



Awards for All Pilot Project Evaluation

Circus in sheltered accommodation in NI

Awards for All Pilot Project Evaluation Report

Circus in sheltered accommodation in NI

Streetwise Community Circus CIC

November 2023

Dr Nick McCaffery

Context:

From July to September 2023, Streetwise Community Circus CIC (hereafter Streetwise) delivered a pilot project of social circus workshops to tenants in sheltered accommodation¹ across 4 areas of Northern Ireland.

The rationale for this pilot project emerged from the **Ageility NI** project, a social circus project for older people in Northern Ireland which began in 2020. As the Covid 19 pandemic developed in Northern Ireland, it became apparent that older people in sheltered accommodation had been adversely affected by the subsequent lockdowns, and that Streetwise had the potential to have a positive impact on wellbeing by developing circus workshops specifically with this population.

The following report consists of a brief discussion on what social circus is and how it can positively impact wellbeing. The next section presents feedback from this pilot from participants, partner staff, and Streetwise tutors. Due to the relatively short time scale of the project, feedback was focussed more on the practical elements of the project, rather than on the impacts of participation – however several respondents were keen to express the benefits of this project during the feedback process. The final section of the report illustrates the specific reasons how and why social circus programmes are suited to older people generally, and tenants in sheltered accommodation more specifically. This section includes feedback from participants on some longer running Streetwise circus workshops for older people in Northern Ireland to illustrate the longer term benefits of social circus projects for older people.

Summary:

This report argues that developing social circus workshops in sheltered accommodation can have a range of positive impacts on participant's mental, physical, social and cognitive wellbeing. It also argues that the approach developed by Streetwise is informed, flexible and participant-led, leading to a high level of engagement with the project.

¹ Streetwise have developed working relationships with a number of clients on this project. Some refer to their accommodations as 'sheltered' others as 'supported'. For ease of understanding I have used the term sheltered in this report, and understand that both terms refer to accommodation that does not provide nursing or health care, but does provide a bit more support – e.g. on site scheme managers/support staff, 24-hour emergency alarm systems, communal areas (inside and outside), and social activities.

Summary of findings:

Data collected from those involved in the pilot project suggests that:

1. The majority of participants who engaged with the project thoroughly enjoyed the workshops and would like to continue to do circus.
2. All of the workshops on this pilot were used the 'sit-down' circus approach. However the ability to include more mobile activities (partner juggling, stilts, unicycle etc.) for those who would like to do them, could be a potential advantage in persuading participants to travel to local hubs
3. Social Circus has the potential to address key elements of wellbeing simultaneously, making it an extremely effective intervention for a variety of people. At the time of writing there were *no comparable activities* being used in sheltered accommodation across this pilot project.
4. Whilst there are barriers to many people in sheltered accommodation to travel to local hubs outside of their home, these barriers are not insurmountable, and Streetwise are in a good position to engage with all partners in order to overcome them.
5. Streetwise tutors' knowledge of the impacts of working with older people and techniques available to address specific challenges was good; although all tutors were keen to continue to gain more knowledge and skills in order to continue to raise the quality and standards of their own pedagogies.
6. Long term participants of social circus projects with older people are keen to communicate the effects of attending circus workshops in terms of their own wellbeing, thus reinforcing the hypothesis that social circus is a positive intervention for older people.

Based on feedback collected, the author suggests that any future programme of social circus workshops with tenants in sheltered accommodation should consider the following recommendations

- Social Circus is an effective social intervention for a range of individuals facing a variety of challenges in their lives – from young people at risk of being excluded from education, to older people facing new challenges in terms of wellbeing as they age.
- When approaching new clients, Streetwise must communicate clearly the benefits of social circus workshops, in order to avoid misconceptions of them being childish, or not suitable for older adults
- Streetwise should continue to have a flexible and participant-focussed approach to the delivery of circus workshops in order to direct the most appropriate resources to specific locations. Regular communication between all parties is key to the effective delivery of this project.
- Streetwise should continue to develop formal opportunities for tutors to increase and share skills and techniques suitable for working with older people, both within the Streetwise tutor team, and also with other practitioners.

Social Circus, a definition:

Put simply, social circus is the practice of teaching circus skills in order to encourage positive impacts among those who are taking part. Whilst the props and many of the techniques are shared by professional circus artists and trainers, the aim is not necessarily measured in terms of skills gained or artistic output, but rather the personal development of those who participate. The potential impacts of a social circus project are many, and they are often framed in terms of wellbeing.

Streetwise has drawn upon academic and professional discourse surrounding social circus to develop an understanding of wellbeing that is categorised into 4 areas:

1. Physical wellbeing

Circus skills and warm-up exercises can be tailored to the needs of each individual. From gentle seated stretches and movement, to acrobatic and aerial techniques. Learning circus skills can also have a positive effect on fine and gross motor skills, general body awareness and physical confidence.

2. Social wellbeing

Circus workshops are by their nature inclusive, accessible, and encourage participation at all levels. This can contribute to tackling social isolation, loneliness, and often gives individuals an excuse to share a friendly space with other people.

3. Emotional wellbeing

One of the key effects of learning circus skills is the development of resilience, which can be useful when dealing with stress and mental ill health. Other impacts of social circus projects include improving confidence, developing strategies for risk-management, and generally having a lot of fun.

