Art, healing and museums

Exploring museum-based art psychotherapy practices with a focus on the *No Words* programme at the National Gallery of Ireland

A publication of the NEMO Working Group LEM – the Learning Museum

NEMO Network of European Museum Organisations

NATIONAL GALLERY of IRELAND

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“. . . Some of the things the women have experienced, they can’t speak about—there are no words. ”

Andrea Plunkett, Art Psychotherapist in Residence

Foreword

“We are hugely grateful to the Network of European Museum Organisations (NEMO) for this opportunity. Thank you, Margherita Sani and Mira Höschler, for your encouragement and patience, and for allowing us to position this life-affirming work at the heart of such vital conversations across the sector. The research and writing of this publication would not have been possible without the consistent support of the National Gallery of Ireland Education Team and the Director of Collections and Research, Kim Smit. Our colleague, Art Psychotherapist Andrea Plunkett, has been fundamental to the process throughout, and we are deeply grateful for her insight and guidance. Above all, we thank all the *No Words* participants, who in putting their trust in us, allowed us to develop a programme that we are proud to share with you now.“

Brina Casey, Education Manager: Special Projects, and Sinéad Rice, Head of Education & Public Programming, National Gallery of Ireland

Publication December 2025

Museums today are increasingly recognised not only as custodians of heritage but also as vital spaces for wellbeing, reflection, and healing. The intersection of culture and health has become a central theme in recent years. This topic was at the heart of the **NEMO Conference** in October 2025: **Who cares? Museums, wellbeing, and resilience**, which brought together professionals from across Europe to share inspiring practices and initiatives.

There is a lot happening in this field. Yet, while the breadth of activity is inspiring, the details matter. Success in this area depends not only on vision but also on careful planning, sustainable structures, and replicable models. It is for this reason that the **NEMO Working Group LEM – The Learning Museum** (LEM WG) chose to dive deeper into one exemplary case study: the work of the **National Gallery of Ireland** and its enthusiastic **Education Department**. One of their programmes demonstrates how museums can meaningfully contribute to wellbeing through art psychotherapy, and how such initiatives can be scaled and replicated.

This publication unpacks the many aspects required to set up a successful programme:

- **Partnerships** between the cultural and health sectors, which are essential for credibility and impact.
- **Funding models** that ensure sustainability and allow for long-term engagement.
- **Work with fragile and vulnerable communities**, requiring sensitivity, trust-building, and inclusivity.
- **Professional expertise**, both from museum educators and health practitioners, to guarantee quality and ethical practice.
- **Evaluation and evidence**, to measure outcomes and strengthen advocacy for continued support.
- **Institutional commitment**, ensuring that well-being is embedded in the museum’s mission rather than treated as a temporary project.

By focusing on this replicable case study, the LEM WG aims to provide not only inspiration but also practical guidance. We hope this publication will serve as a resource for museums, cultural institutions and health partners who wish to embark on similar journeys.

Mira Höschler
LEM WG Coordinator

Margherita Sani
LEM WG Leader

Introduction

Since autumn 2023, museum-based art psychotherapy has taken place on a regular, weekly basis at the National Gallery of Ireland. Still in its infancy, the programme, titled **No Words**, is the outcome of extensive research, meaningful collaboration and serendipitous opportunity, underpinned by over three decades of steady, dedicated work across the interrelated fields of art education, community engagement and creative health.

Practically, the programme offers vulnerable and underserved individuals and communities the opportunity to engage in creative therapy within a national cultural space.

Fundamentally, it is changing the institution.

The National Gallery of Ireland, photo © The Pimlico Project

“Taking the art therapy course has helped me connect with myself.

The tour we are given through each of the exhibition rooms allows me to learn more about the different types of painting that exist in the world and how each painter expresses in their works the way they see and feel life.

Then, when we go to the creative room, we have the opportunity to make some form of art inspired by what we saw, any art that has caught our attention. And add some of the creativity, thoughts and feelings that we have inside us.

This frees me from many things I have on my mind and is a great help in releasing my emotions and expressing them in a painting or other type of art.

The connection I build with my art group mates makes me feel safe after creating my art, and having the chance to show it to my mates, and explain the reason behind it and how it makes me feel.

This frees me from a lot of things I might be holding onto. The atmosphere of unity that Andrea creates within the room helps me feel safe and comfortable.”

Programme participant, 2025
International Protection Accommodation Service Users Group

Museums reimagined

While not radical in itself, **No Words** is the first programme of its kind in Ireland. Situated within a burgeoning tapestry of arts and health initiatives across the country, it is emblematic of a slow-burning, yet increasingly visible shift throughout Europe and beyond, where museums are reimagining their role in the 21st century. Once viewed primarily as guardians of objects, progressive museology has long advocated for a focus on social engagement, critical reflection and audience participation. Through recognising museums first and foremost as civic institutions, we reveal their capacity, and indeed responsibility, to contribute to collective wellbeing, social inclusion and justice.

However, while museums may possess the 'will' to embrace this expanded civic role, realising the 'way' demands systemic change. Over two decades ago, Richard Sandell (2003), writing on social inclusion and institutional transformation, cautioned that genuine engagement with such concepts would "require museums, and the profession and sector as a whole, to radically rethink their purposes and goals, and to renegotiate their relationship to, and role within, society" (Sandell, 2003, p.45). Drawing on a growing body of research, Sandell argued that if museums were to become effective agents for social inclusion, a "paradigmatic shift in the purpose and role of museums in society, and concomitant changes in working practices" (p. 45) would be essential. **Post Critical Museology: Theory and Practice in the Art Museum**, published in 2013, can be seen to have pushed this collective charge further still, in calling for a far-reaching new alignment of academics and professionals, committed to rethinking the role and experience of the public for the everyday work of art museums (Dewdney et al., 2013). Yet, while championing this alignment as an urgent mandate, this constructive, future-oriented approach also implicitly recognises the "yawning gap" (Dewdney et al., 2013, p.221) between cultural theory and concrete practice, and so moves from asking what is wrong with the museum, to what can the museum actually do, and become, in the world now?

Museums can do, and become, much, and significant progress is evident. From Alistair Hudson's (Hudson, 2014, 2015) grassroots, real-world usefulness vision for **Museum 3.0** (Hudson 2014, 2015), to **Multaka: Museums as Meeting Point** (2015), the transnational model facilitating exchange through active intercultural participation of people with migration and/or refugee experience, it is clear that across institutions of varying scale, collection type and geography, countless projects, policies and working practices have embedded social purpose. Throughout this report, the examples cited and signposted, while selected for varying achievement, are mutually noted for advancing inclusion, equity, and community participation; enabling their institutions to become what contemporary discourse increasingly positions as "third spaces".

Originally proposed by Ray Oldenberg in his book, **The Great Good Place** (1989), "third spaces" exist between the private sphere of home and the formal structures of work or education, such as public parks, cafés and libraries. As third spaces, museums can be understood as informal, welcoming civic spaces that sit between home and work, fostering connection, conversation and community outside of traditional hierarchies (Oldenberg, 1989). Thus museums are reframed not as neutral containers of culture but as living, dialogical spaces where relationships and meanings are continually made and remade (Lynch, 2021). This inclusive, agile perspective aligns with the demonstrable ambition of museums across Europe, which in recognising their potential as third spaces, become capable of fostering human connection, dialogue and emotional wellbeing, moving, as museologist Stephen Weil predicted, from "being about something" to "being for somebody" (Weil, 1999).

Photo: Pauline Loroy, Unsplash

In striving to truly "be for somebody", museums must acknowledge the dual opportunity presented by their civic purpose; to both reflect and shape society, as essential public arenas where culture and community intersect, and where questions of identity, belonging and care are actively negotiated. The International Council of Museums' (ICOM) definition of a museum (2022) centralises this expanded role.

"A museum is a not-for-profit, permanent institution in the service of society that researches, collects, conserves, interprets and exhibits tangible and intangible heritage. Open to the public, accessible and inclusive, museums foster diversity and sustainability. They operate and communicate ethically, professionally and with the participation of communities, offering varied experiences for education, enjoyment, reflection and knowledge sharing."
ICOM, 2022

Following extensive consultation, ICOM's classification was widely adopted and endorsed. Yet its practical realisation remains the sector's defining challenge, and perhaps its greatest opportunity.

The urgent task of realising this civic role was brought into sharp focus at the 2025 UK Museums Association Conference. In the panel discussion **Museums and Civic Repair: A Call to Arms**, the risks of an inward-facing sector amid growing polarisation and instability were laid bare. Inbal Linne, Senior Creative Lead at Manchester City Galleries, cautioned that "we cannot turn away from people who do not agree with us — the Gallery is for all people" (Linne, 2025). While Damian Etheraads, Head of Culture, Museums and Archives at Herefordshire Council, posed a vital question: "How can we stop talking to ourselves... stop talking about inclusion, and start talking to people?" (Etheraads, 2025).

Beyond the museum field, this call for openness and municipal responsibility forms part of a wider cultural reckoning about the role of art in public life. Closely aligned with ICOM's emphasis on museums as a not-for-profit service for society is a growing discourse that challenges the political rebranding of art and culture as "creative industries", valued primarily for their economic output rather than as a fundamental human right. In a crucial discursive shift, Justin O'Connor, in **Culture Is Not an Industry** (2024), argues that art and culture must renew their social contract and re-align with a radical agenda for a more equitable future. For O'Connor, the true value of culture lies not in its market potential, but in its capacity to sustain the social fabric, to help us imagine, belong and care. When culture is reduced to an economic instrument, he warns, we risk neglecting its deeper purpose: to nurture empathy, connection and shared meaning (O' Connor, 2024).

Museums are, without question, being re-imagined, emerging as vital spaces for civic renewal and societal wellbeing. More importantly, and most relevant for this report, they plainly possess the unique and distinct potential to bridge the gap between collection care, cultural participation and public health.

Museums and health

Running parallel to this evolution in museum thinking lies a deepening recognition of the role of the arts in health and wellbeing. As long ago as 1948, the World Health Organization (WHO) defined health as not merely "the absence of disease or infirmity" but as "a state of complete physical, mental and social well-being" (WHO, 1948, p.1). Within this framework, cultural participation, and particularly engagement with the arts, is long understood as a significant contributor for society to thrive.

However, while this is widely accepted and, arguably, felt and known, in order to make a truly compelling case for the role of arts in health practices, a robust evidence base is required. In 2019, the WHO Health Evidence Network published the synthesis report **What is the evidence on the role of the arts in improving health and well-being? A scoping review** (Fancourt & Finn, 2019). Mapping over 900 publications and 200 reviews covering more than 3,000 studies, grouped into performing arts, visual arts, literature, culture, and digital arts, case clusters illustrated how arts practices contribute to prevention (e.g., child development, cognitive health, social cohesion, mental-health promotion) and treatment (e.g., pain management, trauma recovery, cancer care, neurorehabilitation, respiratory health). The report confirmed that participation in cultural and creative activity can play a major role in preventing ill health, promoting well-being, and managing illness across the lifespan, and called for stronger collaboration between the arts and health sectors to realise these benefits at scale.

Most recently, the publication of a first-of-its-kind study,**The Physiological Impact of Viewing Original Artworks vs. Reprints: A Comparative Study** (Worrell et al., 2025), undertaken by King's College London and co-funded by Art Fund and the Psychiatry Research Trust, strikingly attests that viewing art in a gallery or museum can produce measurable physiological and psychological benefits. Informed by the knowledge that "engagement with the arts has been associated with improved wellbeing and reduced stress, yet the underlying biological mechanisms remain poorly understood" (Worrell et al., 2025, p. 1), the study examined whether viewing authentic artworks in a gallery elicits distinct physiological and psychological responses compared with viewing high-quality reproductions in a controlled laboratory. Findings conclude that "authentic aesthetic engagement can activate integrated pathways of stress regulation and immune balance, offering a biopsychological mechanism through which cultural experiences promote resilience and wellbeing" (Worrell et al., 2025, p.2).

Dr Tony Woods, the study's senior author at King's College London, has since stated: "From a scientific perspective, the most exciting outtake is that art had a positive impact on three different body systems, the immune, endocrine and autonomic systems, at the same time. This is a unique

finding and something we were genuinely surprised to see" (Art Fund, 2025, para. 7). Woods further lauded the findings of the study, articulating that:

"Stress hormones and inflammatory markers like cortisol, IL-6 and TNF-alpha are linked to a wide range of health problems, from heart disease and diabetes to anxiety and depression. The fact that viewing original art lowered these markers suggests that cultural experiences may play a real role in protecting both mind and body."

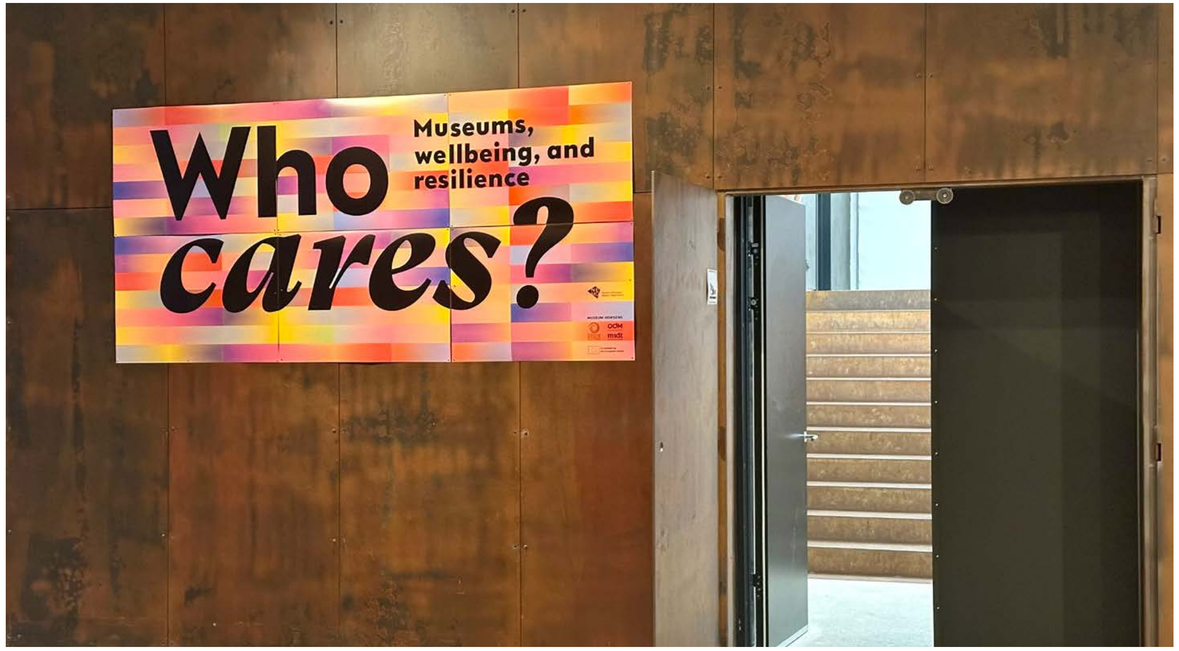
King's College London, 2025, para. 5.

This empirical validation affirms what arts and health practitioners have long known: that cultural experience can profoundly support holistic health, a recognition resonating widely across the museum landscape.

The Network of European Museum Organisations (NEMO) has repeatedly highlighted the role of museums in this context, and while its 2024 conference, **Can we talk?**, emphasised the importance of dialogue in fractured societies, **Who Cares?**, its 2025 conference, directly addressed museums' responsibilities in relation to care, wellbeing and resilience. In a special episode of **The Art Engager Podcast** (Bown, 2025), NEMO's Secretary General, Julia Pagel, explained the astute significance of the conference theme: "This is the beauty of what networks are, you feel that themes are emerging … You hear the topic of wellbeing and resilience come up once, twice, ten times, one hundred times, and we realise we need some central moment to bring these projects, the ideas, but also the many questions that come with it, together" (Bown, 2025, 3.59). The conference brought together over 328 participants from 37 countries across Europe and beyond, to engage with the subject, through the contexts of policy, practice and partnerships. The event overwhelmingly demonstrated the commitment, both within and beyond the sector, to this expanded role for museums, and culminated in the NEMO Executive Board's **Statement on Museums, mental health and wellbeing** (NEMO, 2025, October 29), underlining the urgent role of museums in promoting mental health and social cohesion across Europe.

This European agenda is also reflected in the work of the UK Museums Association (MA). Their 2024 conference, **The Joy of Museums**, celebrated sectoral creativity, wellbeing and resilience, while the aforementioned 2025 event invited attendees to share their sense of **Perthyn** (Welsh for **Belonging**) at a time where identity and nationality are increasingly politicised and volatile, with demonstrable consequences for societal welfare. On an international scale, the globally attended ICOM conference, **The Future of Museums in Rapidly Changing Communities** (November 2025), furthered this essential exchange, while closer to home, the forthcoming Irish Museums Association's 2026 Annual Conference, **Shared Futures: Museums as Spaces of Belonging**, will build on these conversations, exploring how museums can foster inclusion and collective care in a changing Ireland.

These developments offer compelling evidence for the central role museums can play in creative health, while also underlining an urgent truth: in times of political volatility and social division, it is all the more imperative that museums, conceived by design as municipal, fully inhabit their civic role, including their emerging place within public health ecosystems, where cultural participation and social connection are vital to collective flourishing.



NEMO's 2025 European Museum Conference, photo: Mira Höschler

“The *No Words* project invited me to step into a different kind of conversation about domestic violence and abuse, one shaped not by data or policy, but by expression, stillness and presence. Collaborating with the National Gallery of Ireland and Andrea Plunkett whilst drawing inspiration from Lavinia Fontana’s work reminded me that art can reach places that language sometimes can’t.

