast	Clanmil	Retirement housing (supported)	42
Cullintree Meadows, Belfast	Clanmil/Belfast HSC Trust	Supported Housing (dementia)	38
Carr's Court, Belfast	Radius	Accommodation for over 55s (Supported)	10
Church Mews, Dungannon	Clanmil	Retirement housing (supported)	7

## **Section 2: A Summary of the 4 years of the Ageility NI Project 2020 -2024**

### *Year 1 2020*

Streetwise Community Circus Began to deliver the first stage of circus workshops at core centres and some outreach locations in February and March of 2020, with some initial positive responses. However, by the end of March 2020 it became clear that the project would need to be completely reconfigured in order to comply with the subsequent series of lockdowns and social restrictions due to the global Covid pandemic.

- As the first lockdown began in March, Streetwise Community Circus established a weekly Zoom coaching team that enabled the Fermanagh group to continue meeting remotely to practice their circus skills.
- Streetwise Community Circus began to produce and publish short informal tutorial videos by tutors which were distributed on social media. These videos were later referred to by one group in Lislea as a reason why the group have become regular participants of Streetwise Community Circus workshops.
- In August and September Streetwise Community Circus provided 11 circus shows by Streetwise Community Circus tutors for sheltered accommodation. Although these were funded through other sources (Arts Council of Northern Ireland's "Arts and Older People's Programme"), the shows introduced the idea of circus, and established a real demand for workshops for people suffering from isolation. All of these centres began plans to be part of the Autumn programme funded by P&C. However, by September all communal rooms in these centres were closed and the workshops had to be cancelled.
- Streetwise Community Circus used the staff contracted for this work to film training videos to be used in sheltered accommodation centres. P&C agreed an additional £4,000 to buy 200 individual circus kits (balls, scarves, a spinning plate and a flowerstick) so that participants could have their own equipment to avoid contamination. These were delivered to centres in September, then collected again following closure of communal areas.
- Social distanced face-to-face workshops were offered in November in Belfast, Millisle and Whitehead (according to advice from government regarding restrictions for gathering indoors)
- Zoom sessions were provided to individuals and groups across the country – e.g. Belfast, Fermanagh and Omagh, Whitehead, Lislea, and Enniskillen. These zoom sessions ranged from physical warm up sessions, beginner juggling, flowerstick, advanced juggling and general circus skills.

The flexibility of Streetwise Community Circus to develop innovative methods of teaching was the key to the project's success in its first year, and indeed the development of online teaching became an invaluable aspect of Streetwise Community Circus's approach to working even beyond the lifting of restrictions in subsequent years.

Despite the complications of the Covid 19 Pandemic which began this year, the potential for maximising the benefits that were at the core of this social circus project was noted by Streetwise

Community Circus staff, partner organisations and of course the people who took part in the workshops.

## Year 2 2021

The Second year of the project took place in the context of continuing social restrictions for Northern Ireland as the Delta and Omicron variants of the Covid19 Virus arrived. Additional complications to the original delivery plans for the project lay in the loss or change of staff amongst several partner organisations, essentially leading to the administrator having to start from scratch in many areas.

One of the key factors that shaped Streetwise Community Circus's approach to the project this year was an awareness of the very difficult challenges faced by older people living in sheltered accommodation in Northern Ireland.

In the first year of this project, Streetwise Community Circus had been in touch with staff at sheltered accommodation and dementia units in Northern Ireland in order to offer their residents access to the project. Whilst enthusiasm for participation was high, the practicalities of accessing communal areas - particularly in sheltered accommodation units - were too difficult to overcome. This was an impact on older people that was a direct result of the pandemic, and as such Streetwise Community Circus had to adapt their approach accordingly.

Rather than deferring the project in this first year, Streetwise Community Circus offered some centres outdoor shows from Streetwise Community Circus artists and tutors, which enabled residents to meet outside and experience some aspects of circus skills. In addition, Streetwise Community Circus also created a lending library of circus equipment in conjunction with a series of instructional videos for how to use them.

In the summer of 2021, indoor communal areas finally opened up again, and residents were allowed to meet indoors and participate in joint activities.