4. Cognitive wellbeing

Learning certain circus skills, in particular juggling, can have a profound physical effect on the brain, leading to an increase in neuroplasticity. Streetwise have developed an approach to learning based on functional juggling, an emerging method in which props and techniques are used to develop experience-based methods of learning. This approach strengthens the physical and neural foundations necessary to develop juggling skills, and also enables inclusion for those with physical or cognitive barriers to learning traditional forms of juggling. In addition, Streetwise often include cognitive training games as part of warm up routines, and include other skills known to increase neural and cognitive health such as poi.

By focusing on specific areas of wellbeing, each social circus project has the capability to identify needs of a particular population and adjust the project accordingly. For example, workshops for people on the autism spectrum would take into account environmental factors such as light, sound and smells; and tutors would make space for those with less focused attention, or those who need specific structure in a workshop. Likewise, circus workshops for individuals with physical disabilities would encourage participation by adapting equipment, or games to ensure full participation. In any case, the goals of each social circus project are identified and delivered in accordance to the needs of

the participants themselves. It is for this reason that social circus has the potential to work particularly well for older people in sheltered accommodation.

The following section provides feedback from those who were involved in the pilot project in the summer of 2023, and shows that despite the very brief nature of the pilot, participants, support staff and circus tutors have all noted some positive impacts already.



Feedback from Partner staff:

Brief feedback from partner staff across all of the locations was gathered informally by phone, whilst discussing gathering feedback from the participants via survey. The researcher asked each member of staff if they had witnessed or taken part in any of the workshops and whether they had received any feedback about them. The researcher also enquired about the potential for traveling to local hubs outside of their own schemes.

"It was brilliant, really good, but I was disappointed that the tenants drifted off towards the end [of the project]. Sometimes this happens, and then they ask to do more of it again a couple of weeks after the project has finished."

"The tenants loved it, and you could hear the laughter coming from people who would never say Boo! Eddy [SCC tutor] was great, and even when people were making mistakes it was all ok."

"The project was excellent, as was Ed [SCC tutor]. Attendance varied from week to week, but those that did attend really loved it."

"Not many took part here. It started with 4 and 2 dropped out. People said they thought it would be too childish and would rather go out instead. But the 2 that did do it really enjoyed it and looked forward to it each week."

"Most of the ones that joined in here were from the local care home. Our own tenants said they were too busy, but the ones that did take part loved it and want to do more"

"I sat in on a couple of these and thoroughly enjoyed it. They [participants] loved it and want more, but it's just getting them out – a 16 seater coach costs £180, so it's impractical, but they loved it and want to do more"

"We started with 12 and went down to around 9, but it was very well received. We are keen to do more, but Millisle is not practical for us to get to, especially for this age group who are more comfortable staying at home."

These comments raise the following points:

1. Reaction to the workshops was generally very positive, with most of the participants expressing a strong desire to continue, and staff stating that the tutors and activities were excellent.
2. For some, there are barriers to travelling to local hubs that are framed in financial terms, or with regards to health reasons, rather than a lack of desire to continue.
3. In at least one scheme the idea of taking part seemed to be too childish, or not relevant to them. This perspective was also noted by some of the tutors, who suggested that this may have been due to a lack of clarity in describing to people what a circus workshop entails and the reasons for bringing social circus to this population. Of course, Streetwise recognises that an *informed* decision not to engage with circus is always respected!

Feedback from Streetwise Tutors:

Feedback from the 4 streetwise tutors who were employed on this pilot was gathered by telephone interview with each of the individuals towards the end of the project. Tutors were asked for data related to the following 4 areas:

1. General observations of the participants in each centre, whether they chose “sit down” workshops or include more “stand up” activities, numbers and attendance.
2. What skills they covered, and what they didn’t include.
3. Informal feedback gathered by tutors from participants and partner staff
4. Techniques and teaching skills they had used and developed, and skills they had identified as needing improvement for future projects.

1. *General observations:*

- a. All of the schemes on this pilot project were delivered using the sit down circus approach. This approach enables all of the group to be engaged with the tutor throughout the whole workshop, and is also a gentler approach for those with mobility or other physical issues. However, there was a range of individuals and there is potential for developing more stand up activities for future workshops.
- b. Attendance was mixed across the pilot. Some had excellent attendance in terms of numbers and continuity, other schemes were lower or less constant. Tutors stated that despite higher levels of independence amongst the participants (as opposed to in a care setting) they were still reliant on support staff to remind them that the workshops were happening.
- c. Building rapport between tutors and the group was essential. Mostly this was a positive relationship, with several participants and support staff praising the tutors. However, there were cases where this was not achieved quite as well as it could have been. One tutor described strong leaders in a group, who would influence others to disengage with the workshop. Others who would describe the idea of the workshops as too silly or childish, or who described the workshops as ‘unnecessary’, as they already did exercise classes. Although not quantitatively recorded, all circus tutors suggested that schemes that had more encouraging support from staff in the centres often led to greater engagement with the project.
- d. There were cases where the tenants were not really sure what the workshops were for or about. The word “*circus*” was not really explained and may have put some people off. Some groups assumed it was an exercise class. Despite flyers being distributed there seemed to be a lack of information ‘on the ground’ as to what was expected from participation.

2. *Skills covered*

- a. All tutors stressed the importance of the warm ups as opportunities to get individuals physically ready to engage in learning the skills but also as a way of introducing brain games.
- b. Scarf games and scarf juggling were used across the board and seemingly repeated each week.