Lavinia Fontana’s portraits held a quiet power and that same quietness exists in the lives of those who have experienced domestic violence and abuse; the pauses, the unspoken, the weight of what’s often carried alone. Through this project, we tried to honour that silence whilst giving voice to the voiceless.

Participating in the *No Words* video felt extremely meaningful, to see our work come to life. It wasn’t about awareness for its own sake, but about reflection, about allowing us to stop, to feel, to connect.

For me, *No Words* reaffirmed that change doesn’t always begin with talking. Sometimes, it begins with listening and looking differently.”

Nadine O’Brien
Director of Services
Saoirse Domestic Violence Services (SDVS)

No Words: Museum-based art psychotherapy at the National Gallery of Ireland

It is within this evolving landscape that **No Words** emerged at the National Gallery of Ireland (the Gallery). Initiated as a pilot project in 2023, and as a collaboration between the Gallery's Education Department, art psychotherapist Andrea Plunkett, and Saoirse, a domestic violence support service, the programme uses museum-based art psychotherapy to engage participants affected by violence, trauma and diverse forms of social marginalisation. It has since evolved into a sustained practice and a living example of how a national cultural institution can better own its civic duty, supporting emotional recovery, community connection, and systemic reflection through art.

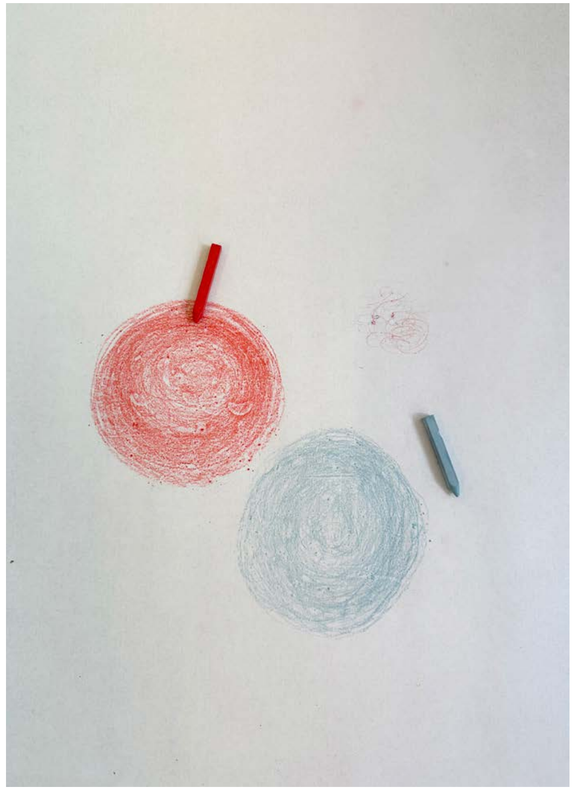
This publication charts our journey. It explores how the Gallery has embedded museum-based art psychotherapy within its wider educational strategy; how partnerships with local community initiatives, national health organisations, and frontline services have enabled it to meet social need and make space for other voices; and how, in developing a proven, adaptable, and replicable model, this work dually contributes to a growing European movement that places wellbeing at the heart of cultural life, while advancing the Gallery's own strategic ambition to become "a Gallery for all" (NGI, 2024, p.23).

The following chapters map evidence-based research and discourse in the field, beginning with a focus specifically on museum-based art psychotherapy, an evolving area of practice that delivers art psychotherapy within cultural settings. By situating this development within the broader context of museum education and examining the psychotherapeutic mechanisms that underpin the work, we then demonstrate that the distinctive environments of museums and cultural spaces do not simply accommodate art psychotherapy, but actively and uniquely enhance the therapeutic process. This approach, we contend, offers far-reaching impact, to the mutual benefit of participants and institutions alike.

International examples of museum-based art psychotherapy projects, both historical and current, illustrate this progressive work and provide a foundation for the principal focus of this publication: **No Words**, the Gallery's flagship arts and health programme. Examined through its origin, structure, implementation, and evaluation outcomes, the programme illustrates the transformative potential of embedding psychotherapeutic practice at the heart of a national cultural institution.

As **No Words** has profoundly reshaped how the Gallery engages and supports underserved communities and vulnerable audiences, central to this publication are the voices of programme participants and partners, in their own words; their insights providing compelling evidence of the programme's effectiveness, significance and potential. By deliberately positioning lived experience alongside institutional reflection, we aim to provide resource and testimony one that honours personal truth while informing systemic change.

Imperfect, iterative and ongoing, at its core **No Words** is about reimagining what museums can be: not simply spaces for looking, but for feeling; not only for learning, but for healing. Museum-based art psychotherapy makes room for unknown stories, challenging conversations, and moments of shared understanding. In this spirit, the publication offers practical insights, encouragement and critical reflection for those working at the intersection of cultural engagement and mental health. More than a case study, it is also a call to action, inviting museum professionals, art psychotherapists, educators, policymakers and cultural leaders to consider how art and empathy can work together to shape a more humane, responsive, and socially engaged museum landscape: one in which our institutions stand not only as pillars of history, but as catalysts for care.



NEMO's 2025 European Museum Conference, photo: Mira Höschler

Publication December 2025

Chapter 1

Museum-based art psychotherapy: Development, mechanisms and benefits

Publication December 2025

What is art psychotherapy?

Humans have expressed creative impulses throughout history, from prehistoric cave paintings to the sculptures of ancient civilisations and, over time, we have come to use these expressions therapeutically, as a means of understanding human history, culture and consciousness. Despite this long creative lineage, the formal discipline of art psychotherapy is relatively young. Like most psychotherapeutic modalities, it developed differently across the world, each branch shaped by its own cultural and theoretical influences.

In the United States, early practice was largely defined by the interplay between Freudian psychoanalysis and art-making, while British art therapy evolved with greater emphasis on Jungian archetypes (Borowsky Junge, 2016). Today, art psychotherapy remains a dynamic and ever-evolving field (Anderson, 1980; Hocoy, 2005; Kaplan, 2007), but there is broad consensus between the British Association of Art Therapists (BAAT) and the American Art Therapy Association (AATA) regarding its core principles. Both organisations describe a fundamentally humanistic worldview, one that centres on relational engagement, creative capacity and human free will (Yalom, 1980). The AATA defines art therapy as “a mental health profession that enriches the lives of individuals, families, and communities through active art-making, creative process, applied psychological theory, and human experience within a psychotherapeutic relationship” (AATA, n.d.). The BAAT adds that its goal is to “reduce distress and improve social, emotional and mental health by promoting insight, self-compassion, and a sense of agency and self-worth” (BAAT, n.d.).

Art psychotherapy is grounded in the belief that creative activity is inherently healing. Its transformative power lies within the “triangular relationship”, the dynamic interplay between client, therapist, and image or artefact (Ioannides, 2019; Springham & Huet, 2018). The image or object created during therapy can acquire deep symbolic meaning; it may become “a formative element in the establishment of a conscious attitude to the contents of the unconscious mind” (Schaverien, 1992, cited in Hocoy, 2005, p. 8). Likewise, the therapist’s capacity to hold and contain the client emotionally during this process can be profoundly restorative.

“In February 2025, Dublin City Community Cooperative (the Co-op) learned of Andrea Clare Plunkett, Art Therapist and current Chair of the Irish Association of Creative Art Therapists (IACAT), and the ground-breaking cultural art therapy programme she delivers at the National Gallery of Ireland. Coincidentally, our Refugee Support Team had recently been discussing how to strengthen both mental health supports and creative initiatives in our outreach to International Protection Applicants at emergency accommodation sites in inner-city Dublin. Seeing the National Gallery of Ireland’s short film of Andrea’s work with Domestic, Sexual & Gender Based Violence services, it was clear the *No Words* cultural art therapy programme was a perfect fit for our work.

We met with both Andrea and Brina Casey, Education Manager at the National Gallery of Ireland, to explore how the programme might benefit our asylum-seeker and refugee communities. In the lead-up to Andrea’s eight-week programme, the National Gallery of Ireland offered several guided tours to help our service users feel at home in the space.

The response was remarkable; tours ran over time, service users returned with friends and, as word spread, members of the asylum-seeker and refugee community began arriving simply in search of a safe and welcoming place.

This collaboration has shown how galleries can act as a ‘third space’ where people connect, express themselves and feel part of a wider community. It offers a creative, trauma-informed way to reduce isolation, build confidence and nurture belonging — critically important for those facing language and cultural barriers. It has been one of the most well-attended and impactful initiatives the Co-op has collaborated on and we’re deeply grateful to Andrea, IACAT, and the National Gallery of Ireland for their partnership and care in supporting this diverse and resilient group.”

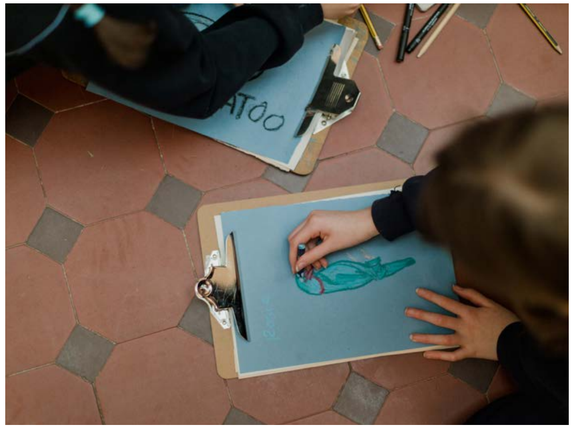
Megan Jones
Refugee Support Worker
Dublin City Community Co-operative

To the untrained eye, an art therapy session may appear indistinguishable to an art class with paints, brushes and creative materials at hand. The difference, however, is both "felt and known by therapists and patients" (Salom, 2011, p. 85).

Historically, art psychotherapy was developed and practiced in hospitals and mental health institutions (Watson et al., 2021). Yet its inherent flexibility, the very fluidity and openness characteristic of its development, has allowed it to move progressively beyond these traditional clinical spaces. Coles and Winter (2022) describe art psychotherapy as "an innately responsive psychological therapy approach" (p. 57), one that adapts to new social and cultural contexts.

Societal influences on the practice of art psychotherapy have also grown. Kapitan (2014) asks us to consider art therapy as "a complex social landscape that contains many, many communities of practice" (p. 12), including a range of potential locations, audiences and contexts. This has led to a shift; from a focus on working with the individual, to enhancing the experience of the collective; from an attention to personal goals to the utilisation of skills for the benefit of "community development, social advocacy, and social action" (Betts et al., 2015, p. 22).

Our concern here lies less with the specific theoretical orientations of the art psychotherapy being practiced, and more with the wider cultural and social dimensions of the work. As Wadeson (2016) makes clear, while an art psychotherapist may practice from within a range of different psychotherapeutic frameworks, be that Jungian, Gestalt or psychoanalytic, "of greater prominence is the need for understanding and skill in working within a socio-cultural context" (p. 131). This evolution is true to the profession's historical character as, since it first emerged in its modern form in the 1930s, art psychotherapy has always attracted those who seek to apply its methods to broader social purposes. Evolving definitions have continually navigated the tension between those more focused on a deeply psychoanalytic approach to the individual unconscious, and those who would favour a more expansive application that goes beyond strictly clinical goals and is "rooted in community needs" (Kalmanowitz & Potash, 2025, p. 2). Kaplan (2007) argues that art therapy and social action are now inseparable and as such, all art therapists should operate within this context. We will, duly, explore the potential personal and social impacts that can emerge when this social action art psychotherapy stance merges with that of the 21st-century museum, a model of engagement that is more attuned, socially relevant, expansive and civically minded.



Drawing in the National Gallery of Ireland, photo © The Pimlico Project

What do we mean by museum-based art psychotherapy?

Museums, galleries and cultural spaces are actively pursuing new partnerships and interdisciplinary engagements that allow them to fully exploit their social value and the unique role they can play in positively contributing to the health and wellbeing of our communities. Indeed, Treadon et al. (2006) illustrate how museums have created progressively more opportunities for visitors to have meaningful interactions with their exhibitions and spaces, inviting and encouraging them to interact with and interpret what is on display. Consequently, and in service of this approach, professions and expertise not traditionally found within a museum staff, such as social workers, community workers and art psychotherapists are now being invited in.

Museum-based art psychotherapy is an evolving area of practice in which art psychotherapy takes place in a cultural setting such as a museum or gallery. While participants may come from a range of different audiences or client groups, and a diversity of approaches and formats are utilised, a consistent aspect of museum-based art psychotherapy programmes is that they are always led and guided by a qualified art psychotherapist, who applies an appropriate and considered psychotherapeutic framework to the experience (see, for example: Coles & Jury (eds.), 2020; Pantagoutsou et al., 2017; Salom, 2013; Treadon, 2016; Dejkameh & Shipps, 2019; Peacock, 2012). The engagement of an art psychotherapist in this work, and the safeguarding they inherently provide, is *sui*

generis; this is what distinguishes the activities we are interrogating in this publication from the vast array of other creative and wellbeing pursuits that take place, effectively and beneficially, within cultural settings.

Our research into the history and practice of art psychotherapy within museums and cultural settings has made us aware of projects that have been taking place across the globe, quietly, creatively and impactfully, for over three decades (Dejkameh & Shipps, 2019; Zhvitiashvili, 2020). Nonetheless, it continues to be a relatively unknown practice within museology, and one for which the evidence and research base remains incomplete and poised for advancement (Holttum, 2020). This is despite the existence of findings that persuasively attest to how the psychodynamic mechanisms of art psychotherapy fit particularly well within a museum or cultural context (see, for example: Alves et al., 2024; Watson et al., 2021; Coles, 2020; Thaler et al., 2017; Froggett & Trustram, 2014). Here we will look at how these mechanisms not only facilitate the integration of art psychotherapy into museums and cultural settings, but also serve, in a singular manner, to enhance the overall therapeutic experience (Spraggins Rochford, 2017b; Watson et al., 2021; Jury et al., 2015).

Slow looking, photo © National Gallery of Ireland

Integration of art psychotherapy and psychodynamic mechanisms in a museum/cultural setting

Psychodynamic concepts in museum settings

There is a strong correlation between the ambience encountered in a traditional museum environment and that of a therapeutic space (Rubenstein, 2022), with both lending themselves to moments of stillness and tranquillity. The synergies between these two realms, however, do not end there. Primary psychotherapeutic mechanisms that are fundamental to its successful operation include relating to external objects, the therapeutic relationship and its dynamics, and the importance of experiencing a contained, safe space; all of these processes also find a natural relevance in the practice of museum-based art psychotherapy.

This section explores the particular bearing that the psychotherapeutic theory of object relations has had on the development of museum-based art psychotherapy to date; the evident advantages for participants of the social, rather

than clinical, settings of cultural spaces; and some of the social and community impacts of this practice. Highlighting the growing body of literature that speaks to the psychodynamic underpinnings of museum-based art psychotherapy, we will further illustrate this with a number of examples, both of art psychotherapists working within cultural settings, as well as collaborative projects between museum educators and art psychotherapists (see: Pantagoutsou et al., 2017; Froggett & Trustram, 2014; Ioannides, 2021; Watson et al., 2021; Lanceley et al., 2011; Walters, 2020; Coles et al., 2019; Salom, 2015; Jury et al., 2015). We make no claim that the examples included here represent an exhaustive summation of museum-based art psychotherapy developments and projects to date; there has, and continues to be, more activity across the globe than we could reasonably attest to. Indeed, we are very aware of, and hugely indebted to, the rigorous efforts of our fellow museum workers and researchers around the world, to develop, promote and legitimise this work. It is a privilege to be able to contribute to this evolving field.

Object relations theory

The psychotherapeutic theory of object relations rests upon the assumption that to be in relationship with others is fundamental to what it means to be human. In this framework the "object" is not an inanimate thing, but rather emblematic of the "other" that we inherently seek to connect with. There is much divergence in thinking in why and how we seek and make connection with the object or other, as well as a vast array of theories and theorists, but for our purposes here, we will frame this work in the context of D.W. Winnicott's (1971) influential concepts of "transitional phenomena" and the "holding environment", as well as Christopher Bollas's (1987) formulation of the "transformational object". These theories are regularly cited within the literature on museum-based art psychotherapy and, as we will see, are particularly germane to its functioning.

Object relations theory cites object seeking and relating as "the basic unit of mental life" (Bateman & Holmes, p.39); the self can only develop within a context of relationship as "the human being is essentially social: our need for contact with others is primary" (Gomez, p. 2). Winnicott's "transitional phenomena" are the things that resolve the ambivalence between our human need to exist simultaneously as an individual, and as a member of collective society; they are the "resting place" (Gomez, p. 93) for these contradictory impulses.

Most famously, Winnicott used the example of a child's attachment to a teddy bear or blanket; this becomes its "transitional object", the thing that can both represent, and provide the comfort sought of the child's absent primary caregiver. Additionally, the "transitional phenomenon" is a non-material object, such as a song or comforting habit, while the "transitional space" between the subject and object is the space that develops that is "neither self nor other, subjective nor objective, inner nor outer" (Bateman & Holmes, p. 59). Having and experiencing transitional phenomena is an important part of coming to an understanding of the self, in that it allows us to differentiate: "It gives room for the process of becoming able to accept difference and similarity" (Winnicott, 1971, p. 8).

Importantly, humans need the experience of another person engaging, in a sensitive and attuned way, with our transitional phenomena; allowing them to manifest and responding to them appropriately. It is through such an encounter that feelings of "self-efficacy and creativity" (Bateman & Holmes, p. 59) can be engendered for the child or adult involved.