Working in conjunction with partner staff, Streetwise Community Circus rolled out an extensive series of socially distanced, face-to-face workshops for people in this situation in residential homes across a broad geographical area. In July and August, Streetwise Community Circus tutors delivered 128 workshops (of which only 13 were conducted via Zoom) in 20 locations.

Feedback from tutors this year began to articulate some of the impacts (both positive and negative) of having to adapt teaching methods to new ways of delivering social circus workshops. For example, tutors found it difficult at first to transition from face to face workshops where you were able to be in close physical proximity to a participant, to a form of teaching where actions and advice were almost all described verbally:

- *Teaching through zoom was hard, so not being able to guide them through a trick in person. Some people can't quite understand when its being explained through screen*
- *The only difficulties/differences I have come across have been the socially distance regulations due to the Covid. You can't be as hands on as in past workshops when showing different techniques with certain props*
- *With social distancing it is harder to fix smaller problems and takes longer to teach certain things as we can't be as hands on as we used to be.*

For something as physical as circus, having to rely less on physicality and more on verbal explanation was a learning curve that took a little time to get used to.

Throughout this year and in subsequent years the majority of workshops were delivered by single tutors in each location, rather than by a team of 2 or 3 tutors. This had enormous benefits to the

project as it enabled Streetwise Community Circus to deliver far more workshops in more locations than had been previously thought. However, with this shift to solo teaching Streetwise Community Circus tutors lost an important opportunity for peer skills sharing and support.

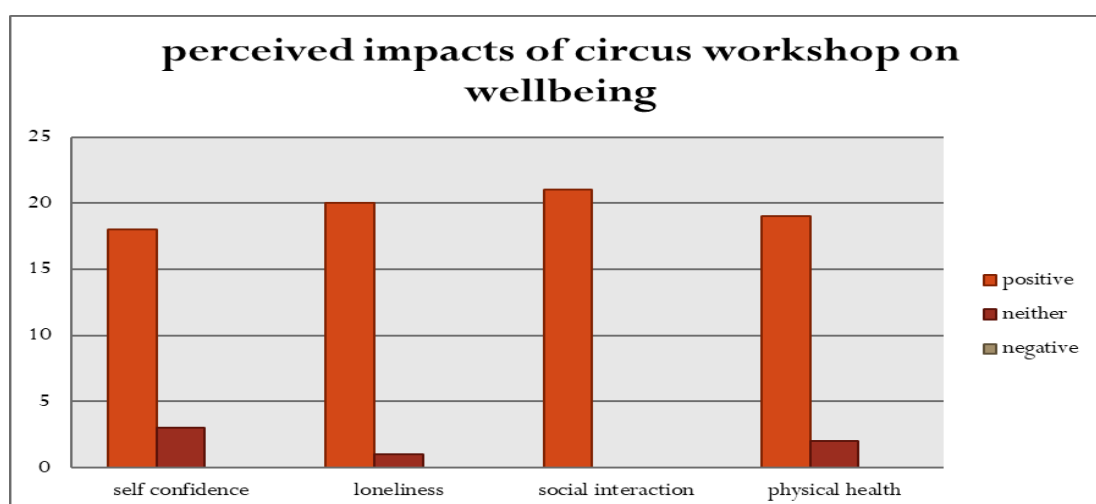
- *Actually working alone can be difficult, or teeth pulling. But also working alone can be liberating.*
- *As there is only one tutor on each project I found it difficult to make sure everyone has enough help and support.*
- *If someone is more advanced or less advanced than the rest of the group or. It becomes apparent very quickly. It would be much easier with another tutor.*

This issue was raised again in year 3 and in response Streetwise Community Circus organised a number of ‘tutor training’ days which enabled teaching staff to come together at Morton Community Centre and share pedagogical and skills based knowledge and techniques once again.