- c. At least one tutor included parachute games with a beach ball in order to avoid repetition of routine.
- d. Functional juggling techniques were employed, specifically ball and ring exercises, but nobody used any adaptive equipment (e.g. Juggle Boards), due to these being single tutor workshops with little opportunity for extended 1-1 engagement with participants.
- e. Group juggling games such as juggling stars were often used, utilising a variety of props
- f. More active props such as stilts, unicycles etc. were not included; also due to these being single tutor workshops with little opportunity for 1-1 engagement with participants. This was always framed in terms of a health and safety consideration, but the opportunity for introducing these skills would be more likely in a local hub setting with larger spaces and higher staff ratios.
- g. There were sometimes occasions in the workshops where participants were more comfortable just having a chat and telling stories or catching up with each other for 5 or 10 minutes, and tutors were happy for this to happen and able to adapt the workshop planning around the needs of the participants.

3. *Informal feedback gathered by tutors from participants and partner staff:*

- a. Schemes where tenants were obviously enjoying themselves were more prevalent than those that showed less enthusiasm.
- b. Positive elements that tutors were made aware of included
 - i. Good physical exercise presented in a non-traditional way
 - ii. Brain games that could be used in between workshops
 - iii. Having lots of fun and laughing together as a group
 - iv. Developing new skills that participants had thought would be unattainable
 - v. An opportunity to get together with other tenants
- c. Many of the tenants told tutors that there were fewer occasions for taking part in activities following the Covid 19 pandemic, and that circus was a great opportunity.
- d. Participants were often comfortable telling the tutors which skills the group liked or disliked, who were then able to adapt the range where necessary.
- e. Tutors were also told by tenants and staff that those who had participated were keen to continue with circus skills in the future
- f. Although general feedback seemed to be forthcoming and positive, there were few cases of detailed responses regarding specific impacts on wellbeing. This is understandable, considering that tutors would rarely ask specific questions about the potential impacts of social circus whilst facilitating the workshop.

4. *Techniques and teaching skills developed or needing development*

- a. All tutors felt that they had a good understanding of how to deliver appropriate circus skills to these participants
- b. All tutors also recognised that continued knowledge sharing between peers was crucial for learning new skills, and avoiding repetition in workshops
- c. For some tutors, there was a frustration at relying on using a reduced number of skills in a sit down workshop, and they questioned whether they could incorporate more disciplines/props to assure variety in the future.

- d. Some of the tutors felt it would be beneficial to have a brief and easy to understand explanation of the potential impacts of social circus so that they could communicate this to participants.

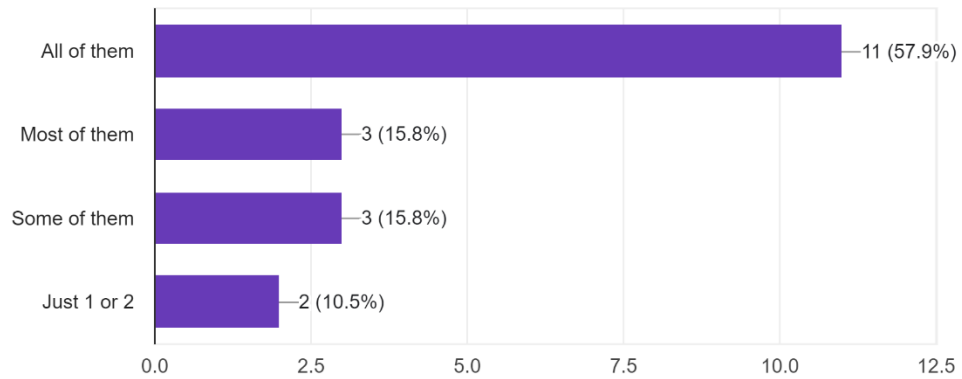


Feedback from participants:

The following data was recorded by feedback forms sent out to all participating centres.

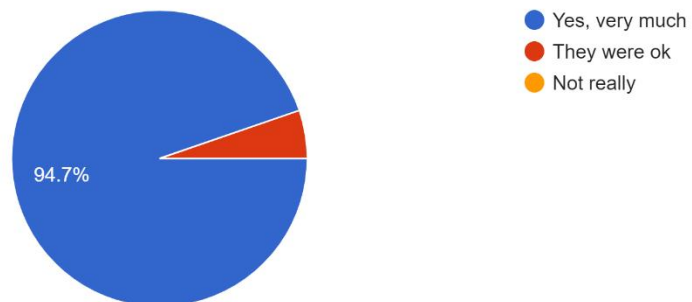
how many of the circus workshops did you attend over the summer?

19 responses



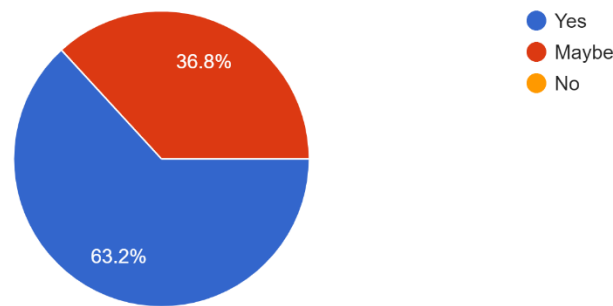
Did you enjoy the circus workshops?

19 responses



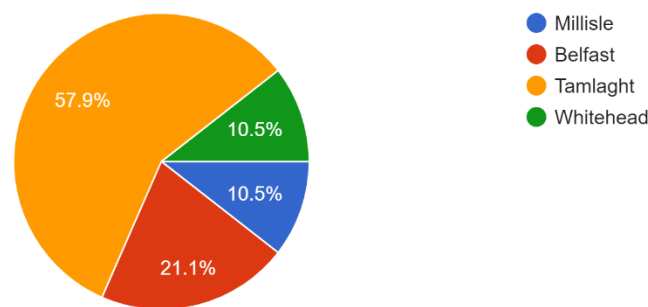
Would you like to attend more free circus workshops in your local area?