When we contextualise the concept of transitional phenomena in a museum or cultural setting, and given that "museums offer particular environments in which visitors can select cultural objects of personal significance and elaborate their relations to them" (Froggett & Trustram, 2014, p. 482), we can begin to deduce how transformational the process of a museum-based art psychotherapy programme can be for its participants. As we've seen, the object we relate to can be a "non-human thing or idea which is subjectively important due to its human associations" (Gomez, p. 2). While at an early developmental stage the transitional object represents the person the baby is closest to, and is the very beginning of our capacity for symbol-making and experiencing playful thought, as we mature, we can expand the range of things into which we place symbolic value. We can feel emotionally connected to a piece of art, a film, a song, or another cultural experience; we can experience both a sense of personal intimacy and affinity, while also feeling part of a collective experience. It follows that in a psychotherapeutic relationship, the transitional object might become the therapist; in art psychotherapy, the object might be a particular artwork; and in museum-based art psychotherapy, both or either an artwork, or the museum or cultural space, may function as a transitional phenomenon; it becomes the "other" that the person wants to form a connection with.

Primary School children in the National Gallery of Ireland, photo © The Pimlico Project

“In October 2023, I attended an art therapy ‘taster session’ facilitated by Andrea Plunkett, the National Gallery of Ireland’s Art Psychotherapist in Residence. As a curator, I was interested in understanding the purpose of art therapy, and how it works within a museum setting.

Andrea explained the basic ideas behind art therapy and how it can help people deal with trauma. Understanding that difficult issues could be worked through without words was eye-opening for me. Each of us in the small group had the opportunity to experience how making art, or at least using art materials, can allow busy, anxious minds to grow calm. Using crayons held in both hands to make patterns on paper was wonderfully meditative. We also had a session in the Print Gallery. I went in thinking it would be a pointless exercise for me as I had curated the exhibition. How wrong I was! I emerged feeling moved. I spent a long time simply looking at a large carborundum print by Barbara Rae. I knew it spoke to climate change and it usually sparked feelings of anxiety in me. But, standing in front of it for long minutes, eyes sweeping across the surface or settling on a particular point, I grew calm and peaceful, and saw and imagined things I had never thought about before. Afterwards, back in studio, we took paint and crayons and made our own work of art inspired by the session. It was great fun; the process of making marks on paper with no agenda was physical and somehow freeing.

I would recommend to all my colleagues to take the opportunity to experience this art therapy session. It is so valuable to know that the national collection of art that we work with and care for every day can be used as a means of helping diverse people to deal with difficult experiences in a safe and joyful environment.”

Anne Hodge, Curator of Prints
and Drawings
National Gallery of Ireland

Froggett and Trustram (2014) state, “museums are premised on the fact we make relationships with objects” (p. 484). While making these connections, and following the tenets of object relations theory, we can also begin to understand our similarities with, and differences to, those around us. Stiles & Mermer-Welly (1998) utilised the therapeutic potential of this psychological capacity for thoughtful “play” in their work with a group of socially and economically disadvantaged, pregnant young women. In attempting to develop effective ways to manage the psychosocial needs of this group, they incorporated museum gallery visits into the art therapy treatment the group was participating in. Over the course of their visits to a gallery, the young people were directly encouraged to think about the artworks they were seeing, to make connections with their own lives, and to consider if the works changed their own perceptions of themselves. In this, the participants were being actively encouraged to use cultural artefacts as transitional objects, a process that ultimately resulted in them having an altered view of their community, and of how they perceived themselves within it. In the recorded personal outcomes felt by these young women, we see the direct impacts that can emerge from the use of cultural spaces and artefacts in the practice of art psychotherapy.

Holding and containment

The concepts of “holding” and “containment” are also central to psychotherapeutic practice, and to object relations theory. Articulated by Winnicott (1971) in his description of the parental “holding environment”, and by Wilfred Bion’s (1962) formulation of the container and *reverie*, these theories are particularly relevant to the successful functioning of museum-based art psychotherapy (Froggett & Trustram, 2014; Coles, 2020; Ioannides, 2019).

Winnicott’s “holding” environment is an emotionally secure space in which one can exist in a relaxed and undefended way. It is in the experience of this holding that we can feel a sense of “existing over time and space as one being, existentially real and personally authentic” (Gomez, 1997, p. 89). Froggett & Trustram (2014), through their analysis of the **Who Cares?** research programme, convincingly conflate the holding functions of a museum, in both a curatorial sense and through the framework of an exhibition, with the museum’s capacity to function as a holding environment for the emotional responses of their visitors.

Salom’s (2015) work with internally displaced indigenous women (IDIW) as part of an art therapy programme with the Museo del Oro (Gold Museum) in Bogotá, Columbia, is an excellent example of this dynamic in action. This project sought to use a combined cultural, art making, and art therapy process to ease the mental health impacts that internally displaced people experience. Issues of discrimination, difficulties accessing health care and housing, language barriers and personal feelings of loneliness, are recognised as just some of the challenging circumstances that internally displaced people must deal with. Additionally, they must try and reconcile their understandable desire to hold onto and express their own cultural origins, with a need to learn how to live in, and come to an understanding of, the culture of their new location.

The guiding hypothesis of this project was that, during a process of acculturation, the museum and the project coordinators could function as a safe holding environment, “an emotionally safe space, free of aesthetic judgement, open to emotional communication and supportive of participants’ history through art-making” (Salom, 2015, p. 52). Additionally, it was recognised that the non-verbal nature of an art therapy process could beneficially bridge the language discrepancies between the women and the project facilitators. Two separate groups of indigenous women were invited into the museum to engage in an art making process. The facilitators (including an art therapist, an artist and a psychology student) eschewed linear planning or a directive approach, trusted in non-verbal communication, and allowed each session to progress in an organic way, led by the traditions and cultural impulses of the women. While the industrial art supplies of the host culture were made available to the group, the participants put these to use in ways that expressed their own traditions and allowed them to symbolise their own experiences. And while the museum space was new and unknown to the women, it functioned as the psychotherapeutic potential space, allowing their “inner frameworks [to] interact with external reality to process events, create relationships, identify subjective experience and conjure intimate meaning” (p. 49). Situating this process in a museum setting is of notable importance as it ensured that the women were also benefiting from the stability of an institution such as the Museo del Oro. In contrast to the transience and uncertainty of their recent histories, “a continuous artistic dialogue inside the museum could provide a sense of permanency that is lacking in the ever-changing circumstances of IDIW” (p.58).

In thinking about museums both as physical spaces and in terms of the objects that they hold, Christopher Bollas’s “transformational object” (1987) has obvious pertinence here too. This is a thing that can serve many purposes, be it a “vehicle for projection, a receptacle for unwanted aspects of the self, a source of delight and terror, bringing one into touch with one’s deepest desires and disappointments” (Bateman & Holmes, 1995, p. 74). For Bollas, this internalising experience of the object can transform one’s sense of self. In healthy development, the baby integrates and transforms the object in the context of its positive, holding experiences with its primary caregiver, while in a therapeutic relationship the client can do this work with, and through, the therapist and in the secure framework of the clinical space. The ground-breaking art psychotherapy programming that has taken place at the National Museum of Contemporary Art Athens since 2016 shows these processes in action. By constructing and holding a psychotherapeutic frame in which the participants could place their trust, and using the museum as the secure and welcoming holding space, participants experienced the contemporary artworks in the collection as transformational objects. Ioannides et al. (2021) describe a process by which the participant groups could “internalise the cultural world to transform, to understand, explore, reveal

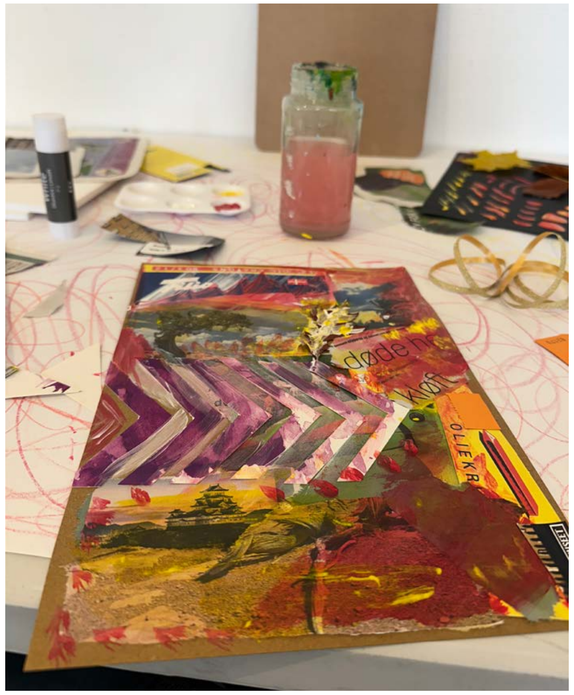
and acquaint themselves with different aspects of themselves" (p. 7).

From a psychodynamic perspective, art psychotherapy is a process that brings the unconscious into conscious awareness through creative engagement, reflection and relationship. The process is both expressive and containing, offering a safe, boundaried space in which thoughts, feelings, and experiences that may be unavailable to verbal articulation, can be explored symbolically through art making.

When this therapeutic process takes place in a museum or gallery, the environment itself becomes part of the therapeutic frame. The space, its architecture, light, history, and the presence of artworks, contribute both to the containment and to the aesthetic experience of the therapeutic encounter (Kalmanowitz & Potash, 2010; Coles & Jury, 2020). In this way, the museum functions as Winnicott's (1971) potential space: a transitional area between inner and outer worlds, where imagination, play and creativity can facilitate emotional growth and healing.

Moreover, the museum setting provides opportunities for projection, identification and relational meaning-making that are distinct from those in clinical or studio-based contexts. The art objects on display can act as mediating third elements within the therapeutic relationship, facilitating dialogue, reflection, and empathy (Thaler et al., 2017; Watson et al., 2021). The relational triangle between therapist, client and artwork expands to include the museum as an active participant in the therapeutic process.

As Spraggins Rochford (2017a) observes, this model of practice can profitably draw on feminist systems thinking, recognising both individual and collective experiences, and situating healing within broader social, cultural and institutional frameworks. Thus, museum-based art psychotherapy not only supports personal recovery but also holds potential for collective repair, aligning with current museum discourse that seeks to position museums as agents of social change, civic care and wellbeing (Sandell, 2002; Janes & Sandell, 2019; Murawski, 2021).



Cultural Art Therapy Workshop at NEMO's 2025 European Museum Conference, photo: Mira Höschler

The museum environment: Holding collective consciousness. A non-clinical, non-stigmatising safe space fostering social inclusion

We have established that when working therapeutically with the personal or subjective meaning evoked by an encounter with a cultural object, emotional transformation can occur. But how is this different when this work takes place within a museum or cultural space? Might an art psychotherapy client experience the same outcomes if they were to be presented with a photocopy or printed image of an artwork instead of the original object? Does any difference manifest in the work due to its happening within a museum environment, rather than remaining within a traditional clinical setting?

Sue Holttum (2020) speaks clearly to the absence of formal evaluations of many museum-based art psychotherapy initiatives, and the problem that this lack of data presents. While we

may only "tentatively" (p. 36) state many of the findings of research, here, through three lenses, we explore how and why it can be particularly meaningful for clients and art psychotherapists to participate in, and work within, cultural contexts. Considering the ways in which museum-based art psychotherapy programmes are enacted, we will address: firstly, the role the cultural space plays in holding and connecting both participants and therapists to a community and its collective unconscious; secondly, the value of such spaces as non-clinical and socially inclusive; and thirdly, the situating of these practices at the intersection between art psychotherapy, and community activism and social action frameworks.

The museum as container and a holding place for collective consciousness

Museums and galleries are often long-established institutions, housed in architecturally significant buildings that convey permanence and stability. They occupy an enduring place in society as guardians of collective memory. Yet these same attributes can also be perceived as exclusionary, depending on how they are experienced by communities (Coles, 2020). Nonetheless, in contrast to more commercial or transient spaces, the continuity, enduring nature and symbolic weight of museums contribute profoundly to their value as sites for museum-based art psychotherapy.

Froggett et al. (2011) speak specifically to the societally encompassing nature of museum collections, especially those that are publicly owned. Through their very existence, "they symbolise the fact that culture, which differentiates social groups from one another, is *also* something collectively generated over time and place. [...] They are thus potentially vital instruments of inclusion, helping to insert people into a common culture" (p. 65).

The collective consciousness that imbues cultural settings also opens them up further for psychotherapeutic use. The psychoanalyst Wilfred Bion described how healthy emotional growth occurs in the context of the person having access to a container capable of *reverie* (Bion, 1962). In developmental terms, this is a mother or father figure, a person who is available and open to receiving or taking in feelings that may be too much for the child. This process of projection allows the expelled emotions to be taken in, digested and metabolised by the other, who, if functioning optimally, can then return them in a more tolerable form to the child (Bateman & Holmes, 1995). In this model, we develop in a more healthy manner, when we know that we are being "held in mind" by the other.

In a therapeutic relationship, the therapist can play this role for the client, acting as a safe, secure and constant presence during and between sessions. It is further possible to map this consequential role of "container" onto the position that a museum or cultural space can come to hold for members of a community or, more specifically, for a museum-based art psychotherapy participant. Salom (2008) articulates that when we enter a museum, we have the luxury of existing within its "protective limits" (p. 98) and of knowing that we are safely contained. Consequently, the mind can "expand beyond its usual internal dialogues" (p. 98) and, from this secure base, "risk" (p. 98) feeling otherwise repressed or unpleasant emotions, such as aloneness. As places that intrinsically "keep objects safe and ordered", museums "may help to foster a sense of containment" (Coles, quoted in Jury, et al., 2015, p. 27).

As previously noted, museums are places where we can form personal symbolic connections, while at the same time feeling collectively and culturally held (Froggett & Trustram, 2014). The interplay of these dynamics can result in an experience of transpersonal consciousness, where one moves beyond the usual limits of ego and personality that form one's everyday psychic patterns. Pantagoutsou et al. (2017) evidence this effect amongst the participants of art psychotherapy groups at EMST The National Museum of Contemporary Art Athens, where both the environment and the stimuli offered allowed "the members' unconscious minds" (p. 75) to be activated. With the museum object functioning as the "symbolic third", that is as a presence that bridges the gap between the personal, subjective and the wider, cultural sphere, the participants could use the museum as "a therapeutic regressive space" (p. 75). While, in this process, their emotional experiences were being contained and metabolised, the space was also demonstrating "human similarities beyond our own particular time place, relieving feelings of isolation as [participants] relate to what they witness" (Salom, 2011, p. 84).

The museum as a non-clinical, non-stigmatising safe space

The existence of cultural spaces as communal, non-clinical settings is another important feature of this work that warrants interrogation. Where a medical or clinical space may, through necessity, be organised in a functional and utilitarian way, cultural spaces "surround visitors with a variety of historical artefacts and exhibits to stimulate learning, leisure, and reminiscence" (Chen et al., 2014, p. 138). For Alison Hawtin, who used gallery visits and collections as a regular part of her art therapy work with adults with learning disabilities, the normality of the setting was fundamental: "A key success criteria for us was that it simply looked like any visit to a gallery by any group of people" (quoted in Jury, et al., 2015, p. 27).

The very fact of the therapist and client group interacting in a non-clinical setting can have identifiable impacts on the progress of the work, including bringing an element of play into the therapeutic dynamic, and a new layering to relationships. In their analysis of the experience of art psychotherapists who have facilitated museum-based art psychotherapy projects in museums, Watson et al. (2021) note the emergence of humour and a degree of informality in the interactions between the art therapists and group participants. Whereas in a clinical setting, the power dynamic between therapist and client is explicit, relating within a museum setting can have an informal quality, with "a more equal distribution of power between the therapist and service user" (p. 145). Furthermore, the demonstrable

effort of the art psychotherapist in trying to practice in a new and "potentially more conducive setting" (p. 144) can also transmit their level of caring and conscientiousness to the participants.

The normalcy of the museum setting also facilitates group participants to develop social connections and personal relationships, a useful element in reducing the sense of isolation and loneliness that those who experience mental health problems often report (Chen et al., 2014; Coles et al., 2019) note that museum coffee shops allow participants the space to meet autonomously before or after a session. The act of doing this demonstrates that, not only can the group exist without the presence of the therapist, but also that they are taking their place as members of society and regular museum visitors. The reductive labels of "patient" or person "in treatment" do not apply.

Conducting a museum-based art psychotherapy group within a cultural setting allows for, and often requires, greater physical movement to take place. The group may move back and forth between art works or areas of activity; some spaces may be private within the museum, while others will likely be publicly accessible exhibition spaces. This process can bring new information into the therapeutic frame that might otherwise be absent, as "the style used to inhabit and explore a place illustrates how clients inhabit and explore themselves and their world" (Salom, 2011, p. 85). Coles et al. (2019) point to an additional potential benefit of this experience of movement for the participant: "The ebb and flow between the private and public spaces, and between the intimate and the more social relating, could perhaps help someone to connect vulnerable and more robust parts of themselves and encourage a more embodied, continuous sense of self" (p. 64).

This process of bringing the self into focus, getting to know where personal parameters lie and, in the process, articulating one's inner life, can be further strengthened by the seemingly simple act of picking and choosing which cultural artefact or piece of art the participant wishes to engage with. In exercising their choice and in stating a preference or a dislike, the participant has "taken a step towards thinking about" (Coles, et al., 2019, p. 60) themselves.

These attributes: the non-clinical yet protective, informal space; the social interactions and required movement through public and private spaces; and the process of stating personal cultural preferences and choices, are all particular to the museum-based art psychotherapy process, playing an important part in its successful execution.

The museum environment: Social action art therapy and social inclusion

There is an inclusive and companionable nature to working within a museum setting that has clear connotations for the participants' sense of what it is to exist in their own community, and how or if they feel included and valued. But it also touches on the societal changes that museums, as important and powerful civic institutions, can come to effect, and

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on how they crossover with the imperatives of the social action art therapy movement.