Partner staff continued to express support for the project as it developed in its second year, and referred to the benefits to those who took part in the workshops:

- *Tenants enjoyed the interaction hugely and have reported increased movement and dexterity in hands as well as uplifted mood*
- *Enjoyable, energetic, funny, engaging, really kept group going through Covid difficulties*
- *Before meeting there was hope and expectation, with a little worry. Since meeting again, socially distanced but in person, there has been a lessening of the worry and a greater sense of contentment from those involved.*

Gathering feedback from participants themselves highlighted the difficulties faced from an evaluation perspective. One of the aims of evaluating this project was to establish a baseline of several long term participants and assess whether participation in the workshops had a *measurable* impact on areas of wellbeing, such as social isolation or physical health. This proved to be impossible to deliver for a number of reasons, not least of which was the way in which delivery of the project changed radically with the changes to society brought about by Covid19. Whilst some attempt to establish baseline levels of wellbeing were attempted in this year, the diversity and magnitude of





those who took part in the project proved too big a job for just one person! Instead, the evaluation sought to investigate self-perceptions of positive impact on the project:

### Year 3, 2022:

By mid-February of 2022, all Covid restrictions were lifted in Northern Ireland. For Streetwise Community Circus, this meant the return to face-to-face workshops on a much larger scale than we had seen over the previous 2 years. Having developed a method of delivering workshops with just one tutor rather than 2 or 3 (a result of not being able to share transport through the pandemic), Streetwise chose to utilise this approach to deliver a far greater number of workshops than was originally planned.

In addition to strengthening the 4 core locations of Whitehead, Fermanagh, Lislea and Millisle, outreach workshops were delivered across the country. A key factor in the extensive rollout of workshops was the increased need for activities in 2 key demographics that addressed physical and mental wellbeing. These 2 areas were in supported/sheltered accommodation and for those living with dementias.

Feedback from partner staff in these areas gave Streetwise Community Circus a small insight into the devastating emotional, social, cognitive and physical impact of social restrictions as a result of lockdowns and social distancing measures.

*Essentially the older tenants became completely isolated, shut off from the world, from friends, families. The supported housing where they lived and the staff inside them became their world. Yes, we could get them online ok, but all activities stopped, literally whipped out from under their feet. So many became isolated, and there was massive impact on mental and physical health – not getting out, even for a walk to the cafe, or the shops or to see people.*

There were those who were not able to visit loved ones before they died, or who did not fully comprehend why they were no longer receiving visits at home. In addition, many people's physical wellbeing has been adversely affected by a combination of having less access to healthcare, and a decrease in physical activity. A feature that was also noted in interview with partner staff:

*For those without dementia you still see a lot of the impacts, I can see we're still trying to get people out and about - there is a lot of low confidence and some groups which they used to go to simply don't exist anymore. But also some laziness too! Some people got used to the idea of staying at home, and not going out and this needs to be challenged too!*

The only positive aspect of learning more about this situation was the hope that something as seemingly unimportant as circus was actually going to be a key tool in addressing these devastating impacts.

In 2022 Streetwise Community Circus delivered 530 workshops in the 4 core projects and 15 outreach centres, using both face to face and online teaching. Partner staff became increasingly supportive of the project and tutors and participants began to both recognise and articulate the impacts of participation in a social circus project.

#### Year 4 2023/24

Delivery of workshops continued across Northern Ireland and tutors worked on developing circus skills according to the needs and wishes of the participants at each location. For most of the outreach locations this was delivered using the sit down circus approach where all participants sit in a circle and engage in a series of group activities. Props and equipment used in these workshops included juggling scarves, balls and rings, flower sticks, hats, and other objects for manipulation. Individual tutors used these props in a range of ways according to their groups.

For example, in Copelands in Millisle, the group generally included up to 20 individuals with a range of dementias, and excellent supporting staff. Here, the tutor developed a schedule of activities that was repeated each week in order to maximise engagement amongst those who had problems with memory. The group started with a name and memory game using a hat that passed to each participant around the circle, followed by a gentle seated physical warm-up, followed by a scarf juggling activity. Then the tutor led a ball juggling activity, followed by either a hat passing game or some hat manipulation exercises, and finally a game of throwing juggling balls into a hat in the centre of the circle and a moment of breathing and reflection. Occasionally other props were introduced, such as flower sticks, but generally stuck to a routine that became recognisable for the participants. The tutor was often greeted with comments such as “I know you, we’re going to do the scarves and hats today!” or when we finished the hat game at the beginning, several participants would immediately start the first warm-up exercise without being prompted. For this group, repetition and familiarity became the best approach to inclusion.