19 responses



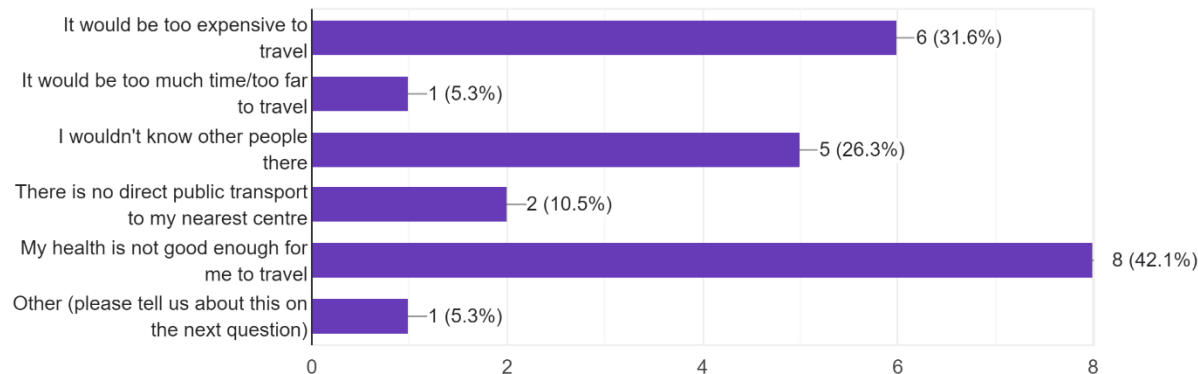
If there were free circus workshops in your local area, which of these would be the closest?

19 responses



What, if anything, would hinder you from being able to attend workshops in your closest area? (pick all answers that are relevant)

19 responses



Other things stopping me from attending6 responses

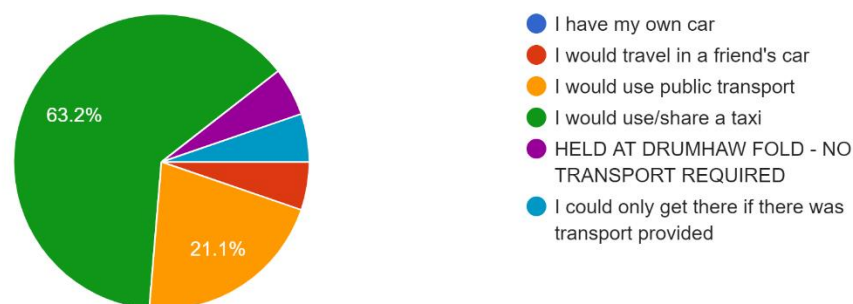
Most of the above, does not let you pick more than one response

NONE

Mobility
 Nervous meeting new people
 Mobility
 other events
 I'm very old and unsteady on my feet
 I'm 96
 I'm very old and it's almost winter

How would you get to the free sessions in your local area?

19 responses



Tell me about the other activities that you do in your local area (e.g. sports, fitness, arts & crafts, music groups, socialising, etc) 14 responses

none
 Inter-generational project, crafts
 LUNCH CLUB EVERY WEEK, LISNASKEA WOMENS GROUP EVERY FORTNIGHT, OAK HEALTHY LIVING , LIBRARY.
 Activities in scheme bingo coffee mornings
 Not out and about
 Stay in scheme
 Lunch outings with help
 socializing, cinema
 choir, water colour class, yoga
 garden centre
 coffee morning
 music events i.e festivals gigs
 Crafts, chair yoga
 I go to church but don't get out much.
 My family comes to visit I don't get out

Tell me about the other activities that take place in your home (e.g. classes, social lunches, film nights etc.)¹⁴ responses

Coffee mornings, lunches, occasional outings, social nights
LUNCH CLUB, HAIDRESSER , LISNASKEA WOMENS GROUP
In house activities offered
Attend all activities in scheme when offered by manager.
All activities in scheme as I know the tenants
Bingo evening teas and coffee mornings.
Coffee morning, fry day, gospel meeting, bingo, armchair aerobics
armchair aerobics, coffee morning, bingo fry day
Tea at three, lunch club, Knit & Natter, art club
lunch club, Knit & Natter, social teas
art club, seasonal activities, tea events
lunch
tea
craft classes
Magic movement I love it and a little dog comes to visit and Bucky on the tv.
The wee dog and Bucky

If there is anything else you'd like to say about the circus workshops that you attended in the summer, or the ones that we are planning in your local area, please tell us here¹⁰ responses

It was mentally stimulating and to some degree physically stimulating but mostly it was fun
ED WAS EXCELLENT WITH ALL OF THE TENANTS AND CARRIED OUT A RANGE OF ACTIVITIES.
EVERYONE ENJOYED IT.
some things where repetitive
no
I liked the hat toss
very enjoyable
I thought it was brilliant, really got me moving
good craic
absolutely brilliant
i felt dizzy, in a good way
George is wonderful
I love the plate spinning

Analysis:

The feedback collected directly from participants reflects the feedback collected informally by the Streetwise Tutors. In short, those who took part thoroughly enjoyed it, but there are barriers to engaging with circus outside of sheltered accommodation. However, these barriers are not insurmountable, and there is a real willingness to continue to take part in social circus workshops in their local area. Indeed the positive response to use taxis to travel short distances is a sign that there are many participants who would be able and willing to travel to local hubs. For those with more complex health needs or who need more emotional support to engage with groups outside of their

homes, Streetwise would be able to continue to monitor potential for attending local hubs whilst delivering short terms of circus workshops within their homes.