Social action art therapy is a framework that argues that art psychotherapists cannot engage effectively with a person's emotional life unless they attend to the reality of the client's social circumstances, as well as the impacts of their social experiences: "We cannot separate the people we treat from the cultural settings in which they live and by which they have been influenced" (Kaplan, 2007, p. 13). Kaplan argues that these facts must be honoured in the work, and further exhorts art psychotherapists to continually "'think' social action" (p. 14), regardless of the contexts within which they are operating.

But how can being mindful of the need for cultural sensitivities when working with an individual or a group be categorised as social action? In one respect, this awareness of the different circumstances that people exist and live in is what has allowed and legitimised psychotherapists to practice in locations that go far beyond the traditional clinical space. But furthermore, and as Kaplan (2007) says, "one does not necessarily need to be demonstrating in public places to effect social action" (p. 14). We argue that the very act of hosting a museum-based art psychotherapy initiative in a museum or cultural space can be seen as an act of quiet resistance, a way of confronting social imbalance, reclaiming public space for those who may otherwise feel marginalised or unseen, and effecting social change.

People engaged with mental health services, for example, can experience a sense of a loss of personal control, social exclusion (Schneider & Bramley, 2008), labelling by society, and discrimination (Chen et al, 2014). If your circumstances require you to engage with social services, and most of your experiences have taken place in an under-resourced office or, perhaps, an unsuitable clinical setting, you may feel that this reflects how you are viewed by society at large, and experience this as reinforcing a sense of being "othered".

In contrast to these experiences, museums and galleries are widely regarded as unique spaces of cultural importance that should be protected and attended to with particular care and thoughtfulness. Watson et al. (2021) speak to how the act of welcoming a person into a place that holds valuable and significant objects can, by extension, compel a sense of intrinsic worth and personal value for the visitor. When museum-based art psychotherapy initiatives are delivered with due care and thoughtful planning, this experience is amplified. Participants not only engage creatively but are also reminded, symbolically and experientially, that they too are part of the shared human story being held and honoured within those walls.

From theory to practice

This summation of the beneficial interplay between the act of engaging in art psychotherapy and the unique characteristics of cultural spaces and contexts is not exhaustive, and the examples referred to only scratch the surface of the innovative practice that is happening worldwide. We encourage the reader to explore this topic further through the body of published writings, research and case studies that have been invaluable to our work, but that we could not possibly do full justice to here: from Dejkameh & Shipps's (2019) history of the early integration of art therapists into education spaces at Queens Museum, New York, to the deep and rigorous process work that EMST The National of Contemporary Art Athens (Pantagoutsou et al, 2017; Ioannides et al., 2021) has engaged in for the last decade; from the compelling and compassionate programme of art psychotherapy that has been impressively integrated into the Montreal Museum of Fine Arts (Baddeley et al., 2017; Legari et al., 2020), to the multiple inspiring case studies gathered by Ali Coles and Helen Jury (2020) in **Art Therapy in Museums and Galleries, Reframing Practice**. These examples have both heartened and galvanised us.

Museum-based art psychotherapy aligns therapeutic intent with civic purpose. It bridges the personal and the public, inviting participants to see themselves not as patients, but as contributors to the cultural and emotional life of their communities. This integration of inner and outer worlds is one powerful way in which art psychotherapy can realise its potential as a socially engaged and transformative practice.

NEMO's 2025 European Museum Conference, photo: Mira Höschler

“I enrolled for art therapy because I enjoy looking at artworks. I ended up getting so much more from the experience.

**The check-in was a refreshing opportunity to be part of a safe group.
It helped reduce my isolation.**

Viewing art, it was a privilege to see many beautiful paintings, sculptures, drawings and glass work by great Irish and international artists.

Making art each week was an opportunity to create something — a depiction of an artwork I like, my life experience, anything.

Reflection: a time to talk, listen, cry, smile, do nothing, about our art or anything else.

Other benefits: I enjoyed the sandwiches, background music, networking, the building, committing to attend weekly, the bus pass, gift, and keeping my art.

Thank you to the National Gallery of Ireland, our facilitator Andrea, Megan from the Dublin City Community Co-op and other participants of my art therapy group.

I was blessed by the art therapy.”

Programme participant, 2025
International Protection Accommodation Services Users Group

Chapter 2

Case study: *No Words*—developing a museum-based art psychotherapy programme at the National Gallery of Ireland

Publication December 2025

Introduction

This chapter is an exposition of **No Words**, the National Gallery of Ireland's museum-based art psychotherapy programme. We introduce the Gallery and its Education Department, and provide a brief overview of the contemporary social concerns in Ireland that directly informed the development of **No Words**. We explore the institutional context in which the project took shape, its methodology, objectives, and funding considerations, before presenting a detailed picture of the project stakeholders and its main components. This is followed by a discussion of the outcomes and findings presented in the **No Words** independent evaluation report.

We recognise the implications of advocating for a museum to engage with social issues as complex and nuanced as mental health and domestic violence and, moreover, of doing so through a non-traditional framework such as art psychotherapy. This chapter presents an in-depth profile of our community partner in this work, Saoirse Domestic Violence Services (Saoirse), including the services they provide, the profile of their service users, and their considerable organisational needs. Saoirse is one of a number of non-statutory domestic violence support services operating in Ireland today, providing critical resources to victims and survivors of domestic abuse. Highlighting their work provides essential context for understanding **No Words** and the circumstances of its participants. It also speaks to the ambition of our work and to the complexity of the social issues that we believe museum-based art psychotherapy programmes can meaningfully engage with.

Ensuring that **No Words** was comprehensively and independently evaluated and documented was a fundamental element of the project planning from the outset. This chapter draws extensively on the independent evaluator's report, presenting the project's findings, outcomes, challenges and future recommendations.

The National Gallery of Ireland and the Education Department

The National Gallery of Ireland (the Gallery) is the country's principal cultural institution devoted to the collection and care of fine art. Comprising approximately 18,000 objects, including paintings, drawings, watercolours, miniatures, prints, sculptures, and decorative arts, the Gallery's extensive holdings include masterpieces by many of the most celebrated figures in Western European art, alongside the most comprehensive collection of historic Irish art in the world. Funded primarily by the State, the Gallery employs more than 160 staff members and provides free public access 361 days a year.

Being a "National Gallery for All" (NGI, 2024, p. 23) is a stated strategic priority of the institution, which actively works to foster "a culture of inclusivity, diversity and equality" (p. 23) for all audiences. The Gallery's Education Department embodies this ambition, and educational values have been integral to the institution since its inception.

In 1854, when the Act to establish the National Gallery of Ireland was passed by Parliament, the Gallery recognised its intrinsic role as an educator. As former Head of Education at the Gallery, Marie Bourke, details in **The Story of Irish Museums, 1790-2000, Culture, Identity and Education**, the first Board of Governors and Guardians articulated this clearly, noting:

> "The establishment of a National Gallery in Dublin would be of general importance not only in referring to the cultivation of public taste and in affording to all classes a source of informed enjoyment, but more immediately in regard to the aid it would give to the existing institutions for the training of artists, as well as those classes of the community for whom so many elementary schools of art have of late years been established" (Bourke, 2011, p. 233).

Board minutes from the Gallery's archives further state that "the purpose of the collection was the great advantages secured to the public by such opportunity for study as it supplied" (p. 234).

However, while education was clearly attended to from inception, the matter of access was much deliberated in the period before the Gallery was opened to the public. While it was established that the Gallery was to be open, free of charge (NGI, 1855), petitions were submitted, arguing for the rights of Dublin citizens to access public spaces on Sundays (Bourke, 2011, p. 235). For the working population (in the terminology of the time the "operative class") who worked six days per week, Sunday was the only day available for leisure pursuits and, consequently, of vital importance. Committed to their belief that the Gallery was for public benefit, and demonstrating a striking conscientiousness towards the needs of the local population, the governors of the Gallery resolved that it would be "open all Sundays in the year, except during vacation, after 2pm" (quoted in Bourke, 2011, p.236). As Bourke notes, this equity of access occurred in the National Gallery of Ireland nearly 30 years ahead of museums in the United Kingdom, and many others in America and Europe (p. 237).

The Gallery opened its doors on 30 January 1864, with the general public gaining access from March. It welcomed visitors weekly, with Sunday opening particularly well received, quickly becoming the most popular day for the public to visit their National Gallery; a fact that remains to this day. From the very beginning, opportunities were provided for artists and students from the Royal Hibernian Academy, the Dublin Metropolitan School of Art and other art institutions to study the paintings and sculptures on display (p.239). In this way, the Gallery initiated a dynamic tradition of public engagement and lifelong learning that continues to define its mission today.

As the institution evolved, new departments and specialist roles were created to strengthen this remit. The appointment of the first Education Officer in 1974 marked the beginning of a more structured and strategic approach to learning and public programming. Over the following decades, the Gallery's reach expanded significantly, connecting with communities nationwide. Early correspondence reveals the enthusiasm of schools, community groups, and cultural organisations seeking access to the national collection, underscoring a widespread appetite for educational engagement and artistic enrichment. From the 1990s, dedicated outreach sought to bring the national collection closer to communities through partnerships with museums, local authorities, schools, healthcare settings, cultural centres, and libraries, with forward-facing initiatives such as new parent tours, intergenerational workshops, and hospital-based programmes (NGI, n.d.).

As evidenced, the Education Department has consistently sought to create opportunities for as broad an audience as possible to learn through, and about, art. By researching, designing and delivering an ambitious year-round public programme, the Education Team embraces a holistic approach to learning that reflects the role museums can play in artistic, social and civic life.

Consequently, the Department's programming spans from "cradle to grave", offering onsite, offsite, and online learning opportunities, from early years and baby sensory workshops, to a progressive and inclusive schools programme, and from an active and engaged Gallery Youth Panel to highly tailored, co-created community projects.

In 2023, the year in which **No Words** was devised and delivered, the Education Department reached a total of 352,707 people across onsite, offsite and online programming, through 2,118 events (NGI, 2023). This represented 35% of all public engagement with the Gallery that year. At the time of publication, the Department operates with a permanent staff of eight, which is periodically enhanced through the appointment of specialist fixed-term contract roles, and Fellowships, designed for early-career museum professionals.

Within the Gallery building, one dedicated education space, the Education Studio, hosts a diverse range of year-round activities, including art history talks, film screenings, school residencies, intensive weekend painting courses, tailored events for neurodiverse audiences, seminars for university students, and a variety of other programmes.

Underpinning this work, and as articulated in the Education Department's policy (NGI, 2024), is a commitment to social justice and social action. In practice, this means that as we plan and develop programming, we continually test our ideas against several criteria: Could the work be shaped to promote greater equality of opportunity? Are there modifications that might counter systemic or structural discrimination? Are we critically considering our own biases? And are we inclusively addressing complex societal needs, particularly those identified by the Gallery's internal public duty assessment procedure and deemed relevant to our operations?

Photo © National Gallery of Ireland

“I was told about art therapy by my key worker. She said there was a place for me in the national art gallery if I wanted it as I am very open and love expressing myself—her words not mine. I was very unsure as I hated art in school and I was thinking this would be the same thing. Well I was very wrong. Going into the art afraid of new things, opening up, drawing paintings, feeling trauma I had built up for years, I wanted to run as I was thinking ‘how will this help me, I can’t stay still for long?’ Once I got in and I met Andrea, who is the art therapist, I got the warmest feeling from someone I had just met. I knew I was safe. When we did art for the first time I got lost in the art and the therapy. I was so calm and so relaxed—feelings came out that had been locked up in my Pandora’s box for years. It all came out on paper and it was like a weight was off me that I never knew I had. I met such lovely ladies from the group, we had such amazing bond. I loved the art so much I begged to do another course. I never knew how much something like that could help me as I was so negative about the therapy, thinking ‘how can it even help?’ It was the best thing I have done and I would tell anyone to jump at the chance to do this as it has given me such a new balance in life and has calmed me down, and now when I am at home and stressed I will start doing art. If you asked me this a year ago, I would laugh at you thinking ‘how can art help me?’ But now going in and doing it with fresh eyes, it has opened me up to the world of art.”

Programme participant, 2024-2025
Domestic Violence Service Users Group

Irish society: Social inequalities and issues

While consistently reviewing the programme is this is a rigorous and time-consuming process, such attentive planning within a national, publicly funded institution in Ireland has arguably never been more necessary. Despite frequently reported positive economic indicators, including national budget surpluses, effective full employment rates, and a robust economy (Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development, 2025), significant societal challenges remain evident at local and community levels across the country.

A 2024 report by Social Justice Ireland, an independent think tank and justice advocacy organisation, critically assessed wellbeing in Ireland using the Irish Government's **Overarching Wellbeing Framework**. This framework represents a broader and increasingly internationally recognised methodology for measuring social equality that extends beyond traditional economic indicators.

Social Justice Ireland identified substantial demographic inequalities across several key areas. These include "Subjective Wellbeing", encompassing social inclusion and access to public services; "Mental and Physical Health", highlighting barriers faced by young people and women in securing affordable healthcare; and "Income and Wealth", which points to persistent poverty risks for some and a widening income gap across the population (Social Justice Ireland, 2024). The report further evidences a socially paralysing housing crisis, reflected in deteriorating living conditions and deepening inequality within "Housing and the Built Environment".

In the areas of gender-based violence and racism/discrimination, Social Justice Ireland reported "a concerning negative performance" (Social Justice Ireland, 2024, p. 31). Ireland's demographic profile is changing rapidly due to increased inward migration. According to the Central Statistics Office, net migration reached its highest level in sixteen years in 2024, with over 141,000 people arriving in Ireland and more than 29% of the population now born outside the country (CSO, 2024). This diversification has enriched Ireland's cultural and social fabric, yet it has also exposed structural inequalities and barriers to full participation for migrant and minority ethnic communities. Reports from the Economic and Social Research Institute (ESRI, 2024) note persistent disparities in access to housing, employment and healthcare among non-Irish nationals, alongside higher reported experiences of discrimination.

Gender-based violence, particularly domestic violence, is also a pressing and deeply concerning social issue. While there is no single legal definition of domestic violence in Ireland, the European Institute for Gender Equality (EIGE, 2024) notes that the Domestic Violence Act 2018 "criminalises physical or emotional force or the threat of physical force, including sexual violence in close adult relationships".

Although this is an issue that affects both men and women, data from 2022 identifies women as the primary victims of "violence, homicide, and rape committed by intimate partners and domestic perpetrators" (EIGE, 2024). In Ireland, 35% of women have experienced psychological, physical, and/or sexual abuse from an intimate partner during their lifetime (EIGE, 2024), while An Garda Síochána, the national police service, responded to an average of 1,250 incidents of domestic abuse every week in 2024 ((Women's Aid, n.d.). In 2024, Cuan, Ireland's new national Domestic, Sexual and Gender-Based Violence Agency, was established, representing an important structural response to this growing crisis.

The deteriorating metrics in evidence in relation to gender-based violence and racism/discrimination highlight not only the scale of these problems, but also the profound social and emotional toll that they exert on individuals and communities. The findings underscore the important role that socially responsive institutions, including museums, can play in fostering intercultural understanding, representation and belonging within increasingly plural societies. It is within this environment that the **No Words** project, which we will now explore in detail, was conceived: examining how museums might serve as responsive, therapeutic and socially engaged spaces in addressing such complex and deeply human experiences.

Cultural Art Psychotherapy at the National Gallery of Ireland. Photo © The Pimlico Project

No Words: Museum-based art psycho-therapy pilot project

Project development in the context of the Gallery

For several years, a particular area of focus for the Gallery's Education Department has been programming situated at the intersection of museum practice, and health and wellbeing initiatives. Encompassing artist-led practical workshops, as well as wellbeing activities such as slow-looking tours, mindfulness sessions and gallery-based yoga, much of this programming, though occasionally targeted, serves a general, self-selecting Gallery audience. These offerings are consistently popular and frequently oversubscribed.

Alongside our commitment to harnessing the power of the Gallery's national collection for the emotional and mental wellbeing of the Irish people, our mission also challenges us to develop programming that enables deeper engagement with underserved audiences.

In 2022, we began researching, developing, and seeking funding to deliver the Gallery's first museum-based art psychotherapy programme. This initiative coincided with the development of the Education and Learning Public Programme for the Gallery's major exhibition that year, **Lavinia Fontana: Trail Blazer, Rule Breaker**.

This monographic exhibition celebrated the achievements of Lavinia Fontana, a 16th-century Bolognese artist whose ground-breaking career established her as one of the first female portrait painters to achieve widespread recognition. The exhibition also contextualised the extent to which Fontana's determination and passion challenged the societal gender norms of her time. Living in a male-dominated society and working in a male-dominated profession, she defied expectation to become a respected and successful artist. The richness of Lavinia Fontana's life story presented an opportune framework for exploring related 21st-century issues of gender inequality and gender-based violence through a process-based arts intervention.

Project methodology

A central imperative across all of the Education Department's work is attentiveness and sensitivity to the needs of our audiences, and a willingness to adapt to those needs. For this project, we were particularly mindful of the inherent vulnerabilities of the participants we were inviting to engage, acutely aware of the nuances of their experiences and the potential instability of their personal circumstances during the project timeframe.

As previously noted, Spraggins Rochford (2017a) outlines the benefits of applying a feminist systems thinking (FST) approach to both the theory and practice of art therapy and museum collaboration. Our project methodology reflected the essential tenets of this approach. The principles of FST, as outlined by Stephens (2011) and relevant to community programme development, include: adopting a gender-sensitive approach; valuing voices from the margins; incorporating the environment within research and action; selecting appropriate methodologies; and undertaking research and action that promote plural, desirable, and sustainable social change.

