

Arts Council of Northern Ireland
Young People & Wellbeing Arts Programme

Year 2 Evaluation Report

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RF Associates

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1. Summary findings

1.1. The Young People and Wellbeing Programme

The Young People and Wellbeing Programme is an arts focused National Lottery funded programme through the Arts Council of NI. It aims to improve the mental health and wellbeing of young people (aged between 12-18) by engagement in high quality arts and is based on a pilot programme (Articulate) that ran between 2016 and 2019. Since September 2022 to March 2024 the project has provided £325,463 in funding to 42 projects, across 31 organisations:

- 24 funding awards, totalling £190,522, were made during the first round of funding announced in September 2022, for projects in 2022-2023. RF Associates produced an evaluation report for Year 1 in April 2024.
- 18 funding awards, totalling £134,941, were made during the second round of funding in 2023, for projects in 2023-2024.
- 11 organisations had funding in year one and year two.

This is the evaluation report for year 2 of the programme, 2023-2024.

1.2 Evaluation methodology and sample

Data for this evaluation report comes from the end of project reports submitted by 11 out of 18 participating projects, using the Arts Council of NI online report template and 196 responses to the young people online survey. There were 196 young people survey completes from 8 out of 18 projects.

RF Associates (RFA) also conducted three online qualitative depth interviews with three projects which had completed an end-of-project report. RFA combined the data from these with the data in their project reports to create three case studies.

1.3 Programme outputs

Key characteristics of projects:

- 18 projects received grants ranging from £1,130 to £8,850.

Of the 11 projects that submitted an end of project report:

- 8 out of 11 projects partnered with other organisations to deliver their activities. These 8 projects named a total of 20 project partners.
- 4 out of 11 projects were enabled to leverage additional funds from other organisations, reporting additional total funds of approximately £16,174.
- The length of project activity for 11 projects ranged from 5 weeks to 52 weeks.
- 7 broad art forms were used to deliver the 11 projects.
- 68 artists were involved in delivering the 11 projects.
- 10 out of 11 projects used more than one type of art form.

Approximately 1441 participants were projected to take part in 2023-2024 according to 16 grant application summaries. This does not include participants from two of the total 18 projects as projections were not included in their summaries. The 11 projects which submitted an end of project report provided data which totalled to 519 project participants. They estimated that their activities also reached audiences of 1719 people in total.

1.4 Programme impact

In the young people survey, respondents were asked “*What has been the most valuable aspect of taking part in this project?*” Their answers demonstrate the positive impacts that involvement in the funded projects has had on the young people who took part. Some examples include:

“I have gained an incredible amount of confidence in myself and when talking with others.” (Survey respondent)

“It’s built up my confidence and has made me less socially awkward. I feel I can socialise a lot better. It’s also a safe environment where you can talk to the teachers normally unlike in school.” (Survey respondent)

“In my opinion I feel that performing arts is very beneficial to a person’s mental health. Personally myself drama has helped me come out of my shell and helped me to meet likeminded people who I do not have to put a mask on to be friends with them as they accept me as who I am. Also with all the support we received from all the leaders in this course, it helps us to build confidence and be strong and proud in everything.” (Survey respondent)

“It helps me get out my comfort zone. And get me out [of] my shell.” (Survey respondent)

“You get to meet people and make friends with people from other schools.” (Survey respondent)

“The most valuable thing to me would be to look after my mental health because I really struggle with it. I have learnt many ways that I am willing to try to get my mental health better.” (Survey respondent)

“This show was amazing to experience, and it really opened my eyes to the ways in dealing with mental health.” (Survey respondent)

“It has improved my mental health as I am constantly communicating with others who I can trust with any problems I have.” (Survey respondent)

“Having the opportunity to learn different skills such as embroidery.” (Survey respondent)

“Learning the arts and progressing in my abilities.” (Survey respondent)

“I know how to express myself in movement.” (Survey respondent)

The data from the project reports and the young people survey provide evidence that the intended participant outcomes of the programme have been achieved. These are summarised in Table A.

Table A: Summary of participant outcomes and evidence of impact

Young people ...	Evidence of impact
1. Have increased wellbeing from participation ACHIEVED	• 11 end of project reports stated that participants had increased wellbeing. • Participation in the projects positively impacted on the young people's mental health and wellbeing, with many young people reporting feelings of safety and respect within the group settings. The projects reported that engaging in creative activities provided the young people with stress relief, relaxation, and an outlet for emotional expression. The reports emphasised the long-term benefits of continued arts engagement, with participants recognising its role in supporting their mental wellbeing. • Project reports described how the creative activities helped young people manage personal challenges, reduce stress, and increase joy, connection, and self-worth. • Project reports described how many of the young people experienced increased confidence and strengthened social bonds through group activities such as drama games, dance, music, and visual arts. • Some projects described how their dance-based initiatives contributed not only to emotional wellbeing but also physical fitness, which further supported overall health. • 92% of young people who completed the online survey agreed 'being part of the project has helped me improve how I feel about myself'.
2. Have increased willingness to express opinions or feelings ACHIEVED	• 86% of young people who completed the online survey agreed 'being part of the project has helped me express my opinions'. • 89% of young people who completed the online survey agreed 'being part of the project has helped me express my feelings'.
3. Feel less isolated/lonely ACHIEVED	• 92% of young people who completed the online survey agreed that 'being part of the project has helped me feel less lonely'. • 11 end of project reports stated that participants had increased community engagement. • The project reports included case study examples of anonymised individuals highlighting the transformative impact of the projects, particularly for young people facing social isolation or for those with special educational needs, strengthening their self-esteem and social connections. • Some project reports also described benefits around increased community engagement and inclusion.