Whilst several centres include access to an increasing number of activities both in-house and in the local area, most of these activities do not have the same range of impacts that circus has. The way that social circus has the potential to affect all 4 areas of wellbeing simultaneously is one of its biggest strengths. Of course there are activities that address social wellbeing – e.g. lunch clubs, coffee mornings and social teas; there are activities that promote physical activity – e.g. armchair aerobics; and there are activities that promote a combination of social and cognitive activities – e.g. knit and natter, craft activities, and bingo. There are currently no activities that match circus for including physical activity with social, cognitive, and emotional wellbeing elements.



Social Circus in sheltered accommodation.

Over the last couple of years, and as a direct result of the Covid 19 pandemic, Streetwise have been delivering circus workshops for people in sheltered housing across Northern Ireland. Whilst the reaction to these workshops has been generally very positive from participants, tutors, and partner staff; we are beginning to understand why social circus can be so useful in terms of the 4 categories of wellbeing introduced earlier in this report. The following discussion is based on observation and participation in several schemes, and discussion with participants, partner staff and Streetwise tutors.

1. *Physical wellbeing*

Older individuals who live in sheltered accommodation would tend to be more independent and physically more active than those in a care setting, but there is a wide range of physical health. Streetwise circus workshops can be adapted to run as either '**sit-down**' circus, where the participants are seated in a circle and participate as a group, or '**stand-up**' circus, where individuals are more active and combine individual learning with group activities. Of course, some workshops can incorporate elements of both approaches.

A physical warm-up is a vital element of any circus workshop and these are always tailored to the comfort level of the group. Tutors are encouraged to be aware of the mood of the group, and to always remind participants that they are only to do those activities that they are comfortable with. Individuals with health problems (e.g. arthritis) are told not to do anything that exacerbates their health, whilst at the same time encouraging all participants to be more aware of their own bodies, and engage with the warm up as an important element of the workshop. Individual tutors have a range of exercises to draw from, ranging from gentle stretches and breathing activities to more aerobic training. Several participants tell streetwise tutors that they would notice the day after a workshop that muscles are tired, or that they 'know they've been doing something physical the day before'.

Staff and tenants often comment on both the similarity of these warm-ups to other activities (e.g. armchair aerobics, or even physiotherapy) but also the differences to these more traditional forms of exercise in terms of the unique way that they are presented. From my own observations, I believe that the element of fun that pervades a circus workshop warm-up, means that these exercises are often introduced as games rather than something serious, and participants often state that they are doing 'sneaky exercise', or that tutors are introducing physical activity in a way that is more enjoyable than going to the gym or taking an exercise class.

For example, passing a juggling scarf around a circle can be included as a simple game, with increasing levels of difficulty incorporating higher levels of speed, increasing numbers of scarves and even including cognitive exercises such as naming the colour of the scarves as they pass along the circle. What is also happening in this 'game' is that people are using fine and gross motor skills, hand to eye coordination, improving pinch grips, moving their arms from one side of their body to the other in both bilateral and asynchronous spheres, and, depending on the speed of the 'race,' increasing the heart rate. And more often than not, the participants are laughing at themselves and with their peers. Which is also pretty good for their health.

2. Social wellbeing

Tenants in sheltered accommodation were affected a great deal by the Covid 19 pandemic, as the following extract from one of our partner staff illustrates:

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. (partner staff interview Dec '22)

The impacts on this across so many schemes and houses still resonates. While there has been a slow return to more normal behaviour throughout 2023, issues of loneliness and social isolation which existed well before the extreme nature of Covid 19 lockdowns, are still pertinent.

Social circus is not the only solution to these issues which are widespread and complex. But, it is one of the tools that has the potential to have an immediate positive impact. Social circus gets people in a room and levels the playing field – very few people come into a circus workshop with existing circus skills, but everyone in that room has the potential to participate fully.

Streetwise tutors encourage rather than demand participation, and incorporate a range of games, techniques, props, skills and approaches in order to sustain interest and involvement. Using shared spaces within sheltered accommodation builds up a confidence to be more social with others, and an excuse to see one's neighbours and have a bit of fun together. The activities in a social circus workshop include those that are immediately achievable and also ones that will develop over the weeks and take a little bit of practice to achieve. As the projects progress it becomes apparent that each individual will find the skills that they enjoy more and progress with more. This results in a group where individuals see their peers progress in certain skills, and have their peers see their progression in other skills. So not only do individuals develop their abilities with circus, they also have an audience that witnesses this progression, and they will often receive praise for their development from their peers.

The logical next step to this, is to extend these social networks (where appropriate) by bringing people from different schemes together under the guise of learning circus. It should also be reiterated that there is something very powerful about including time in a circus workshop for a cup of tea, a chat, and a biscuit or two. However, it is important to recognise that social wellbeing is often connected to a strong sense of an individual's emotional wellbeing

3. Emotional wellbeing

Emotional wellbeing is the concept that an individual has the ability to cope with difficult circumstances and can manage the feelings and emotions that arise in life on an everyday basis as well as in times of stress or difficulty. According to NICE² "Mental wellbeing is about

² <https://www.nice.org.uk/about/nice-communities/social-care/quick-guides/promoting-positive-mental-wellbeing-for-older-people>

life satisfaction, optimism, self-esteem, feeling in control, having a purpose and a sense of belonging and support” So, how does social circus have any impact on emotional wellbeing?