All five principles framed our project planning and guided our progress throughout. As Spraggins Rochford (2017a) states, adherence to these principles ensures that projects are designed in a manner that is "collaborative, inclusive, beneficial to the system, uses suitable methods [and] advocates for social change" (p. 10).

Project objectives

We determined that a museum-based art psychotherapy framework represented an appropriate and innovative method for the Gallery to engage with survivors of domestic violence and the social support services that assist them.

Two primary objectives were established for the project:

1. To bring tangible benefits and support to female survivors of domestic violence, among the most vulnerable members of our society.

2. To bring the benefits of process-based arts engagement to social support organisations, such as women's refuges.

Additionally, aligned with our departmental goal to contribute to peer learning and sectoral development, we aimed to establish a replicable methodology that could be adapted by other cultural institutions. To that end, our project design included the appointment of an independent evaluator and a creative documentary production company to ensure transparency, accountability and wider knowledge-sharing.

Project funding

The exhibition *Lavinia Fontana: Trail Blazer, Rule Breaker* was supported by Bank of America, who also generously provided funding for this pilot initiative. As funders, their respectful and trusting approach was crucial to our ability to test and evaluate the efficacy of this work, both for the benefit of the Gallery's communities and in advancing our institutional objectives.

In their approach, Bank of America exemplified one of the enabling mechanisms for sectoral change that Sandell (2003) identifies as essential for long-term progress. To be "truly responsive to community needs" (p. 56), cultural institutions require the support of funding bodies willing to exercise flexibility, allowing for "pilot projects through which success can be demonstrated, (and indeed, from which lessons arising from failed projects can be learnt)" (p. 54). Bank of America's approach embodied this principle completely.

Project team

Brina Casey, Education Manager: Special Projects

Brina Casey joined the Education Department of the Gallery 18 years ago and has since delivered a wide range of arts and health programmes, both onsite and through outreach partnerships with diverse community organisations. Alongside her work in the Gallery, she is an Irish Association for Counselling and Psychotherapy-accredited psychotherapist in private practice, holding an MSc in Psychoanalytic Psychotherapy from Trinity College Dublin, and a professional diploma in Psychotherapy and Counselling from the Tivoli Institute, Dublin.

Andrea Plunkett, Art Psychotherapist, Irish Association of Creative Art Therapists (IACAT) Chair

Andrea Plunkett is an art psychotherapist in private practice, current Chair of IACAT, and an artist. She holds a bachelor's degree in Psychology and an MSc in Art Psychotherapy from the University of Ulster. Previously, she worked in social care and domestic violence services, including with Saoirse for over 15 years.

Community partner: Saoirse Domestic Violence Services (Saoirse)

About Saoirse

Saoirse's vision is "a society where domestic violence and abuse is never tolerated or silenced, empowering women and children to live in safety, free from fear" (Saoirse, n.d.). Founded in 2004, and opening its first Women's Refuge in Tallaght, a suburb of Dublin, in 2006, the organisation has grown substantially since and now offers a range of wrap-around services across South Dublin and West Wicklow.

Employing over 70 qualified and experienced staff, Saoirse strategically provides life-saving and transformative support services, aiding women and children in their journey towards safety and recovery. This includes refuge and safe house accommodation, a 24-hour helpline, specialised outreach services, children and youth services, and court accompaniment, all tailored to address the complexities of domestic violence.

Beyond direct intervention, Saoirse engages communities to proactively educate and challenge prevailing attitudes towards domestic violence, emphasising prevention and awareness-raising. The organisation also campaigns and advocates for societal change, legislative measures, and government policies aimed at addressing and mitigating the impact of domestic violence. This multifaceted approach underscores Saoirse's comprehensive strategy to combat domestic violence on multiple fronts.

Currently, Saoirse maintains two refuges: the original refuge in Tallaght, comprising six apartments, and a second refuge in Rathcoole, opened in 2019, with capacity to accommodate five women and their children.

At the time the Gallery's partnership began with Saoirse in 2023, staff costs were primarily funded through Tusla, the Irish State's Child and Family Agency. In 2024, this arrangement changed with the establishment of Cuan, a statutory agency under the remit of the Department of Justice, Home Affairs and Migration, which now supports Saoirse's funding and service delivery.

The establishment of Cuan, with specific responsibility for tackling and reducing domestic, sexual, and gender-based violence, represents an important shift for the domestic violence sector in Ireland. However, Saoirse continues to rely heavily on private donations from individuals, corporate partners and charitable organisations to fund programmes and interventions outside core services such as refuge provision, the helpline and court accompaniment.

Consequently, enhanced or additional services can only be provided on an ad hoc basis, dependent on external funding availability and staff capacity to prepare funding applications. Nadine O'Brien, who at the time of this partnership was Outreach & Prevention Manager with Saoirse (she is now Director of Services), articulated the organisation's funding challenges:

"We're really badly under-resourced, we have to hustle, and I use the word hustle all the time because that's what I feel that we have to do. We have to hustle for money to be able to provide these life-saving and life-changing interventions … I feel like I'm hustling all the time for funding, for money, filling out applications, applying for grants, everything."

“Being in Ireland is not my choice, I am here just because of my kids, who cannot leave Ireland. I’ve been here since August 2024, alone with no family, close friends, money or something I can call a home. I am going through a lot; my ex still tries to control me. I am emotionally, mentally and physically exhausted. So art and craft therapy has honestly become my safe space. I am fully concentrated and my attention is on the kids. I had nothing for myself before art and craft therapy. Now I am so looking forward to every Wednesday, it’s my favourite day of the week. I know this is time for myself. I get dressed up a little, step out, and just be me—not someone’s ex or mum, not someone who goes through trauma—just me. Even my kids notice that Wednesday is different. When my six-year-old sees me dressed— ‘Oooh mum, are you going to make craft today!’ My son, who is nine, he actually encourages me to do things for myself — ‘Mum. Wednesday is your day.’ If they can see the difference, I believe it’s very obvious I am glowing, excited and so happy to go, despite the weather! Andrea our therapist is simply amazing. Since day one, she has had a beautiful way of making everyone feel seen, valued and comfortable. I was very sceptical as I have never been artistic, I am completely useless at drawing and just meeting women in a similar situation, I thought it would be draining, but I was wrong. It’s not about being good at art, it’s about expressing yourself, healing and finding joy in creating something that comes from your heart or how you feel that day. I cannot really explain but I feel so free when I step into the National Gallery of Ireland and our dedicated place. When I make something (it probably looks like a five-year-old did it), while I am doing it my brain is in a different dimension, like I am floating. No bad thoughts, no million things I have to do after, no stress, no panic, just relaxed. I did yoga and meditation a lot, so this is similar. I feel stiff all the time and all my body muscles are in spasm, my brain most of all, but during these two hours everything is so numb in a positive way. Like when I come out from a three-hour massage and spa day. And the good thing is I feel so good the whole day. This therapy gives me hope, confidence, a calm space. When I walk into the room, I can breathe, I can cry if I need to, laugh, talk or be quiet and it’s ok. I know no one will judge me. Andrea has this unique personality that I feel I can say, do or act in the most ridiculous way and still be accepted and it is ok. She gives reassurance, she is so kind and warm. There are very few people that can do this job, just to be there for everyone and be positive and helpful in every possible way. She is truly one of a kind.

On top of everything, you have this amazing group of women. You hear their pain and how everyone has come here in a different way and at their own pace. I have learnt a lot. We share information, advice and suggestions, which is so great, especially for me as I do not have my community here, or support from family or friends.

I could write and write as I have had such a positive experience and it’s still happening.”

Programme participant, 2025
Domestic Violence Service Users Group

Publication December 2025

Profile of service users

During 2022, Saoirse accommodated 121 women and 124 children in refuge services or hotels, and a further four women and two children in safe houses. The average length of stay in refuge was 28 days, increasing to 37 days by 2024, a reflection of Ireland's ongoing housing crisis and one of the many barriers facing women attempting to leave abusive situations.

In 2023, 68% of callers to Saoirse's helpline could not be accommodated because refuges were full; by 2024, this figure had increased to 72%.

The majority of Saoirse service users reside in the Dublin area, with the national and ethnic profile of clients reflecting Ireland's growing diversity. In 2022, 76% of refuge residents were Irish-born, with the remainder coming from regions including Asia, Eastern Europe, Africa, the Middle East, South America, and the UK. Non-Irish clients stayed, on average, one week longer in refuge than Irish clients.

The age profile of women in refuge skews younger, with 18–35-year-olds comprising 59% of residents in 2022. Among children, 51% were under five years old, and a further 20% were aged five to eight years. Women accessing outreach services were slightly older, with 39% aged between 18–35 and 50% between 36–60 years old.

In 2022, clients accessed refuge services through multiple channels: 50% were self-referrals, while 30% were referred by An Garda Síochána or through State social work services.

Service provision

Saoirse offers services along a continuum from crisis to recovery. Clients engage with the organisation at various points depending on their circumstances and personal trajectory through the trauma of domestic violence.

During initial stages, Saoirse provides practical interventions, such as help accessing refuge, social welfare services, and housing applications. As women move further along in their recovery journey, the organisation offers court accompaniment services and assistance navigating the justice system. Other significant supports include the *Freedom Support Group*, a free, 12-week psycho-educational group process delivered in weekly two-hour sessions for women who have left abusive relationships, and the *INSPIRE Family Project*, part of Saoirse's Child & Youth Services, which delivers tailored family support interventions in both refuge and outreach settings. As part of its holistic commitment to early intervention and prevention, Saoirse also runs *Healthy Relationships Workshops* for young people aged 13+, delivered in schools and youth settings.

Saoirse provides therapeutic and counselling services to its clients; however, the capacity to do so is entirely dependent on ad hoc grant or programme-specific funding. Staff face significant challenges in securing therapeutic services due to increasing competition among charities for limited resources. As a result, Saoirse often relies on volunteer or pro bono therapeutic providers or must refer clients to other organisations with similarly stretched resources and long waiting lists.

Despite these operational challenges, all service users interviewed during the independent evaluation were overwhelmingly positive about Saoirse, both in terms of the services offered and the compassion of its staff. Every woman spoke movingly about the help, support and empathy they received:

"They provided a lot. A place to sleep was one of the big things. Very massive. Somewhere to be warm, somewhere to be away from the cold.... They were very understanding of my situation. And I was very open to them. And I think it has really helped me for them to understand me fully." – *Saoirse Service User and No Words Project Participant*.

Another participant described the organisation's profound impact on her life:

"I was in contact with them for a year before I left my relationship ... they've provided... court support, helping me give a statement to the police, holistic therapies, counselling, refuge, a safe space. I had to go into refuge and ... I wouldn't be here today without their support ... I mean, things that I didn't even ask for were provided to me." – *Saoirse Service User and No Words Project Participant*.

Project phases and components

Phase 1: Research, development and pilot | January – June 2023

Research and planning

This phase involved the appointment of Andrea Plunkett as art psychotherapist and the undertaking of in-depth desk research into domestic violence services across the Dublin area. This process led to the Gallery approaching Saoirse to join as project partners. A co-equal approach was adopted in which each organisation's voice was respected and listened to. Continuous reflection on planning and project progression was maintained, and responsive methodologies were employed to address any challenges that arose (Stephens, 2011). This collaborative process fostered a strong working relationship between Saoirse's management and staff and the Gallery's project team.

The project framework and plan were shared and agreed with the project partners.

The Pimlico Project, a photography and video creative studio based in Dublin, was appointed to document the initiative. Following a scoping process between the partners, Sinéad Casey, an independent researcher, was appointed as external evaluator.

Saoirse and Gallery staff professional development sessions

The Gallery's art psychotherapist facilitated three two-hour workshops, one for members of the Education Team and two for Saoirse staff, introducing the concept of art psychotherapy and including an experiential, museum-based session. Staff from both organisations developed an understanding of the theory and practice underpinning a museum-based art psychotherapy approach, as well as insight into what domestic violence survivors might experience when participating in such a programme.

A key factor in the project's success was the creation of a shared sense of purpose between partners, achieved through mutual learning and trust-building. These sessions cultivated understanding across both organisations: Saoirse staff gained insight into the methodology behind process-based arts engagement, while Gallery staff deepened their understanding of working with domestic violence survivors who may be experiencing active trauma.

Pilot drop-in art psychotherapy sessions in Refuge 1

Weekly art psychotherapy sessions took place over six weeks in Refuge 1. These were 1.5-hour drop-in sessions available to any women residing in the refuge at that time. As participants were, by definition, in a period of crisis, the sessions were light-touch, with the objective of creating a safe, calm space and introducing participants to the available art materials.

While these sessions took place, sensory-based art workshops were provided for any accompanying children. These were delivered by a separate Gallery artist-facilitator, allowing mothers to engage fully in the art psychotherapy session without the pressure of caring responsibilities during that time.

These pilot sessions were a critical component of project planning, marking the Gallery's first collaboration with a domestic violence service and its first engagement with women in the crisis stage of domestic violence recovery. The process enabled the project team to learn, evaluate best practices, and refine their approach for the next phase.

Phase 2: Full programme | July 2023 – January 2024

Drop-in art psychotherapy sessions in Refuge 2

Five weekly sessions took place in Refuge 2, broadly following the same format as the pilot sessions held in Refuge 1. As before, concurrent sensory-based art workshops were offered to accompanying children.

Closed museum-based art psychotherapy group

Clients of Saoirse were invited to participate in a closed, museum-based art psychotherapy group at the Gallery, led by the art psychotherapist. The knowledge gained by Saoirse staff through earlier project phases equipped them to identify clients for whom this programme might be appropriate and to facilitate referrals. The art psychotherapist also conducted an intake process with referral interviews by phone, ensuring that safeguarding procedures were in place. Participants in this group had moved beyond the crisis stage of their domestic violence experience and were more settled within their communities.

Beginning in October 2023, a group of seven women met weekly in the Education Studio at the Gallery. Each participant was provided with an Irish public transport travel card preloaded with credit, covering travel to and from the Gallery, as well as food and drink vouchers for the Gallery café, which could be used individually or collectively during the project.

The closed-group format and private studio space enabled deeper engagement with both the psychotherapeutic process and the Gallery's collection. While the sessions were shaped by group dynamics and largely participant-led, each followed a consistent overarching structure:

1. **Guided slow-looking** in the gallery spaces
2. **Individual art-making** in the Education Studio
3. **Group reflection** in the Education Studio

During the slow-looking phase, the art psychotherapist tailored questions to the group's needs, the stage of the psychotherapeutic process, and the specific artworks viewed. This process drew on an object relations theory framework, as well as visual thinking strategies, and the psychotherapist's prior experience conducting art psychotherapy sessions in gallery settings.

Below is an overview of what the slow-looking process might look like:

- Participants are asked to think about what is going on in the picture/image/sculpture/installation.
- The art psychotherapist supports a guided slow look with the group.
- A follow-up question is posed based on group needs to encourage deeper exploration.
- Finally, participants are asked to "title the work".

Following time in the gallery spaces, participants returned to the Education Studio to create art in response to their feelings and experiences. Materials were provided, and participants encouraged to work quietly and independently.

Finally, the group reconvened to share and reflect on their artworks, exploring connections between their creations, the artworks viewed earlier, and their own life experiences. The progression between states, moving from group interaction and being together, to then working alone as individuals and then coming back together again, was intentionally developed by the art psychotherapist to model a healthy attachment style. Enacting this process is intended as a key, unconscious takeaway for survivors of domestic abuse engaging in a museum-based art psychotherapy process.

Gallery community engagement

Two additional family events took place during this phase, further strengthening the relationship between the Gallery and Saoirse.

Summer family event

Saoirse's Child & Youth Services deliver seasonal programmes supporting mothers and children who are part of their service, fostering secure attachments and resilience. As part of their summer 2023 Groupwork Project, the Gallery hosted a family sensory workshop facilitated by artists from the Education Department's practitioner panel. The event was attended by women and children living in refuge, as well as families engaged through Saoirse's Outreach and Prevention Services, with two Saoirse key workers attending in a support capacity.

To remove logistical and financial barriers, the Gallery arranged taxis to and from the event. Participants were welcomed into a supportive and social environment where they could engage in collective art-making activities. A guided tour of the Gallery's collection was also offered for women attending without children. The day concluded with a group lunch in the Gallery café.

Closed group family event

At the request of participants in the museum-based art psychotherapy group, a half-day family event was held at the Gallery in January 2024. Facilitated by artists from the Education Department's practitioner panel, the event invited participants' family members to join. The session included introductory group activities, a collaborative weaving experience using recycled materials, and a shared lunch. The art psychotherapist attended as a participant, reinforcing the sense of connection and collective accomplishment fostered throughout the project.

Working with clay, Art Psychotherapy. film still © The Pimlico Project

No Words: Evaluation report outcomes

Evaluation methodology

Saoirse and the project team worked collaboratively to establish the desired outcomes and parameters of the evaluation process, namely that it would:

- Establish a clear picture of the current level of therapeutic supports available within Saoirse.
- Identify **No Words**' strengths, weaknesses, and areas for improvement or change, outlining lessons learned, challenges encountered, strategies for overcoming them, and recommendations for best practice in future implementation.
- Provide insights into how cultural institutions can effectively engage with DV support networks and replicate similar programmes nationally and internationally.

The evaluation was not designed to assess the quality of the psychotherapeutic experience delivered by the art psychotherapist. As an experienced and professionally registered practitioner, this was not in question. Equally, the evaluation did not assess the quality of Saoirse's service provision.