Young people ...	Evidence of impact
	• 9 end of project reports stated there was increased participation in the arts from under-represented groups. • 7 end of project reports stated that their project was providing a voice to marginalised groups.
4. Have increased awareness of the importance of good mental health ACHIEVED	• 92% of young people who completed the online survey agreed 'the project has helped me learn that looking after your mental health is important'.
5. Have learnt techniques to support good mental health ACHIEVED	• 85% of young people who completed the online survey agreed 'the project has helped me learn ways to look after my mental health'. • Project reports described how their focus on open conversations and peer support has been instrumental in increasing young people's awareness of mental health and equipping them with coping mechanisms. • Project reports described how the projects have effectively used creative expression as a tool for cultivating good mental health, providing young people with practical techniques for this. • Projects also reported that participation fostered a strong sense of community and emotional intelligence. They reported that participants developed coping mechanisms and improved their ability to articulate their emotions, while some parents had reported to the project leads that they had observed increased happiness and confidence in their children.
6. Have improved knowledge about sources of help for mental health problems ACHIEVED	• 82% of young people who completed the online survey agreed 'the project has helped me know where to go for help for my mental health'.
7. Have increased awareness that it's ok to ask for help ACHIEVED	• 93% of young people who completed the online survey agreed 'the project has helped me know it's OK to ask for help with my mental health'.

Young people ...	Evidence of impact
8. Have increased skills in a range of art forms ACHIEVED	• 11 end of project reports stated that participants had increased skills in art forms. • Some projects included youth volunteer or co-design opportunities that empowered participants to take leadership roles while promoting a sense of purpose. • The project reports provided evidence that the projects have successfully increased arts-based knowledge and skills among young people through their variety of tailored workshops and activities across different art forms.
Programme outcome: Non arts sector project partners ...	Evidence of impact
have exposure to the use of arts to support positive wellbeing of young people ACHIEVED	• 8 out of 11 projects partnered with other organisations to deliver their activities. These 8 projects named a total of 20 project partners. • The young people who completed the survey provided data on the wide range of arts skills that they have had the opportunity to try out: Drama (71%), Dance (55%), Music (41%), Visual (33%), Other (22%), Craft (20%), Literature (18%), Traditional language and art (6%), Circus and carnival (4%). • Five end of project reports stated that their project was providing improved awareness of a special social issue.

The case studies in section 5 of this report provide detailed examples of all these areas of impact. Quotes from the case studies illustrate this:

“Artistic Minds built confidence and gave young people a voice. The project created friendships and an outlet to socialise and learn new skills. We delivered many workshops in health and wellness, including, drama, dance, sports, arts and crafts and holistic sessions. This created opportunities for young people to learn and engage in coping strategies, relaxation strategies, confidence building, learning new skills and building friendships.” (BEAM, Artistic Minds, case study quote)

“With engagement comes the potential for friendship ... These young people would not find each other in the world out there because they are so diverse and different to one another.” (Fresh Minds Education, Lost Voices Resonate: An EmotionEcho Jam Club, case study quote)

“One of the participants that was in [the project] this year had just been here as an audience member because her mum was volunteering with that particular festival and she just had no concept, so she's a wheelchair user as well, and she had no concept that as a wheelchair user that you can ... dance. (Open Arts, Take 2: Movement & Mentoring, case study quote)

1.5 Conclusions and recommendations

The funded projects have variously achieved the outcomes set out for the programme. Participation had a positive impact on the mental health and wellbeing on the young people engaged. Young people:

- Have increased wellbeing from participation
- Have increased willingness to express opinions or feelings
- Feel less isolated/lonely
- Have increased awareness of the importance of good mental health
- Have learnt techniques to support good mental health
- Have improved knowledge about sources of help for mental health problems
- Have increased awareness that it's ok to ask for help
- Have increased skills in a range of art forms

In addition, non arts sector project partners have had exposure to the use of arts to support positive wellbeing of young people.