As with many other activities, social circus provides an opportunity to socialise with peers and have fun. But there are other elements unique to social circus that can increase the effectiveness of simply getting together with others. Laughter and enjoyment is one of the recurring factors when discussing this pilot project with participants, circus tutors and partner staff. A social circus workshop is a fun place to be.

In answer to the question what does being in the community circus mean to me, I'd have to say what I love most is the amount of laughing I do at it. They say 'laughter is the best medicine ' and it takes me back to the sort of laughter you do when you're young but then grow out of in a way. What I mean is if someone came into the room to observe they wouldn't 'get it' but I do feel, in the most positive sense, you kind of revert to being young and silly again and get really caught up in the lightness and good fun and silliness of it - it's fantastic. I love spontaneously laughing and I get bucketloads of it on a Friday morning (Circus Participant, Ageility project, Aug '23)

The skills that we use as circus tutors are immediately accessible, due to the use of functional juggling. This diminishes the fear that participants will not be able to join in as they are not skilled enough to juggle. However, as the participants develop their skills through the workshops, tutors are able to increase the levels of difficulty and range of skills provided.

One of the key concepts that is used to strengthen emotional wellbeing is the idea of resilience. Again, this is a core ideal of any social circus workshop, as facilitators create a safe and supportive environment for individuals to challenge their own sense of ability and be able to try new things. These new things are not necessarily easy to learn straight away, but as the program develops, individuals are supported to keep practicing and keep trying and tutors will consistently reiterate the progress and resilience that participants are developing. Thus reinforcing the idea that it is ok to make mistakes, and that continuing to work on a skill or discipline will have positive results. Whilst it is difficult at this stage to identify whether this has a transferable effect on everyday situations outside of the workshop, it is certainly a concept that is worth investigating in future social circus programmes.

4. Cognitive wellbeing

When speaking with participants on a range of social circus projects for older people, one of the things that is mentioned regularly is the need for activities and techniques to **'keep the brain working.'** Several studies and reports over the past decade have suggested that dementia is the UK's most feared disease amongst the over 50s, surpassing fear of cancers. As such, social circus projects with this age group tend to include more activities that increase cognitive function.

Examples of these activities can be found in warm-ups as well as the circus skills themselves, and so it is often the case that warm-ups for those in sheltered accommodation are slightly different than those for younger participants or other populations. In addition to using exercises that get the blood flowing and the muscles stretched in anticipation of slight to

moderate physical activity³, a warm-up in sheltered accommodation will include several “brain games” that use a range of physical tasks.

For example, participants are asked to give a thumbs up with one hand and point the index finger of their opposite hand in front of them. Participants are then asked to slowly change their thumbs up into a finger point, and their finger point into a thumbs up. With practice participants can then swap each hand asynchronously from thumb to finger continuously and without mistakes. Once this is achieved, there are various ways to add in more complex elements, such as doing this with arms crossed, or adding in a handclap between changes, or even a nose tap.

Games like this are useful as they involve elements that can have a physical effect on neuroplasticity, and are easily replicated outside of the workshop. Tutors often tell participants that they can practice these little games whilst waiting for the kettle to boil, during the adverts in a tv show, or any other opportunity in their day where they have 5 minutes to spare.

The cognitive benefits of learning more specific circus skills, in particular juggling, is also becoming increasingly documented. Academics and practitioners are revealing increasing details about the unique nature of the 3-ball cascade pattern of juggling which includes a quite complex series of manoeuvres. By drawing upon the technique of functional juggling, the cognitive benefits of this pattern can be accessed by participants, without the need for learning the 3-ball cascade first.

For example, many tutors will encourage participants to learn to juggle with 3 scarves. The scarves move much slower throughout the air, giving a longer time to adjust throws and catches and is a more ‘forgiving’ method of learning to juggle. However, whilst this is a useful exercise in itself it does not necessarily lead directly to ball juggling, as the necessary ground work for timing of throws and catches has not been achieved.

As such, a practice known as table juggling where balls are manipulated in the cascade pattern on a table, rather than in the air, does enable the participant to learn the correct timing for the 3 ball cascade without the opportunities for failing due to missed catches. Subsequent exercises with a single ball thrown from hand to hand through and around a single juggling ring develops the timing and coordination necessary for effective throws and catches from both hands, which in turn provides the basis for moving on to a 3 ball cascade.

Whilst commonly misinterpreted solely as a method of juggling that leads to more traditional patterns of juggling; functional juggling is, according to its creator⁴, a form of juggling in and of itself. This is because the cognitive benefits of juggling using adaptive props and techniques are equal to those achieved by learning the 3 ball cascade in the traditional way. However, the emotional benefits of achieving a working pattern of juggling happen in a much faster time frame, and with fewer opportunities for making mistakes. Participants are experiencing the world of juggling without failing as much as is necessary to learn the 3 ball pattern. There are

³ Where individuals are participating in aerial or acrobatic elements of a circus workshop, the warm-ups will be more physically thorough and specific to the activity being undertaken.

⁴ www.quatprops.net

also patterns and tricks that can be developed using functional juggling props that are much more technically difficult than a 3 ball cascade. The pathway to enjoying juggling is far from a clear progression from one stage to the next, it is much more diverse and creative.