Sinéad Casey, an experienced researcher with a background in research psychology, was appointed as the external evaluator and produced her findings using qualitative and quantitative research methods, including one-to-one structured and in-depth interviews and data analysis. Interviews were conducted with representatives of the various project stakeholders, including:

- Sinéad Rice, Head of Education & Public Programming, National Gallery of Ireland
- Andrea Plunkett, Art Psychotherapist in Residence
- Nadine O'Brien, then Outreach & Prevention Manager, Saoirse Domestic Violence Services
- Saoirse Domestic Violence Services staff members

Of the **No Words** project participants, five of the seven women involved in the Closed Museum-Based Art Psychotherapy Group gave feedback via private, structured interviews with the evaluator.

The five interviewees represented a range of ages, family situations and nationalities: two were Irish, two European and one African.
All have been given pseudonyms to maintain confidentiality, with indicative profiles as follows:

- Jan, age 40–49, European

Publication December 2025

- Helen, age 25–34, Irish, no children
- Diana, age 30–39, African, two children
- Aileen, age 45–55, Irish, older children
- Maria, age 35–44, European, two children

Guarantees of confidentiality were given to all project participants and to Saoirse staff.

Additionally, at the beginning of each weekly session of the closed group at the Gallery, a paper version of the CORE-10 version of the Clinical Outcomes in Routine Evaluation Outcome Measure (CORE-OM) questionnaire was self-administered by all participants. The CORE-OM is a widely used and validated outcome measure that has been adopted by mental health practitioners as a tool to systematically collect data on mental health outcomes among clients and patients. The CORE-10 is a streamlined version of this tool, designed to be used where use of the full 34-item tool is inappropriate or time does not permit. This version has been validated among clinical and non-clinical adult populations and by gender (O'Reilly et al., 2015). The CORE-10 includes items measuring symptoms of depression and anxiety, general functioning, relationships, trauma, wellbeing and risk.

Project outcomes

The **No Words** Evaluation Report (Casey, 2024), completed by Sinéad Casey in spring 2024, forms the basis of the following summary. Limitations of space have dictated that this is a condensed version of the full report, which is publicly available in its complete format on the Gallery's website.

Fostering participants' mental health

Helped by the safe space of the Gallery and the art psychotherapist group participants engaged in weekly sessions that fostered emotional expression and self-reflection, enhancing their mental health and wellbeing. Participants described the sessions as cathartic and emotionally relieving:

> **"I do believe anything to do with art and non-speaking communication… just expressing yourself is such a soft form of therapy, which is extremely powerful and extremely helpful. And that's probably because not everybody wants to talk and not everybody is able to talk. And some people are just in the stage that talking is too much hurt, but doing something and letting it go, I think it's extremely important."** – *Jan*

Engaging with materials and in art making offered a sense of serenity and calm that fostered healing and self-expression, and interviewees emphasised the therapeutic benefits of creative expression. The ability to form direct personal connections with the collection was also in evidence, with the artworks stimulating emotions and affects that were then available to be worked with in the therapeutic frame.

> **"The beauty of this particular programme is that we actually have experience to go and observe the real art first and then we will do our work and that has been very uplifting… when you look at something beautiful, you kind of get fulfilled… It's a very nice energy. For me, every time it was an uplifting experience… Although I had sad feelings, but seeing the art before was extremely uplifting and I really liked it." –** *Jan*

Empowering participants through community and empathy

Participants reported feelings of enrichment and community, highlighting the programme's effectiveness in aiding their recovery journey, and expressed the value in having an emotionally supportive space that allowed new friendships to form. Consistent with the findings of other researchers (Silverman, 2002; Coles & Harrison, 2018), participants felt able to transcend social labels or trauma identities, expressing other facets of themselves beyond the commonality of their experience of domestic abuse.

Simultaneously, however, there was immense value in the sense of community and connection that built up in the group, partly because of their shared experiences. Participants described the comfort that was found being amongst a group of people who could understand behaviours and feelings that other friends or family might minimise or dismiss:

> **"…So for me the group, it was a breath of fresh air to me… they're amazing. All of them…. It's great to have somebody that actually understands and knows exactly what it is. Because at the end the reactions we have are not logical, they are caused by the trauma we have lived through. People that have not gone through the same situation, they can be sympathetic and they can be supportive… They are, but they are not. If you haven't gone through, you don't know what it is." –** *Maria*

The group provided a unique and invaluable source of empathy, empowerment and support:

> **"…we're all so open… because we're all at different stages. And it's just been wonderful… I trust everyone there. And we all support each other…. It's terrible to say you're not the only one going through because no one should go through the reason why we're all here." –** *Aileen*

This group bond is particularly impactful in the context of working with survivors of domestic abuse, as a common feature of the abuse they have experienced is that their abuser will have isolated them from family and friends, leaving them bereft of a social support network. The strength of the connections that formed in the group was particularly noted by the art psychotherapist in her reflections:

> **"Everybody wants to meet everybody else's family. It shows the depth of the relationships that were built … And obviously with domestic violence, the perpetrator breaks down your communications, breaks down your friendships, makes sure that you don't have anyone to rely on. So a lot of people that have experienced domestic violence end up with no relationships… so to have that peer support, it's just lovely to see." –** *Andrea Plunkett*

“I’ve found coming to the gallery and working with Andrea an amazing experience. Despite us being quite a diverse group from different backgrounds, countries and cultures, making art brings us all together. I enjoy seeing everyone’s work and love how we express ourselves in such a variety of ways — the different materials we choose, how people engage in the process, how much (or little) they reveal to themselves, how we learn from each other.

I would work like this myself on my own but have really enjoyed having the opportunity to explore working like this within a group. It’s helped me to stay focused & I’m finding the dynamic of the group very supportive.

It’s been great having access to the gallery & being inspired by the different exhibits. It’s very helpful if unsure as to where to start and I love seeing where it can lead. Being able to connect one’s own work to a piece in the gallery is very interesting — how it relates ie the subject matter, colours, shape, style, etc.

The gallery is such a great resource & working this way makes it much more accessible to people. It’s definitely given me a greater appreciation for it. I’m benefitting so much from these sessions and love making art in this way. There are so many benefits and in particular I find it boosts my confidence helping me trust myself more, and that I have an ability to heal myself. It’s also a lovely way to meet people.

To be able to explore & feel free to express yourself without judgement or pressure is such a gift.”

Cultural Art Psychotherapy Participant
Domestic Violence Group, 2025

The Gallery as a containing, safe space

Among the participants who contributed to the evaluation, all of them emphasised the importance of the sessions having taken place within the Gallery. As previously noted (Froggett et al., 2011; Rubenstein, 2022), the distinctive nature of a museum or gallery space can impact upon a participant's experience of the therapeutic process and their perception of their own value and worth. The participants of **No Words** reported positive outcomes from their close engagement with the Gallery's building and spaces:

> **"Coming to the Gallery is such an [important] part, for me, even putting a bit of makeup on in the morning. I know they're just things a lot of people do anyway... I feel special coming here [to the Gallery]. I feel privileged to have this opportunity."** – *Aileen*

The Evaluation Report also notes the positive impact of coming into the Gallery on the general wellbeing of participants:

> **"I don't come into town. I kind of isolated myself and stuff like that. So it's been nice to get a break ... and coming in and just feeling part of a group, a supportive group enjoying it. It's lovely to come into the National Gallery. It's a nice experience."** – *Aileen*

This outcome highlighted the importance of providing subsidised travel to and from the Gallery, as well as making refreshments and meals free and available. The participants lived in dispersed locations around Dublin and none of them were in close proximity to the Gallery, hence easing their capacity to get to us and removing any financial barrier proved to be vital to the project's success. By creating a supportive environment for DV survivors, the programme provided a lived experience of the Gallery as an inclusive, community space which participants were welcomed in to:

> **"I felt really comfortable coming in. Everybody's always smiling, everybody's very kind."** – *Jan*

> **"The staff are lovely and they've always been very happy like, 'hi, morning' and stuff like that, and they open the doors for you."** – *Helen*

The nature of museum spaces and their collections also requires specific levels of security and staff, an apparatus that is often quite visible to the public. This aspect of the Gallery's operation provided a fillip for the participants, for whom security concerns and feelings of safety are particularly relevant:

> **"You know, even coming in, the security on the door, going into the actual gallery... it just makes us feel so safe."** – *Aileen*

Creating a more inclusive Gallery

Few of the participants of **No Words** had previously visited the Gallery or engaged with it in any capacity, demonstrating that the project effectively reached audiences that traditionally might not have accessed us. Where the Gallery was known, it was perceived as inaccessible and distant by both the Saoirse staff and the domestic violence survivor groups.

> **"I'm a Dubliner and I've never even been in the National Gallery. I was disgusted with myself ... It's the side of the city that it's in. ... You're not gonna get many working class regular everyday folk walking around that side of the city unless you're there for business, government... it's smack bang in the middle of a more affluent area of Dublin city."** – *Saoirse Manager*

Non-engagement with the Gallery was clearly named as a social class issue and raised the theme of ownership of cultural spaces:

> **"I'm from a working class background and the majority of my class growing up did not go into the Gallery... How do I know I'm welcome unless you invite me? ... Unless you physically come to my area... and ask me to come in, how do I know I am welcome?"** – *Andrea Plunkett*

Engagement during **No Words** evoked strong emotional responses and changed perceptions:

> **"When I started to learn about the Lavinia Fontana collection and the trailblazing side of that, that lit me up. I was very emotional... I was frustrated with myself being Dublin born and bred and never having been to the National Art Gallery; and then being exposed to very rich educational feminist feelings... it was those competing feelings going on inside me."** – *Nadine O' Regan*

By the project's end, both Saoirse staff and service users saw the Gallery as a welcoming, safe and enriching public space both for themselves and their families.

> **"I would never have come in here before and now like even after each session I do find I walk around and have a little gander... it's so lovely."** – *Helen*

Having been actively invited into the Gallery, having been welcomed and facilitated in an emotionally attuned and sensitive way, participants came to perceive it as a special and enriching public space, one in which they are genuinely welcome and to which they felt encouraged to return. Unfortunately, it is notoriously difficult to measure the intangible, long-term impacts of these changed perceptions of the Gallery, and of the project participants' new sense of ownership of the institution. We can only surmise that the overall positive nature of this experience has opened up the potential for participants to personally engage with cultural spaces in their futures.

Engagement with Saoirse staff

The two professional development sessions offered to Saoirse staff, and led by the art psychotherapist, were met with overwhelmingly positive feedback. Despite initial scepticism and uncertainty about the purpose and format of both these sessions, and the project as a whole, participants found the experience to be enlightening and enriching. While the sessions were conceived as an opportunity to inform staff about the project, give them a sense of connection with the Gallery, and

introduce them to the potential benefits of museum-based art psychotherapy for their clients, the staff also experienced them as a form of team-building and wellbeing exercise, providing them with valuable opportunities for self-reflection and personal growth. Participants appreciated the therapeutic benefits of art, recognizing its potential for communication and healing for the vulnerable populations with which they work.

Importantly, attending the professional development sessions not only enhanced staff members' understanding of art therapy but also provided them with first-hand experience to better advocate for and support their clients. The sessions also reassured staff about the sensitivity and appropriateness of the art therapy programme for vulnerable clients. The participants expressed a desire for the length of these sessions to be increased in future, in order to maximise the mindfulness aspects of the experience, feedback that reinforces the value that was attributed to the sessions.

Overall, the professional development sessions set out to deepen understanding of the therapeutic benefits of art. This was achieved, along with other secondary but valuable impacts which included enhancing staff wellbeing, promoting team cohesion and reintroducing an avoidant cohort to the Gallery as a place to visit, recharge and enjoy. The Saoirse staff and management team reported that the project's collaborative nature enhanced their professional practice, deepened their understanding of trauma-informed art psychotherapy, and increased their awareness of how creative, non-verbal processes can complement their existing service delivery.

CORE-10 results

At the beginning of each weekly session of the closed group at the Gallery, a paper version of the CORE-10 questionnaire was self-administered by all participants. The CORE-10 tool measures the clinical range of psychological distress through scores banded in three roughly equal increments from mild (11-15) through to moderate-to-severe (20-25); a score over 25 indicates the 'severe' level. The self-reported data indicated a high level of psychological distress among the museum-based art psychotherapy group participants.

In week one, five of the seven women recorded scores above the clinical cut-off of 11; four of whom were in the moderate-to-severe band and one of whom was in the moderate band. Only two of the seven women recorded scores below the clinical cut-off.

Clients showed a wide differential in scores from week to week, however none of the women fulfilled the criteria for reliable improvement from week one to their final week. The Evaluation Report notes mitigating factors in relation to these results, however, including that none of the women managed to attend all sessions, with an average of six sessions out of 10 attended among the seven participants. Additionally, given the recent trauma of domestic abuse experienced by all the group participants (and for some the ongoing trauma of engagement with the legal system), as well as the high levels of psychological distress reported by participants, it is unrealistic to expect a relatively short group intervention such as this to show a clinically significant reduction in post therapy scores.

However, as one participant expressed:

"I started to feel a bit lighter after each session—like a weight was being taken off me, slowly. I don't think I realised how much I needed something like this until I was here." – *Maria*

Challenges

This programme was always conceived as a learning experience, and the project team placed a strong emphasis on developing best practice and iterating to optimise outcomes. The primary challenges that arose throughout the project were logistical and communicative, particularly in the areas of participant recruitment and session scheduling.

Referral and recruitment process

It was originally envisaged that the women who had attended the drop-in sessions at Refuge would form the recruitment base for the museum-based art psychotherapy group in the Gallery. After each drop-in session, the art psychotherapist asked participants if they would like to take part in the group at the Gallery. All the participants agreed and provided contact telephone numbers.

When recruitment for the closed group began, however, the art psychotherapist could not reach any of the women. It is not uncommon for domestic violence survivors to change their contact details in order to break contact with former partners or spouses; however, the project team was surprised that none of the phone numbers provided, in some cases mere weeks earlier, were operational. As a result, most of the women who participated in the museum-based art psychotherapy group were recruited via their key worker or another trusted domestic violence support worker. This process worked very well and, in retrospect, is an effective and efficient model for recruitment to such groups.

One Saoirse staff member raised the need for careful consideration in referrals, ensuring that only women who were emotionally ready for such engagement were selected. For this reason, the staff professional development sessions are critical, enabling staff to gain a shared understanding of what art psychotherapy is, to communicate the programme's risks and benefits, and to assess client suitability.

"Anyone that I would have referred would have been working with us for a while. And you know that they're ready and they're looking for that support." – *Saoirse staff*

Session scheduling: Logistics of life

For all participants, the 'logistics of life' such as work, children, caring responsibilities and transport, had to be managed. These logistics can be even more of an issue for domestic violence survivors. Women have often had to leave their homes and may be living in unfamiliar areas. Several of the women interviewed did not have family supports to help with childcare, school runs or pick-ups, and finding two hours, plus travel time on a weekday

morning, was challenging for many. That said, Friday was a popular day, coming at the end of the week with less pressure on time.

The network of wraparound supports provided by Saoirse for clients to enable their participation in the projects proved invaluable. In one situation, a key worker intervened and organised for a crèche to look after a child for an extra hour so that her mother could take part in the art therapy group.

"... I shared my concern with the child support worker at Saoirse. And I told her my concern will be the pick-up time [for my daughter] ... and then she asked me if she contacted the crèche manager, would that help? ... And the crèche manager spoke to me and I said, yes, it's about art therapy. And she knows my situation. She knows I've been in domestic violence and she knows I fled my home." – *Diana*

These challenges, while significant, were primarily overcome through adaptability and a focus on communication. Allowing space for an initial pilot phase enabled us to learn and adapt as we progressed to Phase 2, underscoring once again the importance of flexibility in programme implementation.

Recommendations

The three key recommendations that arose from the evaluation included extending the duration of the programme and group, enhancing communications and logistics, and expanding funding and partnership opportunities.

Extend programme duration

There was a consensus among interviewees that the duration of the museum-based art psychotherapy programme could be extended to allow for a more sustained therapeutic impact. Some participants felt that the programme went by too quickly, while others expressed a desire for follow-up sessions or longer-term support. Several interviewees wished the group could continue for longer.

The duration was also raised by the art psychotherapist who, noting the importance of being flexible and tailoring the art psychotherapy process to the specific needs of the group and environment, found she had to work more slowly with this group due to their vulnerability—slowing the pace of sessions and transitions between activities.

Additionally, Saoirse staff expressed a desire for more and longer staff professional development sessions, and for smaller and more frequent family events. Overall, there was an appetite for greater time to be allowed for all aspects of the project.

Enhance communication and logistics

The evaluation suggested that streamlining communications would ensure smoother programme delivery. While Saoirse staff acknowledged that communication within their organisation was at times an issue, it is pertinent to the planning of a project such as this that staff in a stretched frontline service, such as domestic violence support, are likely to have an intensive workload. Consequently, any new initiative will require additional attention and support to function effectively and achieve sustainability.

The suggestion was made to appoint a key worker from Saoirse to act as a liaison with the project team, ensuring better communication and coordination. This person could be responsible for briefing clients and co-workers about upcoming sessions and groups, and assisting co-workers in the referral process with the Gallery project team.

All the group participants who were interviewed mentioned logistical challenges related to transportation, timing of sessions, and scheduling conflicts, particularly for participants with childcare responsibilities or work commitments. Suggestions to overcome these included adjusting programme start times and exploring more flexible scheduling.

Interviewees were keen to emphasise the value of the programme to them and their hope that other women in similar positions might avail of such a programme in the future.

"And I would be really happy if this project would be running because I think it can make a huge difference in a broken life, because it gives a really nice light in the grey day and it gives a sense of serenity and catharsis, and it's beautiful." – *Jan*

Seek funding opportunities and expand partnerships

Given the ad hoc nature of funding for therapeutic interventions within the domestic violence sphere in Ireland, the evaluation suggested that a multi-annual partnership approach between the Gallery and the community partner could be explored. This would leverage the work completed to date and embed the benefits of the programme. To sustain and scale the initiative, exploring additional funding sources and partnerships was also recommended.