As the Arts Council of Northern Ireland and the National Lottery go forward, we suggest that consideration is given to the following points when designing a similarly targeted initiative:

- **Monitoring and evaluation of the programme:** Despite being prompted to complete the end of project report, only 11 out of 18 year 2 projects submitted one. In addition, whilst there was better engagement in year 2 with the young people survey than in year 1, ideally more projects would also have been able to achieve quantitative feedback from young people. These issues affect the ability to create a robust evidence base around the impact of arts-based projects. We suggest that projects are better incentivised to submit data for evaluation purposes.
- **Monitoring and evaluation accessibility for participants:** It is also clear that not all participants can provide feedback through quantitative surveys. Therefore, ideally different methods would be built into evaluation processes and budgets to collect data from these groups. Projects would also welcome visits from the Arts Council of NI team to see the impact for themselves.
- **Project reach:** The programme seems to have had limited reach amongst boys, older teenagers, and in the North and West of Northern Ireland. These are elements to be aware of and future programmes should consider how to engage with these groups and in these geographies.
- **Project stretch:** Whilst the evaluation has not included a detailed value for money exercise, the funded organisations have done well to achieve a lot with relatively small amounts of funding. It is important to note that the achievements reflect other resources being used by the organisations, for example funding for overheads and staffing. Therefore, these impacts are only possible due to the organisations accessing other funding sources.
- **Ongoing funding:** Eleven organisations that were funded in year 1 also accessed funding in year 2. Evidence from the case study interviews demonstrate that projects were able to build on their learning from year 1 and may have delivered a more effective approach in their second year given their opportunity to develop their programming. This underlines the role that ongoing funding can play and that there are potential opportunities whereby multi-annual funding may be more efficient for the Arts Council of NI as well as arts organisations themselves.

2. Project background and RF Associates' remit

2.1 The Young People and Wellbeing Programme

The Young People and Wellbeing Programme is a National Lottery funded programme.

- It aims to improve the mental health and wellbeing of young people (aged between 12-18) by engagement in high quality arts and is based on a pilot programme (Articulate) that ran between 2016 and 2019.
- Applicants were encouraged to design projects to include young people experiencing higher levels of disadvantage or exclusion as well as vulnerable groups such as those living with a mental health condition, eating disorders or addiction.
- 24 awards, totalling £190,522, were made during the first round of funding announced in September 2022. RF Associates produced an evaluation report for Year 1.
- 18 awards, totalling £134,941, were made during the second round of funding in 2023.
- These 18 Year 2 projects were delivered between January and December 2024.

Table 1 shows the intended outputs and outcomes of the Young People and Wellbeing programme.

Table 1: Intended outcomes of the Young People and Wellbeing programme

Activities	Outputs	Short term outcomes
• Workshops • Showcases/ exhibitions • Sharing events	• Number of workshops and contact hours delivered • Number and profile of young people taking part from disadvantaged backgrounds • Number of artworks created	Participant outcomes: Young people ... 1. Have increased wellbeing from participation 2. Have increased willingness to express opinions or feelings 3. Feel less isolated/lonely 4. Have increased awareness of the importance of good mental health 5. Have learnt techniques to support good mental health 6. Have improved knowledge about sources of help for mental health problems 7. Have increased awareness that it's ok to ask for help 8. Have increased skills in a range of art forms Programme outcome: Non arts sector project partners have exposure to the use of arts to support positive wellbeing of young people

Table 2 shows the projects funded in Year 2 by the Young People and Wellbeing Programme.

Table 2: Projects funded in Year 2 by the Young People and Wellbeing Programme

Name	Project Title	Grant Amount
ArtsEkta	A dream called home.	£8,800.00
BEAM Creative Network	Artistic Minds	£7,780.00
Boom! Inc	“Art for the Heart 2024” Courses and Workshops for Children and Young people that promote good mental health.	£7,850.00
Commedia of Errors	Improving Wellness and Awareness through I Am Maura	£5,518.00
DU Dance (NI)	'IN YOUR HEAD' with Belfast Boys	£8,000.00
eduSOIL CIC	Art For Change (2024)	£8,055.00
Fresh Minds Education Ltd	Lost Voices Resonate: An EmotionEcho Jam Club	£8,020.00
FUEL	Digital Minds	£8,410.00
Golden Apples Players	The Tiniest Lifeboat	£8,850.00
Inspiring Yarns CIC	Be Seen, Be Heard, Be You!	£7,170.00
Kilkeel Parish Bridge Association Limited	JIMS Youth Centre Art and Mental Health	£1,130.00
Live Music Now	School of Rock Afterschools at Ashfield	£8,715.00
Open Arts	Take 2: Movement & Mentoring	£8,553.00
St Oliver Plunkett Youth Club	Positive Creations - Let's give it a try.....	£7,896.00
Tinderbox Theatre Company	Holding Ground production and workshops	£6,300.00
Ulster Touring Opera	Ulster Youth Opera Belfast and Derry/Londonderry	£8,440.00
WheelWorks	Re-Action	£7,950.00
Young at Art Ltd	Young People Wellbeing Arts Programme	£7,504.00

2.2 Evaluation objectives and approach

RF Associates was commissioned to:

1. Clearly define the programme objectives and establish a logic model in consultation with key partners;
2. Design ways of measuring programme outcomes that can be applied across participating organisations;
3. Ensure learning is captured in order to improve the programme, create a sustainable legacy and communicate value to the wider partner/stakeholder group.
4. Report on Year 1 and Year 2 in two separate evaluation reports.