It should be noted that the cognitive impacts of learning many types of skill can be beneficial, and circus workshops can include a range of props and disciplines – from scarf juggling to acrobatics, hat manipulation to trapeze. However, at this stage there is more academic evidence regarding the cognitive requirements and impacts of learning to juggle than there is regarding other disciplines within circus.



Longer term effects of Social Circus with older people:

For Streetwise, the aim of delivering new social circus projects within Northern Ireland is for an increase in longer term participation with circus. One of these longer term projects has been the Ageility project which meets in South Belfast on a Friday morning.

I joined Streetwise about 2 years ago, having been introduced by a friend. Streetwise is at the other side of Belfast for me which is two bus journeys. I thought I would just go once to keep my friend happy but the welcome and friendship I received won me over and despite the somewhat arduous journey I have made space in my diary to attend each week. I was surprised that older people like myself could take on a new hobby that involves such great sight, coordination and athletic ability in some cases. The tutors are friendly, approachable and understanding of each person's ability and they adapt to stimulate each person to reach their potential from the dozen or so circus skills to sample. Physical exercise is involved - when you continually pick up dropped balls or clubs and mentally you have to tax your brain to think on more than one level at a time. We are taught to work with each other for group activities and help one another to progress. We have a fun time and a social break each week. This has developed friendships that extend beyond Streetwise. Streetwise has formed an important part of my life, helping me through some personal difficulties and I continue to strive to achieve my personal circus skill goals.

(Circus Participant 1, Ageility Project Jul 2023)

The Ageility project in Belfast incorporates both stand up circus and sit down circus for a range of individuals over 55. The comment above from one of the participants reflects the way that social circus for older people incorporates elements of all 4 categories of wellbeing. Streetwise tutors recognise that each of these 4 categories are intertwined and inter-reliant, and as such are able to draw upon a variety of techniques and disciplines that meet the most appropriate areas of need for our individual participants.

During lockdown I certainly missed the social interaction with the group- the camaraderie and fun that we have together is hard to replicate in other situations.

As well as the social impact what I missed during the absence of meetings was the sense of "challenge" of learning new skills.

As lockdown continued my motivation to practice new tricks grew less and less - but now that we are back meeting I am finding the impetus to learn and practice has been revived. This has been helped by meeting the other members . I have always felt that being part of the circus group a great way of keeping physically active as well as mentally agile - these two components were greatly missed in lockdown and I am finding great benefit at the resumption of these activities . (Circus Participant 2, Ageility Project Nov 2020)

The group consists largely of independent participants from a range of backgrounds. Some are recently retired – or approaching retirement; some include circus as one of many activities in their lives; others require more support in attending. As the needs of our participants change, tutors can adapt and change their practice accordingly. It is this flexibility, based on decades of experience of delivering social circus workshops, that contributes to the success of the project.

[The Streetwise tutors] are very good at explaining how to do things. They differentiate in their teaching so we are all working at our own level. If anyone is struggling they break down the trick into smaller more manageable steps and build up the skills gradually. They are always positive and very encouraging. with just the right balance of practice and weekly challenge.

As a result I now find I have much greater confidence in both flowerstick and juggling. I am no longer so nervous when people watch me doing something on my own and I feel my skills are improving in both areas. I am able to transfer this to other tasks/activities that I do which are not necessarily circus related.

It is also very beneficial for keeping my brain active, constantly challenging it to achieve new patterns of thinking in order to be able to do a new trick. The constant bending down to pick things up (!!) as well as Paul's online warm up class is also good for flexibility and mobility.

The social side of circus is important to me too. I have made so many friends through it and I particularly enjoy the fun and laughter we have together (Circus Participant 3, Ageility Project Nov 2020)

Whilst the context of social circus in sheltered accommodation is a relatively new avenue for Streetwise, from our primary enquiries it appears to have enormous potential for having a positive impact on tenant's wellbeing. The key to future success of any project with those in sheltered accommodation will be to continue to have a flexible approach in addressing the changing needs of our participants. Some of those who have suggested that they would not benefit from travelling to local hubs outside of their accommodation due to concerns about meeting new people or their own health, may be gently encouraged to visit as their confidence increases through participation in circus workshops at home. Some may not, and this would need to be accounted for throughout the life of the project as it develops in each area.

They say 'laughter is the best medicine ' and it takes me back to the sort of laughter you do when you're young but then grow out of in a way. What I mean is if someone came into the room to observe they wouldn't 'get it' but I do feel, in the most positive sense, you kind of revert to being young and silly again and get really caught up in the lightness and good fun and silliness of it - its fantastic. I love spontaneously laughing and I get bucketloads of it on a Friday morning (Circus Participant 4, Ageility Project Oct 2023)

My reply may not be all that helpful, as my reasons are entirely selfish - I get extra aerial. An added bonus is that it is on a Friday morning, which works well for me.