The evaluation noted that having a project lead with a background in psychotherapy was a significant advantage. This skill set provided a bridge between the professional world of the Gallery and the therapeutic world of art psychotherapy and trauma. The project lead's experience also meant that the Gallery team were both aware of and sensitive to the needs of the women as domestic violence survivors and trauma victims.

The art psychotherapist had previously worked with Saoirse, which brought its own advantages through her knowledge of the organisation and deep understanding of the experiences of domestic violence survivors. These were the particular circumstances of the Gallery project team in this instance and are unlikely to be duplicated in other project or institutional contexts. However, the advantages gained from having team members with these skill sets suggest that museums could benefit from expanding professional training opportunities for staff, broadening recruitment initiatives, and establishing partnerships with local services that can supply relevant expertise.

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Project conclusion

From multiple perspectives, **No Words** was a significant undertaking for the National Gallery of Ireland's Education Department. Starting from a modest position in terms of staffing, physical spaces and finances, it required the commitment of substantial departmental resources. Simultaneously, however, by responding to issues that are currently impacting Irish society, it stood as a clear manifestation of the Education Department's commitment to social justice and social action.

Fundamentally, **No Words** was a statement of belief: that museums and cultural spaces can meaningfully contribute to the mental wellbeing of contemporary societies, and that the considered application of a museum-based art psychotherapy process can have wide-ranging, positive impacts. As evidenced here, the direct impact the project has had on survivors of domestic violence and the staff of domestic violence services has been overwhelmingly positive, fostering catharsis, empowerment and a sense of community.

Enhancing communication channels and establishing clear guidelines for participation within museum-based art psychotherapy groups were among the key recommendations, as was addressing the practical "logistics of life" concerns that may arise for any museum audience, but can present significant barriers to participation for more vulnerable or avoidant cohorts.

The professional training sessions undertaken by Gallery and Saoirse staff emerged as a critical success factor, with recommendations to enhance these sessions and explore opportunities to extend them to other high-stress professional groups. This process would broaden the reach and impact of the Gallery while also raising awareness of museum-based art psychotherapy within other social support and non-governmental organisational settings.

In testament to the project's success, the full complement of women who began in the Gallery art psychotherapy group remained committed until its conclusion, and the Evaluation Report recognised that the programme was highly valued and positively regarded by everyone who participated. This strong endorsement of **No Words**, combined with the Education Department's experience of successfully implementing a museum-based art psychotherapy programme, has directly informed and enriched the Department's work in the years since.

Through sustained collaboration, the project bridged the worlds of art, therapy and social care. It illuminated the Gallery's capacity not only to serve as a space of aesthetic encounter, but also as a site of social renewal and collective care.

"For me, it's not just about art. It's about feeling human again." - Helen

Publication December 2025

Chapter 3

Embedding museum-based art psychotherapy at the National Gallery of Ireland

Publication December 2025

Introduction

In October 2024, the Gallery hosted the first public screening of the short film commissioned as part of the documentation of **No Words** and produced by The Pimlico Project. The event was attended by an audience, both public and invited, comprising museum professionals, social care and charity practitioners, Gallery executive staff and board members, as well as students and academic researchers from all related fields.

The screening was followed by a panel discussion and Q&A session with Brina Casey, Andrea Plunkett and Nadine O'Brien. This event represented the culmination of the Gallery's determination, established from the very beginning of **No Words'** planning process, to publicly communicate the often-overlooked personal and societal impacts of domestic violence, and to demonstrate the ways in which cultural institutions can play a meaningful role in addressing such issues.

It also marked the beginning of the next phase of the Gallery's museum-based art psychotherapy programming, with the announcement of Andrea Plunkett as Art Psychotherapist in Residence, the first such position for the Gallery, and moreover for the National Cultural Institutions in Ireland.

This chapter details how **No Words** has continued to develop at the Gallery since then, including the organisations and partnerships established, the process of embedding museum-based art psychotherapy within our education programming, and our plans to develop a third-level training module for art psychotherapists. Beyond an expositional purpose, this chapter aims to provide a model for how museum-based art psychotherapy can be successfully embedded within cultural institutions.

Bi-lateral drawing process, film still, photo © The Pimlico Project

National Gallery of Ireland: Art Psychotherapist in Residence

Structure

Following the success of **No Words**, both in terms of its profound personal impact on participants and its alignment with the Education Department's ongoing commitment to social justice and social action, the Department made a strategic decision to direct space, financial resources, and staff capacity toward the continued expansion of this initiative.

This began with the appointment of Andrea Plunkett as the Gallery's first Art Psychotherapist in Residence. As noted previously, the majority of the Education Department's programming operates from a single, heavily scheduled and in-demand space, the Education Studio. To prioritise the continued growth of this work, one day per week was assigned exclusively for museum-based art psychotherapy.

Having a dedicated studio day allows Andrea to establish a consistent presence within the Gallery. When programming is not taking place, the space is available to her for research, evaluation and meetings, ensuring the continued integration of art psychotherapy practice within the institution's everyday operations

Finance

The initial pilot phase of **No Words** was generously funded by Bank of America. This support provided the opportunity to design, deliver and evaluate the programme's potential in a meaningful way. Having demonstrated its impact, the Education Department determined that the continuation and development of museum-based art psychotherapy should be embedded within the Gallery's core annual programming.

Accordingly, the Department's annual budget request now includes a dedicated allocation to sustain and expand this work, a request supported by the wider Education Team, the Director of Collections and Research, the Executive Leadership Team, and approved by the Board. A key finding from the independent Evaluation Report highlighted the value of reducing geographic and financial barriers to participation, particularly through poverty-proofing initiatives such as the provision of travel cards and lunch vouchers, which ensured equitable access for all participants.

Reflecting these insights, the current funding structure covers:

- **Staffing cost** of the Art Psychotherapist in Residence
- **Subsidised catering and transport**, to ensure participants can attend without financial strain and feel welcomed
- **Diverse materials** for art making, allowing participants choice and the ability to respond in a myriad of ways
- **Ongoing documentation and evaluation**, which are central to reflective practice, dissemination, visibility and supporting project partners.

This internal resourcing marks a significant institutional shift, embedding social and therapeutic programming not as an ad hoc project, but as a core and sustained component of the Gallery's public mission.

Andrea Plunkett, Cultural Art Psychotherapist in Residence, photo © National Gallery of Ireland

Publication December 2025

Programme development: Expanding the work

Community partnerships

The October 2024 event launching the outcomes of the initial phases of this project generated considerable public and professional interest. Members of the public enquired about opportunities to participate in sessions, while community organisations and social support groups across Dublin City reached out regarding potential collaborations. The level of interest almost immediately exceeded the capacity and resources that could feasibly be allocated to this work.

Recognising the effectiveness of our co-operative approach with Saoirse, as reflected in the project's evaluation findings, we resolved to continue developing relationships with community organisations and social support services, prioritising those with high levels of need and sufficient infrastructure to support participants' engagement.

Outlined below are brief descriptions of the community partners with whom **No Words** has collaborated in recent years, encompassing both staff professional development sessions and client-focused, closed, museum-based art psychotherapy groups. Each participant undergoes an intake process with the Gallery's art psychotherapist to ensure that participation is appropriate to their personal circumstances. Returning participants are welcomed where suitable. All group members receive public transport cards and complimentary refreshments for the duration of their participation.

Domestic violence services: Saoirse and Aoibhneas

As anticipated, our partnership with Saoirse has continued beyond the initial pilot phase of **No Words**. We now host annual, museum-based art psychotherapy group for survivors of domestic violence. Referrals come not only from Saoirse but also from Aoibhneas, another Dublin-based support service for women and children affected by domestic abuse. Sharing an ethos of empowerment, respect and sensitivity, Aoibhneas mirrors Saoirse's commitment to this work and has embraced the programme wholeheartedly.

As public awareness of the Gallery's engagement with domestic violence has increased, we have also received direct requests from survivors who are not currently connected with formal support services. While these enquiries are a positive reflection of the project's reach, they have also required careful safeguarding measures. Each individual's circumstances are assessed to ensure that participation is appropriate, and where needed, they are connected with professional networks that can offer broader support. These situations also highlight an emerging and complex question: whether some survivors perceive their lack of prior engagement with domestic violence services as a barrier to participation, a question that reflects the nuanced emotional landscape that this work exists in.

Canal Communities Regional Addiction Service (CCRAS)

The Canal Communities Regional Addiction Service (CCRAS) complements and strengthens the work of organisations addressing the causes and consequences of substance misuse in Dublin's southwest inner city. Adopting a person-centred and non-judgemental approach, CCRAS recognises the intersection between inequality, social exclusion and addiction.

A vital part of CCRAS's work is its support for the family members of those in addiction, a group often overlooked amidst crisis and care responsibilities. These family members frequently carry deep emotional burdens and have limited opportunities for reflection or personal recovery. To date, the Gallery has facilitated two museum-based art psychotherapy groups as part of CCRAS's family support programme. Both groups were enthusiastically received, providing participants with a safe and creative space for self-expression, emotional processing, and shared experience.

Dublin City Community Cooperative (The Co-op)

The Dublin City Community Cooperative (the Co-op) is a network of thirteen grassroots community development organisations serving some of the most disadvantaged areas of Dublin's inner city. Guided by social inclusion principles, the Co-op seeks to reach communities whose lived experiences are often obscured by macro-level statistics—including those facing educational disadvantage, poor health outcomes, inadequate housing, and marginalisation.

The Co-op's Refugee Support Team works with individuals residing in accommodation provided by the Irish Government's International Protection Accommodation Services (IPAS). This system, intended to support asylum seekers and refugees, has faced significant challenges, including an Irish court ruling in August 2024 that found the State in breach of asylum seekers' human rights (IHREC, 2024), and an arson attack on an IPAS centre in October 2025 that endangered an adult and four young children (Lally, 2025). These incidents underscore the precarious and often traumatic conditions faced by displaced individuals seeking safety in Ireland.

Motivated by a desire to strengthen mental health supports and provide creative outlets for this vulnerable community, the Co-op reached out to the Gallery. Together, we have implemented a range of initiatives, including guided Gallery visits, drop-in art psychotherapy sessions, and two closed museum-based art psychotherapy groups. The professionals we have worked with consistently highlight the profound levels of need within this community. Our ongoing commitment is to provide a sustained, trauma-informed creative space that supports healing and belonging through cultural engagement.

Highfield Healthcare

Our engagement with Highfield Healthcare has followed a different, but no less impactful or interesting, path to that of our other **No Words** community partnerships, and represents a distinct but equally valuable strand of the initiative. Highfield Healthcare provides adult mental health services, rehabilitation and recovery programmes, and specialist care for older adults and people living with dementia. For several years prior to **No Words**, Highfield's art psychotherapy team independently integrated the Gallery's collection and spaces into their therapeutic practice, arranging client visits and then extending these experiences in clinical sessions held subsequently at their centre. In operating in this manner, the Highfield Healthcare team were exemplifying the previously cited, and increasingly frequent, movement of art psychotherapy into non-clinical realms.

With the advent of our museum-based art psychotherapy programming in the Gallery, and recognising the shared goals of our work, the Highfield team began collaborating directly with the Gallery's Education Department. We now offer access to the Education Studio during their visits, providing a private, secure space for creative practice and reflection.

This partnership represents a promising model for future collaboration between museums and healthcare providers. With further research and development, it holds significant potential to establish cross sectoral engagement, simultaneously deepening the Gallery's engagement with holistic and socially responsive forms of care, and broader advancements in arts and health.

Oversubscription and waiting lists

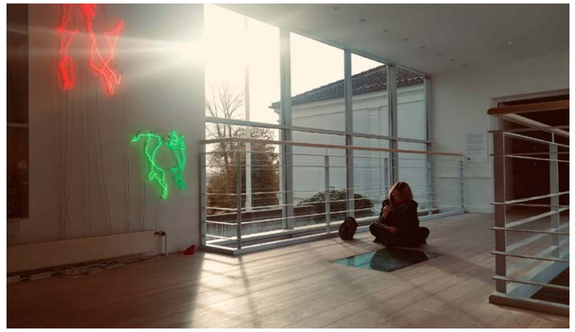
While we are delighted to facilitate these longer-term partnerships in the Gallery, we are also acutely aware that there are several other groups we have not yet had the capacity or resources to engage with as part of the programme. For some groups, such as Akina Dada wa Africa (AkiDwA), a national network for migrant women living in Ireland, and the youth support group run by the Transgender Equality Network Ireland (TENI), we have been able to offer staff professional training activities and drop-in, individual art psychotherapy sessions for service users. These activities have allowed us to maintain meaningful connections and provide some level of engagement until such time as a more sustained group process can be facilitated.

Nonetheless, the demand for participation continues to exceed our available resources. We have experienced an overwhelming level of interest in museum-based art psychotherapy at the Gallery, which can be inferred as indicative of both the lack of accessible mental health and social supports across Ireland, and of the recognised social and emotional value that community services place on a programme of this nature.

In 2025, following a meeting with the Co-op's Health Work and Social Prescribing Team, we agreed to support two new six-week programmes scheduled to begin in January 2026. The first, facilitated in partnership with key staff from the Co-op, will work with participants living in Dublin's north inner city who have been referred due to mental and physical health issues linked to isolation and loneliness. The group is currently full, with a waiting list in place should spaces become available. The second six-week group, commencing immediately afterward, will support members of the Co-op's Men's Group, individuals in recovery who similarly experience isolation and are seeking opportunities for connection and reflection through creative practice.

In addition to these structured group programmes, the Co-op has requested specialised gallery tours for their wider network of participants. These will be developed collaboratively with the Gallery's Education Team as an extension of our commitment to accessible, inclusive engagement.

As the visibility of **No Words** has grown, so too has the number of organisations expressing a desire to participate. The following groups are currently on our waiting list for 2026:



NEMO Cultural Art Psychotherapy Workshop 2025, photo: Sinéad Rice

- Refugee Support Services
- National LGBTQIA Organisations
- Drugs and Alcohol Support Services in the wider Dublin Area
- Libraries
- Hospital Sexual Abuse Trauma Units
- Adolescent and Young Adult Cancer Support Services

We also continue to be approached directly by individuals and services wishing to re-engage with the Gallery, including survivors of domestic violence who have participated in previous programmes and expressed a strong desire to continue.

“I am a committed art therapy advocate.

I started art therapy with Andrea two years ago when I was in a very dark place. I needed help to find myself after losing myself in 20 years of an abusive and controlling marriage. Art therapy has become my light at the end of the tunnel. I would come to the sessions no matter how I felt, and immerse into the paintings in the Gallery. They would take me away from my fears and anxiety.

Andrea would ask us to ‘slow look’ through the exhibition and choose a painting which attracts us the most. It could attract us for different reasons—from admiration to repulsion. After that, back to the studio, where we create our own art with whatever we choose—paint, clay, magazines cut-offs, pastels, beads, nature materials, etc.

Often while creating your own art piece, emotions take over—your mind and body doing the subtle work of healing and repairing the soul. After the art work is complete, we have a choice to discuss it or not, which is very important when you feel that you’re not able to express what you feel or your feelings are too strong...

I am eternally grateful for the art therapy, which has become my solace and given me hope, strength and guidance.

I am in a good place right now and can only wish that many more souls would be able to get a chance to join the beautiful world of art therapy, heal their wounds and experience serenity.”

Programme participant, 2025
Domestic Violence Service Users Group

Embedding art psychotherapy across education programmes

In addition to expanding **No Words** through new and returning community partnerships, we recognise the importance of embedding museum-based art psychotherapy across other areas of our Education Programme. This cross-pollination not only deepens the Gallery's social impact but also integrates therapeutic engagement as a sustainable thread within our broader education and wellbeing strategy.

We have adopted a measured and deliberate approach to this process, guided by available resources, but equally by our commitment to ensuring that any new area of development receives the attention, sensitivity and structural support it requires.

Our art psychotherapist, whose professional experience includes therapeutic work within the Irish national school system, has engaged with teachers and pupils from a local primary school that has previously participated in the Gallery's education programmes. This collaboration explores the intersection between creativity, emotional literacy and social development within early education. Additionally, we now also incorporate a museum-based art psychotherapy session into the weeklong, work experience programmes that take place twice a year in the Gallery for Irish teenagers. These sessions introduce the groups to alternative ways of working in and using a cultural space, as well as the potential opportunities for professional careers in both the museum and healthcare sectors.

The Gallery's dedicated programming for young people has also facilitated art psychotherapy sessions for young carers who are part of **Family Carers Ireland**, a national organisation that supports children and young people whose lives are affected by caring responsibilities within their families. These sessions provide a rare opportunity for participants to express and process their experiences within the nurturing context of the Gallery, combining art-making with reflective conversation in a safe, structured environment.

Future plans

As we look towards the continued growth and embedding of **No Words** in the Gallery's core public programme, a significant challenge is how best to respond to the consistently high level of oversubscription the programme has encountered. While museum-based art psychotherapy remains a relatively niche practice within cultural institutions, the strength of public and organisational interest demonstrates its clear relevance and potential within Ireland's evolving cultural and social landscape.

Our ambition is to expand capacity and establish a sustainable, scalable model of delivery that reflects national and European priorities around wellbeing, inclusion, and social cohesion. This involves developing frameworks that guarantee equitable access for all communities, particularly those most affected by social or geographic marginalisation. Although art psychotherapy offers intrinsic value across demographic and cultural boundaries, we recognise persistent gaps in participation and representation, and are committed to addressing these through targeted outreach, partnership development, and responsive programme design.