This involved:

1. Attending a project initiation meeting with Arts Council of NI to refine deliverables, methodology and timeframe.
2. Preparing an evaluation plan.
3. Undertaking a programme of fieldwork based on the evaluation plan agreed.
4. Completing an agreed number of reports to document programme outcomes.

5. Being appointed to evaluate 3 rounds of funding, with contract renewal on a rolling basis at the end of each reporting period, dependant on funding availability and the production of a satisfactory report.¹

RF Associates' approach to monitoring and evaluation of the Young People and Wellbeing Programme was informed by:

- Review of programme materials.
- Discussions with Arts Council of NI programme team.
- Discussion groups with Year 1 funded project leads.

There was recognition from funded projects of the complexities of evaluating across the programme due to:

- Relatively small funding awards.
- Diversity of projects and participants.
- Ethical considerations of collecting data from young people about the impact of participation on their wellbeing.
- Diverse data collection and evaluation skills and capacity across the projects.

2.3 Methodology and sample

Data for this evaluation report comes from the end of project reports submitted by 11 out of 18 participating projects, using the Arts Council of NI online report template and 196 responses to the young people online survey.

The end of project reports were completed between 12 November 2024 and 6 February 2025.

The young people online survey was open between 22 February 2024 and 5 January 2025. Projects were asked to share the link to the survey with their participants at the end of their project, or to collect data on hard copies and to then input these responses onto the link provided to them.

There were 196 survey completes from 8 out of 18 projects. The number of respondents for each project is shown in Table 3.

RFA also conducted three online qualitative depth interviews with three projects which had completed an end-of-project report. RFA combined the data from these with the data in their project reports to create case studies. These were shared with the projects to check the contents were accurate and have been included in section 6 of this report.

¹ Arts Council of NI is in the process of amalgamating a range of grants. As a result this is the final year that RFA will evaluate this programme. Going forward there will not be a separate funded programme for young people and wellbeing.

Table 3: Number of survey respondents for each project

Name	Project Title	Number of young people survey complete responses
ArtsEkta	A dream called home	3
BEAM Creative Network	Artistic Minds	0
Boom! Inc	“Art for the Heart 2024” Courses and Workshops for Children and Young people that promote good mental health	1
Commedia of Errors	Improving Wellness and Awareness through I Am Maura	76
DU Dance (NI)	'IN YOUR HEAD' with Belfast Boys	3
eduSOIL CIC	Art For Change (2024)	1
Fresh Minds Education Ltd	Lost Voices Resonate: An EmotionEcho Jam Club	0
FUEL	Digital Minds	0
Golden Apples Players	The Tiniest Lifeboat	40
Inspiring Yarns CIC	Be Seen, Be Heard, Be You!	3
Kilkeel Parish Bridge Association Limited	JIMS Youth Centre Art and Mental Health	0
Live Music Now	School of Rock Afterschools at Ashfield	0
Open Arts	Take 2: Movement & Mentoring	0
St Oliver Plunkett Youth Club	Positive Creations - Let's give it a try.....	16
Tinderbox Theatre Company	Holding Ground production and workshops	41
Ulster Touring Opera	Ulster Youth Opera Belfast and Derry/Londonderry	0
WheelWorks	Re-Action	12
Young at Art Ltd	Young People Wellbeing Arts Programme	0

Base: 196 young people online survey completes

2.4 Evaluation limitations

The data provided by the projects in their reports has not been externally verified. It is reliant on project self-reporting.

The data from the young people who participated in the projects is limited to less than half the projects (n=8) who participated in the programme (n=18). The data from the projects is limited to less than two thirds of the projects (n=11) that received funding from the programme (n=18).

3. Evaluation findings: Part 1 Programme Outputs

3.1 Key characteristics of projects

18 projects received grants ranging from £1,130 to £8,850.

Of the 11 projects that submitted an end of project report:

- 8 out of 11 projects partnered with other organisations to deliver their activities. These 8 projects named a total of 20 project partners.
- 4 out of 11 projects were enabled to leverage additional funds from other organisations, reporting additional total funds of approximately £16,174.
- The length of project activity for 11 projects ranged from 5 weeks to 52 weeks.
- 7 broad art forms were used to deliver the 11 projects.
- 68 artists were involved in delivering the 11 projects.
- 10 out of 11 projects used more than one type of art form.

Table 4: Number of projects using each art form

No. projects	Art form used
4	Drama (plays, film, performance)
5	Music (song writing, singing, playing an instrument, DJing, digital, opera)
6	Visual (painting, drawing, graffiti, digital)
6	Dance
2	Literature (writing, story telling, journalling, podcast)
5	Craft (pottery, public art, creating pieces, textile clothing)
1	Traditional (language, music, literature, dance)
4	Other (podcasting, video, digital arts, film-making)

Base: 11 end of project reports submitted

3.2 Project partners

Eight projects out of 11 projects reported that they had partnered with other organisations during project delivery. These project partners can be grouped into six categories: mental health organisations, arts / crafts organisations, community and voluntary sector, organisations representing specific communities, education sector, youth services and local authority. This is shown in Table 5.

