



**Northern Ireland
Creative Health Network**

Northern Ireland Creative Health Network Review July 2024 to August 2025



Will Nicholson



Northern Ireland Creative Health Network

Northern Ireland Creative Health Network Review – July 2024 to August 2025 Summary

The last 12 months has been an exciting period of growth and consolidation for the Northern Ireland Creative Health Network (NICHN). It has seen the network grow from an unstructured and informal group of around 80 individuals meeting ad hoc to a formal, recognised and valued network with a steering group, high level strategy and brand that has delivered numerous significant events across the province throughout the year with over 500 people in attendance.

However, whilst there is widespread recognition of the value of arts and health in supporting individual and community wellbeing and a desire to incorporate creative activities into mainstream health and social care, the practical reality of the crises facing the NHS and related capacity constraints for key stakeholders in the system, has impacted some of our timeframes and required us to be patient, creative and flexible in the way we have delivered our work. We are

now reaping the benefits of taking our time to build relationships and establish our reputation with our key health system partners. We are preparing a funding bid in to develop a creative health strategy and policy for Northern Ireland and have developed an exciting programme of future events. The flexibility of our main funder in the early stages of our development, Baring Foundation, has been vital in achieving this success and has enabled the creation of a major asset for the arts and health sector in Northern Ireland.

Achievements

The main achievements during the year include:

1. Strategic Connections and Networking:

- Producing a high-level summary strategy document for the network with 5 key priorities for the next 3 years, references to key arts and health bodies of evidence and creative health resources, research and reports, toolkits and quality improvement frameworks for all network members and wider stakeholders to avail of. In partnership with Developing Healthy Communities, we have supported the setting up of the Derry and Strabane Creative Healthy City Taskforce with a vision to establish the first Creative Healthy City on the Island of Ireland. The Taskforce is developing a strategy and has initiated informal links with England's Mayoral Authorities Creative Health Network to learn from best practice elsewhere. This has led to Developing Healthy Communities securing €50k funding from the Creative Ireland Shared Island Fund for a cross-border Creative Health and Wellbeing Social Prescribing scoping project delivered in partnership with Donegal County Council and the Health Promotion and Improvement Community Healthcare Team in Donegal. A formal funded role on the Community Advisory Board for the Challenging Health Outcomes/Integrating Care Environments (CHOICE) project funded by the Arts &

Humanities Research Council and led by Professor Gerard Leavey, Director of the Bamford Centre for Mental Health at Ulster University - <https://www.ulster.ac.uk/choice>.

- Providing a Letter of Support to Dr Nuala Morse, Director of Research, School of Museum Studies for her Future Leaders Fellowship Application: 'Culture-Led Care: Resourcing the cultural sector to deliver public health' (Oct 2026-September 2030)
- Becoming an active member of the UK and Ireland Arts and Health Network of Networks alongside the National Centre of Creative Health, Culture Health and Wellbeing Alliance (England), Wales Arts Health and Wellbeing Network, Realta (Republic of Ireland), Arts and Creative Health and Wellbeing Scotland.

We attended x6 bi-monthly meetings during the year benefiting from training and funding opportunities and learning from best practice arts and health policy and research from the other nations. This has informed our own strategy and given us the opportunity to input into the design of the Culture Health and Wellbeing Alliance's annual State of the Sector survey due to be launched in September 2025. Through participation and promotion of the survey to our members, we will not only benefit from the overall analysis of key arts and health trends in the UK and Ireland but sub-analyse responses from organisations and practitioners based in Northern Ireland to enable us to identify country specific needs and opportunities to inform our work going forward.

2. Major Public Events

- Partnering with Developing Healthy Communities NI to deliver The Derry and Strabane Creative Healthy City Conference on 4 September 2025. It was the first major arts and health event in Northern Ireland for over 5 years and attracted over 100 attendees. The event was opened by the Mayor of Derry and featured keynote speakers Julie McCarthy from the Manchester Creative Healthy City, Dan Hopewell from Bromley By Bow Centre and Roger O'Sullivan from The Institute of Public Health alongside local GP Lead Dr Nicola Herron, Jenny Kirkwood from Public Health Agency and presentations from numerous local arts organisations delivering a wide range of arts and health activities.
- Taking a stand and delivering a fringe session on the Benefits of Creative Health at the annual Northern Ireland Confederation for Health and Social Care (NICON) event in October 2024. NICON is the key health and care event in Northern Ireland with all major stakeholders present. The session was chaired by Anne O'Reilly, Chair of the Northern Health and Social Care Trust and Chair of the Chairs of the 5 NHS Trusts in Northern Ireland and endorsed by Heather Moorhead, Director at NICON. This has considerably raised the profile of the network in the health system in Northern Ireland.
- Convening of an arts and health research sub-group involving representatives from Public Health Agency, Institute of Public Health, Ulster and Queen's Universities and local arts organisations including Arts Care and the NI Mental Health and Arts Festival (NIMHAF). The group is planning for an Arts and Health sandpit event in early Spring 2026.
- Supporting one of our key members, NIMHAF, with delivering their opening and closing symposia at the MAC in Belfast and Guildhall in L'Derry in May 2025 with over 100 attendees across both events.