For participants who complete group therapy but wish to remain connected with the Gallery and **No Words**, we plan to establish structured follow-on support. These engagements would take the form of regular but less intensive group sessions designed to maintain participants' connection with the Gallery, support ongoing wellbeing, and sustain the sense of belonging and creative agency fostered through the programme. In parallel, we aim to strengthen pathways into the Gallery's wider public programmes, helping participants and community partners engage independently and on their own terms.

Primary Schools Outreach Programme, Kilmore National School, Erris Bingamstown, County Mayo, photo © The Pimlico Project

Strategically, a priority is to collaborate with third-level institutions in Ireland that offer art psychotherapy training. Working with these academic partners to develop a dedicated museum-based art psychotherapy module would represent a crucial step forward in professionalising and expanding the field. Such collaboration would strengthen the skills and confidence of future art psychotherapists in non-clinical and cultural contexts, while also encouraging critical research into the psychodynamic, aesthetic and theoretical foundations of this practice.

Ensuring the long-term sustainability of this work is central to our planning, both financially and in terms of staff wellbeing. Alongside embedding **No Words** within the Gallery's core annual budget request, we aim to ensure the delivery of free, socially responsive programming through revenue generated from ticketed activity for other educational initiatives. By adopting this hybrid model, the Education Department works to a sustainable and socially conscious business framework, one that recognises the mutual value of inclusive community engagement and responsible financial stewardship. This approach strengthens the Gallery's capacity to continue offering meaningful, no-cost participation for those who need it most, while building organisational resilience.

Finally, future planning must be guided by the hard-won insights of the programme's first two years: first, that work of this depth, engaging with trauma, exclusion and vulnerability, places complex emotional and psychological demands on staff that extends well beyond those typically encountered in cultural institutions; and second, that the time required to research, document, disseminate findings, and advocate for sectoral change is substantially greater than anticipated. Burnout remains a genuine risk. Securing adequate resources, enabling reflective practice, and providing ongoing training and professional support for staff are therefore not optional extras but essential conditions for sustaining meaningful, ethical and transformative work.

The National Gallery of Ireland aims to play a leading role in advancing national and international dialogue on arts and health. Through **No Words** and the continued integration of museum-based art psychotherapy, we are committed to sharing our methodologies, evidence and learning with peer institutions across Ireland and Europe, supporting the wider adoption of socially engaged and therapeutic practices within cultural contexts. By embedding this work into the Gallery's programming, policy and professional practice, we seek to model how national cultural institutions can serve as spaces of care, inclusion and social impact while maintaining artistic and educational excellence. In doing so, we are in direct alignment with Ireland's Culture 2025 policy (Government of Ireland, 2025), as well as the EU's European Agenda for Culture (European Commission, 2018), which, while currently under review, continues to shape European cultural policy. **No Words** embodies a vision of a cultural sector that places wellbeing, equity and social justice at its core.

Work experience programmes for teens at the National Gallery of Ireland. photo © The Pimlico Project

Reflection, provocation and invitation

Publication December 2025

Reflection

As we continue to embed and expand **No Words** within the National Gallery of Ireland, our focus is increasingly centred on sustainability, collaboration and systemic impact. By integrating museum-based art psychotherapy into strategic plans, core budgets and programming; and by balancing free, equitable offerings with ticketed activities that generate revenue, we are working to build a socially responsible and sustainable model of museum practice. In doing so, we aim to align financial resilience with civic purpose, ensuring that the Gallery can meet community needs while sustaining its long-term vision.

Through documenting, evaluating and researching this work, not only through quantitative measures but through qualitative, narrative, and participant-led accounts that capture both emotional and social dimensions, our hope is that this growing body of evidence will contribute to a richer understanding of the role cultural institutions can play in personal and community wellbeing.

More broadly, we see this work as part of a collective European conversation. As museums and cultural institutions across the continent grapple with questions of inclusion, relevance and public value, museum-based art psychotherapy offers a powerful model for transforming spaces of looking into spaces of healing, empathy, and shared humanity. As stated, the National Gallery of Ireland intends to play a leading role in this evolving field, supporting other museums in Ireland and across Europe to develop their own versions of this practice, while advocating for its recognition as a vital strand of the arts and health movement.

As this work continues to unfold, it invites a series of broader enquiries into its implications for the fields it touches, and for the publics and institutions that sustain it. The following questions are deliberately open-ended and exploratory, considering how museum-based art psychotherapy might shape the future of art psychotherapy itself, the communities it serves, and the museums that hold space for it.

What might this work mean for art psychotherapy?

Cultural Art Psychotherapy CPD Participant response work. photo © Sinéad Rice

Expanding contexts, deepening practice

Research continues to demonstrate art's measurable benefits for health and wellbeing; notably, and most recently, the previously cited comparative study on the physiological impact of viewing original artworks versus reprints (King's College London, 2025), providing the first physiological evidence that engaging with art can lower stress, stabilise heart rate, and positively impact overall wellbeing. Such findings reinforce the potential of museum-based art psychotherapy as a model that bridges cultural engagement and public health, showing that art's benefits are both psychological and embodied. Indeed, the very fact of this also mirrors the therapeutic synthesising of mind and body that occurs in effective process work.

Recent discourse has also emphasised the transformative potential of situating psychotherapy within civic institutions. Karcher (2017) argues passionately for art therapists to fully activate the transformative potential of a social justice framework, using their profession to facilitate their clients' capacity to "decod[e] broader social contexts and [develop] mastery to take action to transform the world" (p. 126). Allying this approach with a museum-based art psychotherapy practice serves to continually challenge traditional notions of where and how therapeutic encounters can take place. Here, we can reimagine the art therapist's role, positioning them at the intersection of clinical care, cultural engagement and social justice. The capacity to encourage and empower art psychotherapists to occupy this role within cultural spaces would be greatly increased were there more professional training opportunities available to them. Building on a strong foundation of previous third-level training initiatives (Dejkameh & Shipps, 2019; Jury et al, 2015) the development of further course offerings and onsite placements would be greatly welcomed, furthering capacity while spurring ongoing research and knowledge creation.

Participants in museum-based art psychotherapy programmes also experience greater autonomy in their own recovery, choosing, for example, when or how they might engage with the thoughts and feelings that are stimulated by the objects that they encounter in a space (Ioannides, 2016). As Dejkameh & Shipps (2019) point out, "Museum-based art therapy provides unique new spaces and structures that individuals can use to engage in acts of self-rescue" (p. 217). Such experiences, however, raise compelling research questions around what this new methodology might mean for power dynamics and power sharing within the therapeutic relationship and, further, how clients might experience these new scenarios and reimagined alliances (Watson et al., 2021). What might the art therapist's privileges and assumptions be, as they practice in this cultural context? Are these shared by the participants, or, indeed, experienced very differently? Furthermore, when working within museums, which are so fundamentally embedded in a location's social and cultural life, how should the art therapist attend to the oppressive structures that may have contributed to the participant's trauma? (Kaplan, 2007). We believe these to be rich seams to be mined by social justice, psychotherapy and museum researchers.

What might this work mean for communities?

Healing, prevention, and empowerment

The community groups we work with as part of **No Words** adopt the principles of community development and all work towards social inclusion, recognising that such approaches have the potential to counter the wide-ranging and detrimental social issues that impact people's lives.

For example, Dublin City Community Cooperative's *Social Inclusion and Community Activation Programme* focuses on alleviating the effects of poverty, social exclusion, and long-term unemployment, an explicit acknowledgement that improvement in these areas can materially improve people's lived experiences. Similarly, the Canal Communities Local Drug and Alcohol Task Force recently commissioned Senator Lynn Ruane's (2025) public safety strategy *Moving Towards a Public Health Approach to Violence*, which aims to address safety through "targeted interventions focusing on healing, prevention, and empowerment to create safer, thriving communities." (p. 5).

Museum-based art psychotherapy aligns closely with this ethos. As scholars of social action and community art therapy (e.g. Kaplan, 2007; Kalmanowitz & Potash, 2025) note, while social action and psychotherapy may appear divergent, the former collective, the latter personal, both recognise the interplay between individual healing and systemic change. By offering people the opportunity to process trauma and rebuild selfhood within communal, culturally charged spaces, museums can play a vital role in advancing the collective wellbeing of their communities.

Our work to date at the Gallery, together with the many examples referenced throughout this publication, demonstrate the profound therapeutic value that museum-based art psychotherapy can offer. For all members of society, and particularly for those who have experienced trauma, deprivation or exclusion, the emotional processing enabled through this practice represents an essential step towards healing and renewal. When such deeply restorative work takes place within the symbolic and inclusive setting of a museum, the potential for genuine community impact is remarkable. Moreover, we have witnessed first-hand that when individuals from diverse backgrounds and beliefs come together within the safe, reflective space created by art psychotherapy, empathy prevails, and repair becomes possible.

What might this work mean for museums?

Engaging diverse audiences, deepening relevance and building collective care

The implications of this work for museums are profound; advancing the evolving civic role of cultural institutions and demonstrating how care and wellbeing can become integral to their purpose. As noted at the outset of this report, the International Council of Museums defines museums as institutions "in the service of society... that foster diversity and sustainability" (ICOM, 2022), committed to accessibility, participation and reflection. Museum-based art psychotherapy directly embodies this definition, translating these values into lived experiences of inclusion, empathy and care.

In fostering emotional connection and empathy through art, museums deepen their relevance to a wider range of audiences. As Betts et al. (2015) observed, participants who engaged in an art therapy protocol while visiting the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, reported enhanced reflective engagement and sustained empathy long after their visit ended. This enduring impact suggests that therapeutic approaches may be key to developing audiences who not only view art but are transformed by it; audiences who see museums as spaces for belonging, meaning, and growth. Equally, the pivotal outcomes of the previously referenced King's College Study (Worrell et al., 2025) argue on multiple fronts for the intersection of museums, arts and health. With conclusive findings that engagement with original art objects can offer both psychological and physiological benefits, this evidence base strengthens the argument for embedding wellbeing-focused programming into institutional priorities, not as peripheral outreach, but as core museum practice for all audiences.

While ensuring opportunity for all audiences may be the ambition of any museum committed to its civic duty, addressing barriers to engagement is inherently complex and demands responsive, tailored, and sustained effort. According to a 2023 survey conducted by the marketing consultancy Red C and Fáilte Ireland, Ireland's tourism development authority (Fáilte Ireland, 2023), 69% of visitors to the National Gallery of Ireland came from the 'ABC1' social class grouping; typically associated with higher incomes, higher levels of education, more stable employment, and greater participation in cultural activities. In contrast, just 31% of visitors

were identified as 'C2DE', encompassing skilled, semi-skilled and unskilled manual workers, as well as pensioners and unemployed people. This stark disparity underscores the significant imbalance in who currently engages with this free and publicly accessible cultural institution.

In fulfilling its civic responsibility and addressing these inequities, the Education Department works persistently to meet underserved audiences where they are, to dismantle barriers to accessing the Gallery, and to help shape a more inclusive institution that is genuinely representative of society. **No Words** offers a clear example of what meaningful progress can look like. Its evaluation shows that most participants had never visited the Gallery before taking part, and that class was frequently cited as a barrier to awareness, relevance and participation. By building trust and providing a caring, safe and welcoming wrap-around programme, the likelihood of fostering long-term, meaningful relationships with underserved communities is significantly strengthened, and new voices are afforded space within the institution.

However, as this work continues to be embedded and expanded, museums must also recognise the parallel need to diversify their own workforces. This prompts further questions: How can we create new pathways into the sector? How can we ensure that varied experiences and perspectives are represented within organisational structures? And how can we make it more equitable for diverse individuals to become active decision-makers, rather than solely programme participants, within their museums?

Initiatives like **No Words** offer a model for the future, one that moves beyond access and inclusion as abstract ideals and into tangible, lived practice, positioning care, empathy and wellbeing as integral to museum purpose. While this is overwhelmingly positive, running art-psychotherapy, or other highly socially engaged programmes for vulnerable people has major implications for museums. This kind of deep, trauma-informed work brings emotional and psychological pressures far beyond what museum teams usually face. This is uncharted territory, and as such must be navigated in an entirely new way.

The outset of this report cited important conversations from the Art Engager X NEMO podcast (Bown, 2025) on the subject of museums, wellbeing and resilience. In the same episode, Dr Nuala Morse, Associate Professor in Museum Studies at the University of Leicester (Morse, 2021), also spoke with educator and podcast host Claire Bown about the emotional labour associated with such a vast spectrum of health and wellbeing programmes. Morse, whose research examines the ethics of care, and the role of museums and galleries in public health, clarifies that while much of this work can be contained, joyous and delivered by skilled educators without any measurable risk to those involved, the scope of such work is immense (Bown, 2025). In scenarios in which the work becomes more nuanced and challenging, for example supporting hospice care or individuals with mental health issues, a range of different competencies are required. Museum professionals frequently find themselves, without adequate skills or supports, in close contact and intimate relationships with participants, "and they may in that context be exposed, quite often, and in a sustained way, to quite traumatic experiences" (Bown, 2025, 41.04).

Arts and Health Partnership with Laura Lynn, Ireland's Children's Hospice and the Abbey, Ireland's National Theatre, photo © The Pimlico Project

Whereas confidential, clinical supervision is integrated into, and a prerequisite for, the work of health and caring professionals, Morse cautions that the museum sector is currently lacking equivalent support systems and structures in which these experiences can be processed and where safe debriefing can occur. While ample studies and evidence exists of the vicarious trauma, physical toll and emotional costs such work can have on caregiving professionals, Morse notes that in the museum sector, evidence of these effects is primarily anecdotal: "We don't know what impact it is having on museum workers" (Bown, 2025, 41.47).

To deliver this work ethically and sustainably, collaboratively partnering with experts in auxiliary sectors is not sufficient. Museums must go further, adopting and adapting new systems of support from other social and medical professions. Additionally, the museum sector may need to reconsider and broaden its recruitment priorities, recognising the skills and expertise that contemporary museum practices demand.

To fully realise our civic potential, we must invest in both the research and the people who make this work possible, building the analytical and organisational infrastructure needed to hold and contain complex and emotionally demanding practices, and to commit to their development, delivery and dissemination.

“Cultural art therapy has grown from a seed I planted many years ago, an idea that art galleries could hold space not only for beauty, but for people who need a safe space. What began as quiet work at the Royal Hibernian Academy and through my master’s research has now taken root in the National Gallery of Ireland, where I have been warmly included and supported in continuing to develop this practice as the resident cultural art psychotherapist. The Education Team in the Gallery offer connection and support for me and the programme, allowing me to extend that safety outwards into my sessions.

Each week, people arrive from all walks of life, many visiting the Gallery for the first time. Together, we pause, look and create. Through the guided slow look process, we connect with the artwork, and with ourselves. Often what arises is something already present beneath the surface; an emotion, memory, or meaning, given shape and colour through art making.

For me, this work is about belonging, people seeing themselves reflected in cultural spaces and feeling their stories are welcome here. I feel my background, being from an underrepresented working-class area and having experienced the trauma of being an ‘outsider’ as a queer neurodivergent person, allows me a deep, felt sense of what each person needs to enter this space with safety.

I’ve learned to trust that together we can hold and support even the most vulnerable people within our society, to safely find a creative space that is trauma-informed and protected. That, to me, is success: when art, care and community meet in a way that sustains hope, and everyone, therapist, participant and artwork alike, is changed by the encounter.”

Andrea Clare Plunkett
Art Psychotherapist in Residence,
National Gallery of Ireland
Art Psychotherapist & Current IACAT Chair

An open invitation

The work of **No Words** demonstrates that when museums embrace care as a central value, they not only serve their audiences more deeply but also reimagine their role within society. Far from exhaustive or conclusive, our journey is only beginning, and as this practice matures, its future depends on research and collaboration, across sectors, disciplines and borders.

We therefore extend an open invitation to colleagues across the Network of European Museum Organisations, and to practitioners working in art psychotherapy, arts and health, and community development, to connect, collaborate and co-create the next chapter of this work. Together, we can build a shared framework that embeds creativity, care and equity at the heart of cultural practice, supporting systemic change and nurturing a more compassionate museum landscape across Europe.

Throughout our research, we have learned that, far from working in a museum-based art psychotherapy vacuum, we are part of an exceptional and dedicated community. Yet, even as this report makes clear the value, impact and diversity of such practice, the question remains: why is this work not more widely recognised?

By sharing expertise, co-developing research, and supporting one another in creating inclusive and restorative spaces, we can amplify our collective efforts and ensure that this field continues to grow in rigour, reach and impact.

Amid social, economic and emotional uncertainty, the sector calls for compassion, courage and imagination. As reflected in the art psychotherapy participant testimonies throughout this publication, in order to succeed in this endeavour, three interdependent elements are essential: people, place/collections, and the space for creative process. Though deceptively simple, this combination constitutes a powerful methodology, one capable of transforming museums into spaces of healing and connection.

The task ahead, and the invitation it carries, is to advance this work together: to place equal value on caring for objects and for people, to make space for other voices, and to move, gradually yet decisively, beyond merely reimagining museums, to fully realising their clear civic potential and latent capacity to heal.

Wellbeing programmes: Sound baths in the Gallery, photo: National Gallery of Ireland

Publication December 2025

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Imprint

Published by	NEMO - Network of European Museum Organisations Karl-Marx-Platz 12 12043 Berlin Germany www.ne-mo.org
Published	December 2025
ISBN	978-3-9826586-0-5
Researched and drafted by	Sinéad Rice & Brina Casey, National Gallery of Ireland
Edited and proofreading by	Geraldine Kendall Adams & LEM WG
Design by	Anna Lind Haugaard
Layout by	Claudia Bachmann
Photo cover	Amauri Mejia, Unsplash

Network of European Museum Organisations

NATIONAL GALLERY of IRELAND

Supported by:

Co-funded by the European Union