Table 5: List of project partners by categories

Arts / crafts	• Hazel Wand Theatre School • The MAC • The Playhouse Derry
Community and voluntary sector for specific communities	• Mae Murray Foundation • Migrant Help • North Down Community Network • Another World • Mount Collyer Young Women's Group
Education	• Core Kids NI • BEAMA Education CIC

Mental health	• UHub • Codo Drops
Public sector / other	• Woodlands Youth Justice Centre • St Columb's Cathedral Derry
Youth services	• Barnardo's • Diverse Youth • The Girl Guides • Mount Collyer Youth Group • North Down YMCA • Ogras Youth Centre

Base: 11 end of project reports submitted

3.3 Project participants and reach

Table 6 shows the number of participants anticipated and reported as taking part. Approximately 1441 participants were projected to take part. This does not include participants from the DU Dance NI and Tinderbox Theatre Company as estimates of their number of participants were not included in the Arts Council of NI project summaries provided to RF Associates.

The 11 projects which submitted an end of project report provided data which totalled to 519 project participants. There is no data on actual number of participants from the 7 projects that did not submit an end of project report. This is shown as n/a in Table 6.

Table 6: Participants number expected by the project and the number reported as participating for projects which completed an end of project report

Name	Project Title	Expected participants²	N participants³
ArtsEkta	A dream called home	120	122
BEAM Creative Network	Artistic Minds	20	20
Boom! Inc	"Art for the Heart 2024"	192	44
Commedia of Errors	Improving Wellness and Awareness through I Am Maura	420	N/a
DU Dance (NI)	'IN YOUR HEAD' with Belfast Boys	N/a	34
eduSOIL CIC	Art For Change (2024)	25	N/a
Fresh Minds Education Ltd	Lost Voices Resonate: An EmotionEcho Jam Club	12	35
FUEL	Digital Minds	36	24
Golden Apples Players	The Tiniest Lifeboat	40	40
Inspiring Yarns CIC	Be Seen, Be Heard, Be You!	30	N/a
Kilkeel Parish Bridge Association Limited	JIMS Youth Centre Art and Mental Health	30	N/a

² Data from 18 grant application summaries – in absence of end of project report data

³ Data from 11 end of project reports

Name	Project Title	Expected participants ²	N participants ³
Live Music Now	School of Rock Afterschools at Ashfield	40	N/a
Open Arts	Take 2: Movement & Mentoring	12	11
St Oliver Plunkett Youth Club	Positive Creations - Let's give it a try.....	60	42
Tinderbox Theatre Company	Holding Ground production and workshops	N/a	74
Ulster Touring Opera	Ulster Youth Opera Belfast and Derry/Londonderry	60	73
WheelWorks	Re-Action	60	N/a
Young at Art Ltd	Young People Wellbeing Arts Programme	336	N/a

The projects involved a wide range of young people from different backgrounds and with diverse experiences, including those:

- At risk of isolation / social exclusion
- At risk of mental health issues
- In high levels of deprivation
- With disabilities
- Who were neurodivergent
- From minority ethnic groups
- From LGBTQI+ groups
- From urban and rural communities
- Who are refugees
- From Protestant / Catholic backgrounds, thereby encouraging cross community contact

The 11 projects that submitted an end of project report estimated that their activities reached audiences of 1719 people.

3.4 Project locations and survey respondent locations

Postcode data analysis shows that the project locations where the majority of 11 projects' activity was delivered, and the young people survey respondent home postcode locations differed in some areas. For example, there were no project report postcodes for County Fermanagh, whereas the young people survey responses include a cluster from this area. This highlights the challenge of evaluating the reach of the projects when 7 out of the 18 projects did not submit end of project reports, and when there were only survey responses submitted from young people who participated in just 8 out of the 18 projects.

3.5 Postcode data analysis from young people survey: Measures of spatial distribution of deprivation (NIMDM 2017)

Postcode data analysis shows that a quarter (25%) of the 136 young people survey respondents who provided postcodes lived in the most deprived 20% of Super Output Areas in NI, i.e. MDM Deciles 1 and 2. It shows that most survey respondents who provided this data came from County Antrim, County Down and County Tyrone. It also shows that there

were no survey respondents who provided this data from County Londonderry and only 1 from Fermanagh.

Table 7: Young people locations frequency distribution by MDM decile and county

County/MDM decile	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	Total
Antrim	12	5	5	3	2	0	4	3	4	6	44
Armagh	10	2	1	0	0	0	2	0	0	0	15
Down	1	1	2	5	0	0	3	10	8	9	39
Fermanagh	0	0	0	0	1	0	0	0	0	0	1
Londonderry	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Tyrone	1	2	8	4	16	2	3	1	0	0	37
Total	24	10	16	12	19	2	12	14	12	15	136

Base: 136 young people online survey completes answering Q8 What is your home postcode?