In outreach centres where the participants were more independent, the structure was often less formal. For example, in Cook Court in Newtownards, the small group of up to 10 participants would engage in the structure of the workshop of a physical warm-up, followed by a series of different skills and ending with a moment of reflection and of course a cup of tea and a biscuit at some point in the middle. However, the participants would often request different skills, and would be mindful of things they had already learned or wanted to learn. Here, many of the group became proficient in juggling 3 balls, and could easily use diabolos and flower sticks. Workshops would also often include a discussion about the benefits of the project as a whole, and there was an eagerness to keep ‘learning new things’ to keep the brain working. There was also a very strong recognition that following the restriction in using communal areas during the Covid lockdowns, the opportunity to socialise with each other was something to be encouraged and cherished.

Finally, in workshops throughout the 4 core groups, acquisition of circus skills amongst the independent participants was even greater. In Fermanagh for example, tutors had individuals who could walk on stilts and others who could perform routines with diabolos and other juggling props. Interestingly though, despite a more nuanced engagement with the technical skills provided, informal feedback from each of these centres also referred to perceived impacts in physical, social, emotional and cognitive wellbeing.

### **Section 3: How the project met its original aims and objectives:**

In year's 2,3 and 4<sup>1</sup> of the Ageility NI project, Streetwise Community Circus delivered **1,712** social circus workshops for older people across Northern Ireland.

**Aim 1:** *“Engaging with a greater number of older participants and people affected by Alzheimers or dementia”*

Through the 4 years of the Agility NI project Streetwise Community Circus engaged with more older people – including those affected by dementias – than was initially thought possible. This was enabled by developing new teaching techniques, in particular the use of online teaching and producing videos of circus skills, as well as delivering a greater number of workshops with fewer tutors.

**Aim 2:** *“Combating isolation and loneliness”*

Several staff at partner organisations and many of our participants over the years referred to the way that this project was often the only opportunity for taking part in an activity with other people. The flexible approach that enabled the project to thrive in the context of a global pandemic led to stronger connections with both independent older people and those living in care homes and other supported living. Even after social restrictions were lifted, SCC's Ageility NI project continued to provide a range of opportunities for participating in a fun, safe environment where people could get together, learn new skills, do something physical and have a cup of tea.

**Aim 3:** *“Promoting social inclusion”*

The concept of social inclusion differs broadly across the spectrum of participants on this project. However, there is evidence to suggest that participation in this project did have a demonstrable effect across this spectrum. For those in care homes or with dementias, engaging in the circus led to a sense of group identity with others in the same room, sharing skills and engaging 'in the moment'. For those more independent participants – particularly those in our core centres – circus became a common factor that could be shared between different locations. This was seen where the group from Lislea travelled to meet the circus group in Belfast on 2 occasions, and several participants from the Belfast group travelled to Lislea to see their showcase.

One other pertinent factor here was the way that circus became a positive talking point for participants in other contexts. Whether talking to family, friends, peers or even medical professionals, the mention that one was learning circus skills was often greeted with a degree of interest! It gave several of our participants something interesting to talk about, and brought with it a sense of kudos across various social contexts.

**Aim 4:** *“Addressing health issues including dementia”*

Whilst SCC never set out to deliver circus as a therapy, and by no means was it an aim of the project to 'cure' any ailments; the project did recognise that engaging in social circus could have an impact on individual wellbeing. Circus workshops were strongly participant led, and relied on individuals to define how much they engaged with the skills on offer; as opposed to e.g. a fitness class or Tai chi lesson

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<sup>1</sup> The number of workshops delivered in year 1 is not included, as many were online and planned workshops were later replaced by training videos.

where all individuals are taught to do the same thing – circus is much broader and allows for more personalised learning.

As such, individuals were often able to articulate the benefits of the project as it applied to them personally. Feedback was often framed in terms of general improvements to wellbeing, and recent responses certainly suggest a connection between taking part in circus workshops and a desire to minimise the impacts of cognitive decline as we age.