While aerial is my reason for attending, I appreciate the format of the session, with the exercises that encourage memory, dexterity and social interaction, which I think shows people that they can succeed at things that they have never participated in before and be proud of their achievements, even if they are getting on a bit! (Circus Participant 5, Ageility Project Oct 2023)

One of the regular attendees at the Ageility project originally began coming as a carer for her mother, who had been attending circus projects in Belfast and Whitehead for about 10 years. The family had an interest in circus, in addition to her mother, the attendees brother and nephew had been involved with Streetwise (and other circus events and organisations) for some time which had been inspired by the nephew watching street performers in Covent Garden. Following the deaths of both her mother and brother, the attendee chose to continue attending Ageility for her own benefit. I asked them what drew them to continue to attend on a regular basis:

I really enjoy the company and I enjoy the challenge and deep in the background there's the notion that I'm getting older and less mobile, so I need to maintain any movement that I've got. But primarily it is the social the challenging myself to do new things ... I've often viewed the Morton group [Ageility] as people on the periphery of society and as you get older (I'm now 60) so as you get older I don't want to be the kind of person that goes to a knit and natter in a

church hall on a Wednesday afternoon wearing a cardigan. That's just not me and that's not the kind of people I've met (Circus Participant 6, Ageility Project Nov 2023)

Having witnessed the Ageility Project evolve throughout the last decade or so, it is clear that people come to the project for all sorts of reasons. Whilst people come and go, the project has continued to grow and adapt over the years, and there is a regular core group of participants that number somewhere around 30. In November 2023 I asked each of the participants present to rate their priorities for attending the project with regards to the 4 areas of wellbeing as well as give a brief anonymous feedback:

"Stilts please"

"friendly people"

"I come for fun and friendship 😊"

"can warm up start at 11:15? More unicycling time required"

"I enjoy the whole group or small group activities, like just before Halloween when we all did a poi session. Also love the circle activities, especially throwing hats in the juggling star. And the cognitive thing like 'thumbs up/down finger in/out'"

"def please do anything that helps the neuroplasticity"

"love, love, love circle at beginning, throwing balls, rings, etc. Xox"

"small group activities are enjoyable"

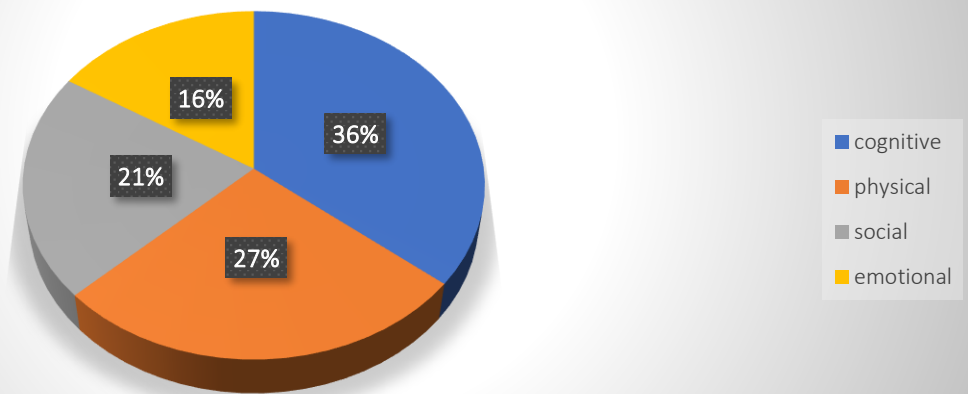
This brief snapshot of feedback from Ageility participants suggests that there is a general understanding of the potential impacts of engaging in the circus workshops. This ties in with the overarching aims of the project, and the ways in which the project is delivered.

The way that circus can address all 4 areas of wellbeing in a holistic manner is illustrated by responses that focus on individual skills learning, group activities (both small and large), the amount of fun being had, as well as a desire to maintain/improve cognitive health via skills learning and specific neural exercises.

In order to explore further this relationship between the 4 areas of wellbeing we conducted a brief experiment with beans and jars.

Participants were given a brief description of the 4 areas of wellbeing and directed to 4 jars – each representing one of the 4 areas. 5 beans were allotted to each person to place in a jar of their choice. They could use whatever ratio of beans to jars they so wished – from all 5 in one jar to one in each jar plus 1 other of their choosing. The logic was to find out whether any of these areas were of more or less value to the participants, or whether there was an equal appreciation of all 4 areas.

Favoured aspects of wellbeing amongst Ageility participants



The graph above represents the value of areas that individuals felt they were looking for in a circus workshop. What is becoming clear, and has been noted in informal feedback from participants across the Ageility NI programme, is that older people are aware of potential decrease in cognitive function due to age and/or diseases such as dementias, and are prioritising this above other negative impacts on wellbeing e.g. isolation, decreasing physical health or poor emotional health. Indeed, cognitive health scored almost the same as social and emotional health combined. Although this is a very small survey conducted amongst a small number of older people, it does correspond to several polls carried out over the past 8 years that fear of cognitive decline due to dementias has recently replace fear of cancers as the most feared disease amongst older people in the UK.

What became apparent through the Ageility NI project which began in 2020 and was based upon the Belfast Ageility project, is that social circus programmes can be flexible and adaptable and able to meet unforeseen circumstances so long as they addresses the changing needs and contexts of the participants themselves. When physical access to participants became impossible due to Covid 19 regulations Streetwise embraced online and socially distanced methods of delivery. As restrictions lifted, it became apparent that individuals in sheltered accommodation were severely affected by the social restrictions of the pandemic, but Streetwise were able to very quickly develop projects according to the needs of the participants, that are having a direct impact on tenant's wellbeing.

Summary:

The data from the long running Ageility group suggests that longer term participation in social circus workshops can improve wellbeing in ways that is as individual as the person taking part. If Streetwise can encourage this longer term participation amongst those currently living in sheltered accommodation, I believe that the impacts on the health and wellbeing of those who participate will be beneficial and potentially have positive effects on life outside of the workshop.