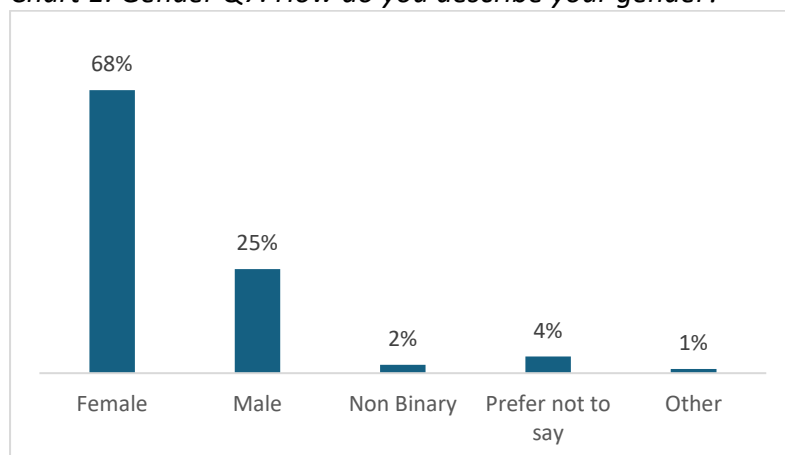
3.6 Project participant ethnicity profile

Nine projects provided data on the ethnicity of the young people participating (n=451). Over four-fifths of participants were from white ethnic groups, 85%. 15% were from an ethnic minority. This data indicates that the projects reached a proportionally higher percentage of young people from minority ethnic groups (15%) than are present in the total NI population according to the 2021 census, where people from white ethnic groups were 96.5% of the population and people from minority ethnic groups were 3.4% of the population (source: NISRA).

3.7 Project participant gender profile

Data provided by 9 projects shows that the projects included more young female participants than male participants: over two thirds of participants were female (72%), and just over a quarter were male (26%). 1% were non-binary. This was reflected in the young people online survey, where the proportion split between the genders was similar; over two thirds of survey respondents were female (68%) and a quarter were male (25%). This is shown in Chart 1.

Chart 1: Gender Q7. How do you describe your gender?



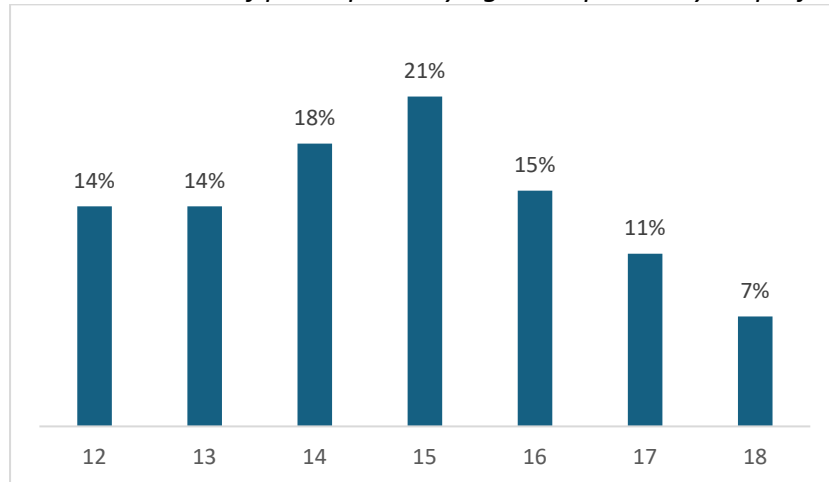
Base: 196 young people online survey completes answering this question

The challenge of encouraging boys and young men to take part in the projects emerged also in the case study discussion with BEAM (see section 5), where three male participants signed up, but they only attended for the first session or two before not returning.

3.8 Project participant age profile

Data provided by 11 projects in Chart 2 shows the spread of ages participating: just over a quarter, 28%, were aged 12-13; almost two fifths, 39%, were aged 14-15; and a third, 33%, were aged 16-18.

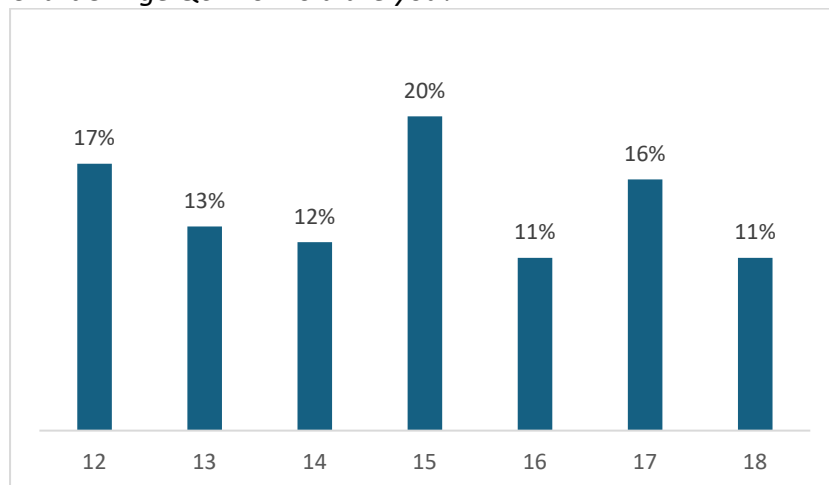
Chart 2: Number of participants by age as reported by 11 projects