3. Catalysing and consolidating the network

- Growing the network from 78 to 129 members, a 62% increase in membership

- Holding x4 quarterly online forum meetings with an average of 30 people attending each meeting
- Running x6 in-person network meetings across the province in L'Derry (x2), Ballymena (x2), Bangor and Belfast with 15-20 attendees in each meeting.
- Developing our network backbone infrastructure:
 - o Developing a brand logo, email address, contacts database and creating a holding website page for the network on the Arts Care website - <https://www.artscare.co.uk/creative-health-network/>
 - o Establishing a steering group of 6 network members
 - o Producing a forward calendar of events including quarterly online forum meetings for the year and in person network events

Key learnings

There is no shortage of fabulous arts and health activity in NI and, undoubtedly, there is now widespread recognition of the value of creative health and huge willingness and energy to get involved in this work. However, it remains very fragmented and is still very much seen as fringe activity by the core business of the health system. Partnerships with key stakeholders within the system (eg NICON, Irish Doctors Orchestra) and with funders like Baring are key to bridging this gap. We also have learned that we need to be flexible and patient with our timeframes and how we engage, especially with health system partners facing significant organisational pressures and restructuring.

The next phase of the network outlined below has been designed to address these learnings through a co-created national strategy and policy for creative health.

What next for the network?

We are in the process of applying for £20k to the National Institute for Health Research Community Connections programme to develop a Northern Ireland Creative Health Strategy and embed it into policy. Baring Foundation funding this past year has been critical in enabling the network to build strategic relationships and establish sufficient gravitas and positive reputation with key stakeholders across Northern Ireland that has made this application possible. Key stakeholders we are convening to support this bid include: Dr Joanne Maclean (Director in the Public Health Agency), Heather Moorhead (Director of NICON), Anne O'Reilly (Chair of the Chairs of the 5 NI NHS Health and Social Care Trusts), Roisin McDonough (Arts Council NI CEO), Barry Macaulay (Arts Care CEO), Edel O'Doherty (Developing Healthy Communities NI) and Prof Gerry Leavey (Director of the Bamford Centre for Mental Health, Ulster University).

The focus of the funding will be to learn from similar strategies in Wales, the Republic of Ireland, and Scotland who have established memorandums of understanding to embed creative health into Department for Health, Department for Culture and Department for Communities policy and into cross-departmental working. It will also focus on connecting with the National Centre for Creative Health and the newly re-established UK All Party Group on Creative Health, exploring the potential for an All-Party Group for Creative Health based in Stormont.

We have also set up a high-quality programme of events for 2025/6. This has been a strategic decision to continue to build momentum and assist us with engaging key stakeholders to secure support for the future funding of the network.

Along with our quarterly online forum events we are running the following events:

- 16 September 2025 - Creative Health at the Ulster Orchestra – we are hosting an in-person networking event at the prestigious Ulster Orchestra’s new home in Belfast.
- 30 September 2025 – Quarterly Arts and Wellbeing Meeting for the Northern Trust area, facilitated by NICHN
- 30 November 2025 – supported by the Creative Health Network, The [Irish Doctors Orchestra](#) are performing their next concert at the Guildhall in L’Derry. This represents a major opportunity for the network to raise its profile within the health system.
- January 2026 - Developing Research around Creativity and Health – Global Café Sandpit Event. The Northern Ireland Creative Health Network, in partnership with the Bamford Centre for Mental Health and the Public Health Research Network the event will bring together researchers, health professionals, creative arts organisations and practitioners to explore opportunities to develop research projects around creativity and health.
- March 2026 - Partnering with Arts Council NI, we are planning an in-person networking event with a focus on mental health to align with their new Arts and Mental Health Programme and cohort of funded projects.

Baring Foundation Support

We wish to acknowledge the vital support from Baring Foundation whose seed funding has been critical in enabling us to deliver the above activity and grow the network over the last year. Baring Foundation endorsement of our work has enabled us to consolidate our informal network, build reputation and gravitas and develop relationships to learn from equivalent networks in the UK and ROI. Ultimately, the funding has provided us a substantial platform from which we can look to secure longer-term sustainable funding and has enabled the creation of a major asset for the arts and health sector in Northern Ireland.

Will Nicholson

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Northern Ireland Creative Health Network

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