**Aim 5:** *“Strengthening the voice of older people”* and

**Aim 6:** *“Promoting the art of circus as an effective and impactful tool in providing a wide range of benefits to older people and by extension our society.”*

As the project developed, SCC engaged more regularly with both social media and traditional media. The idea that older people were tackling social isolation or physical wellbeing by learning circus was an interesting news story, and several of our participants have been interviewed for magazines, television and radio. In addition, news spread about the project in less formal contexts, with friends encouraging others to join in, and partner staff spreading the word to colleagues in other health and social care institutions.

In terms of the impacts of the project as a whole, the evaluator is currently developing links with gerontologists at Queen’s University, Belfast in order to spread the word in more academic and professional contexts. SCC has developed a range of unique teaching methods and experience throughout this project that is of obvious utility to other organisations who work with older people.

SCC is also currently engaging with Circusworks – the UK wide umbrella organisation for youth and social circus groups – in order to develop a working group of circus professionals that would collect, analyse and communicate data regarding the impacts of circus for older people to organisations interested in developing comparable projects.

**Aim 7:** *“Developing and delivering innovative new techniques to enhance both arts delivery and the promotion of health in older people in Northern Ireland.”*

Whilst some of the new techniques that Streetwise Community Circus developed and delivered were a result of conditions outside of our control, the groups administration and teaching team should be commended on their tenacious and flexible attitude towards ensuring that a vulnerable section of society were not simply forgotten through the years of Covid.

Streetwise Community Circus worked closely with individuals and partner organisations to ensure that access to the project was achieved in a safe manner throughout lockdowns and in times of social restrictions. This began in year one with online warm-up and catch up sessions for core centre participants, and developed into more technical skills teaching which continued throughout year 4 of the project. Streetwise tutors developed means to teach a series of very hands on skills through distance learning – which was a radical shift in pedagogical technique, and several tutors developed video tutorials for a range of skills that continue to serve as a useful teaching resource online.

Delivering circus workshops outside whilst maintaining social distance became a normal way of working. And the concept of teaching on one’s own – rather than as a group of 3 tutors – also enabled the group to deliver more workshops for more people. But this also asked a lot of these tutors who often had to step up to become more independent and draw upon a new range of teaching skills.

Throughout years 3 and 4 Streetwise held training opportunities for tutors to share the knowledge they had gathered throughout the project, and this included a traingi day in January 2024 in conjunction with In Your Space Circus in Derry, who are currently developing their own 'Silver Circus' project for older people.

Streetwise continues to utilise the concept of 'functional juggling' which encourages tutors to enable access to the benefits of juggling to a wider variety of learners by using equipment and teaching techniques that breaks down the elements of juggling into smaller and more achievable goals. SCC tutors have had additional training in these techniques throughout the 4 years. Other training that tutors have engaged with and subsequently shared with the group, is the programme developed by SpinPoi<sup>2</sup> in New Zealand, based on doctoral research exploring the benefits to wellbeing amongst seniors of learning poi.

In short, the Ageility NI project has pushed SCC tutors to evaluate their practice, hone their technical and pedagogical skills, and where available draw upon the expertise of international organisations to develop new skills. The impact of this on the organisation is that SCC now have a bank of tutors who are exceptionally skilled and are in a position to share their knowledge with other participatory arts organisations, and those working in the health and social care sectors.

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<sup>2</sup> [www.spinpoi.com](http://www.spinpoi.com)

#### **Section 4: Moving forward: the legacies of the Ageility NI Project 2020-2024**

1. Four core independent circus groups with a passion for circus and an understanding of the impacts of circus on their participants' wellbeing
2. A strong working relationship with a number of partner organisations in the health and social care sector in Northern Ireland who are also supportive of the wellbeing aspects of social circus for older people, whether in independent supported living or in a care setting
3. A tutor team with specialist expertise in developing new knowledge and practice for delivering social circus projects with older people.
4. Strong connections with partner organisations in Sheltered Accommodation
5. Better communication between tutors within Streetwise and with other Social Circus Organisations both nationally and internationally
6. Stronger links with academic researchers through Queen's University Belfast leading to the potential for more thorough academic analysis of the impacts of social circus with older participants.
7. A much stronger presence across both traditional media and social media platforms.
8. A library of online tutorial videos of circus skills.