Base: 499 from 11 end of project reports submitted

In the young people online survey in Chart 3, the age profile was similar for the younger age group, with 30% of respondents aged 12-13. However, there were fewer survey respondents aged 14-15 (32%) compared to the project reports where 39% were in this age group. Instead the survey had a greater proportion of young people in the 16-18 age group (38%), compared to the project reports (33%).

Chart 3: Age Q6. How old are you?



Base: 196 young people online survey completes answering this question

3.9 Artists involved in delivering projects

Data from 11 projects shows that 68 artists were involved in delivering the projects. Over half were female (n=38), 22 were male (the remainder did not provide gender information). The majority, n=56, were white; 3 were from minority ethnic groups. The range was from 2 to 13 artists involved in each project.

These 11 projects provided the approximate numbers of years' experience of each artist. The range was from 2 years to 40 years' experience. The median number of years' experience was 10 years.

3.10 Training provision for those delivering the projects

Data from 11 project reports shows that 3 projects provided training or skills development to those involved in delivering the project as part of their involvement. The training included facilitating specific skills with young people such as drama and mentoring. One project provided safeguarding, mental health first aid and suicide prevention training.

3.11 Volunteer involvement in the projects

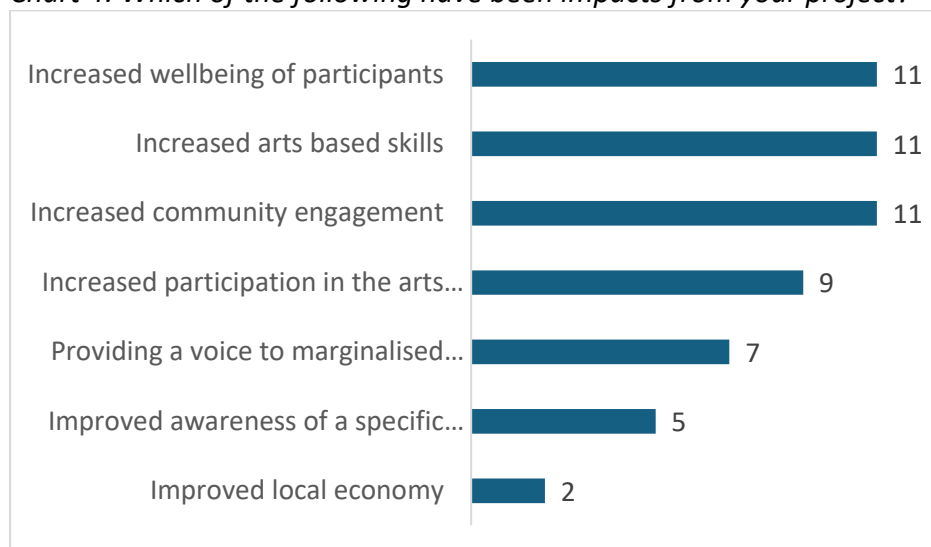
52 volunteers were recorded as providing 418 hours support to the delivery of 7 projects. These were defined as 'provided unpaid help in relation to this project funded by ACNI'; volunteers did not include internships, apprenticeships, and individuals on work experience or board members. This volunteer time translates to an estimated value of £4,782 based on the National Living Wage from April 2024 of £11.44 per hour for adults aged 21 or over. The contributions to individual projects ranged from 5 hours to 128 hours. The range in number of volunteers per project was from 3 to 20 volunteers.

4. Evaluation findings: Part 2 Programme Impact

4.1 Project report data on the impact of the project

Projects were asked to report on the various impacts that their activities achieved. The most frequent impacts were increased wellbeing of participants, increased arts-based skills and increased community engagement with all 11 projects who completed a report, reporting these three impacts. The next most frequent impact was increased participation in the arts from under-represented groups, with 9 projects reporting this impact.

Chart 4: Which of the following have been impacts from your project?

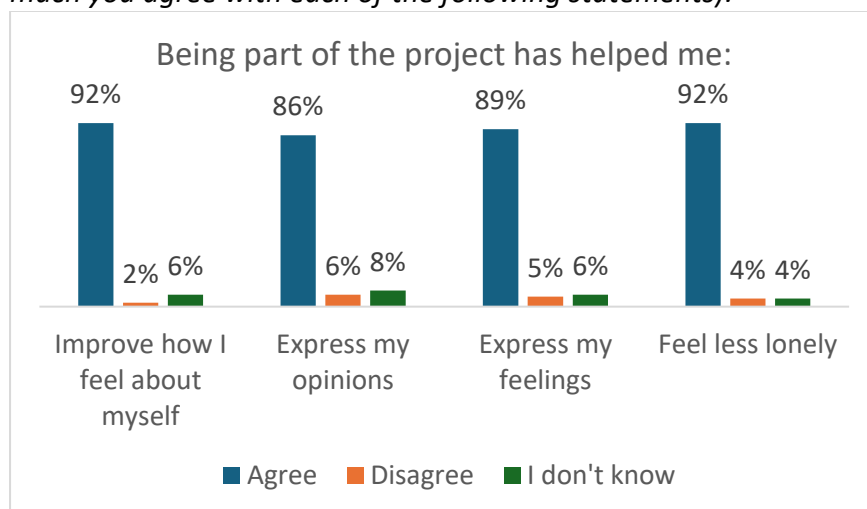


Base: 11 end of project reports submitted

4.2 Impact on young people's wellbeing of participating in a project

The young people survey supported the feedback from the project reports. Chart 5 shows that involvement had a positive impact on survey respondents' wellbeing, with net agreement scores of between 86% and 92% for the four wellbeing statements.

Chart 5: Q2. Please think about what you have done as part of this project. Then tell us how much you agree with each of the following statements):



Base: 196 young people online survey completes answering this question

When asked in Q5. *‘What has been the most valuable aspect of taking part in this project?’* young people survey respondents identified a range of aspects which reflected the anticipated outcomes of the programme. RFA has coded these under a number of themes.

The most common theme which emerged was ‘Enjoyment and fun’, with 75 answers. Respondents mentioned specific aspects they had enjoyed, as well as making general judgements that the project they were involved in was fun and enjoyable.

“[Name] and [Name] are really amazing, the best part was dancing together, it was so fun.” (Survey respondent)

“Learning to have fun.” (Survey respondent)

“The play was really engaging and funny.” (Survey respondent)

Just over a quarter of respondents, 27% (n=46) provided answers which coded across more than one theme. They mentioned finding several aspects valuable. Often they made explicit connections between the positive impact on their own mental health of collaborating with other people on arts projects, whilst learning new skills.

“In my opinion I feel that performing arts is very beneficial to a person’s mental health. Personally myself drama has helped me come out of my shell and helped me to meet likeminded people who I do not have to put a mask on to be friends with them as they accept me as who I am. Also with all the support we received from all the leaders in this course, it helps us to build confidence and be strong and proud in everything.” (Survey respondent)

“Getting the opportunity to learn new skills, make new friends, and try something new, I found it very beneficial to me and found that I have come out of my shell a lot.” (Survey respondent)

“It is a way of expressing yourself through something you love and because you’re having fun whilst doing it there is no stress of the workload.” (Survey respondent)

“This has definitely improved my mental health, it is important as a performer to let go of what others think of you, I used to struggle with this but drama has helped me majorly.” (Survey respondent)

“Performance does help with my mental health, whether it's the improvisations helping build teamwork with others or the thrill of learning lines and show week.” (Survey respondent)

“The social time with nice people and learning skills in musical theatre along the way.” (Survey respondent)

The second most common theme was ‘Connecting with others’, with 45 open-ended answers. The answers provide evidence for the intended participant outcome of ‘young

people will feel less isolated/lonely'. Respondents mentioned enjoying making new friends, or being with others. Whilst no respondent explicitly stated that they felt less isolated or lonely when asked *'What has been the most valuable aspect of taking part in this project?'* the positive statements about connecting with others, when combined with the 92% of respondents who said that they strongly agreed that *'The project has helped me feel less lonely'*, provide evidence that this outcome has been achieved.

"It gets you out and talking to people." (Survey respondent)

"It helps me get out my comfort zone. And get me out my shell." (Survey respondent)

"You get to meet people and make friends with people from other schools." (Survey respondent)

The third most common theme was 'The activity', with 30 answers. Respondents mentioned specific activities they had enjoyed which were the focus of the project they participated in.

"Hip hop group." (Survey respondent)

"The dancing." (Survey respondent)

"The thing I liked was SPLAT and acting." (Survey respondent)

"Trying new things like dance crafts and doing graffiti project." (Survey respondent)

14 open-ended answers coded under the theme 'increased confidence'. These provide additional supporting evidence for the intended participant outcome of 'young people will have increased wellbeing from participation.' Respondents mentioned the positive impact that participating in the various projects had on them.

"I have gained an incredible amount of confidence in myself and when talking with others." (Survey respondent)

"It's built up my confidence and has made me less socially awkward. I feel I can socialise a lot better. It's also a safe environment where you can talk to the teachers normally unlike in school." (Survey respondent)

Thirteen open-ended answers provide evidence for the intended participant outcome of 'young people will have increased willingness to express options / feelings'. Respondents mentioned how they had learned how to express their thoughts and feelings, as well as feeling able to express their emotions through the projects they participated in.

"Learning better ways to express my thoughts and feelings." (Survey respondent)

"it provides a safe space to express yourself." (Survey respondent)

"It's been the best time out of the house where I can let my emotions out in my performance." (Survey respondent)

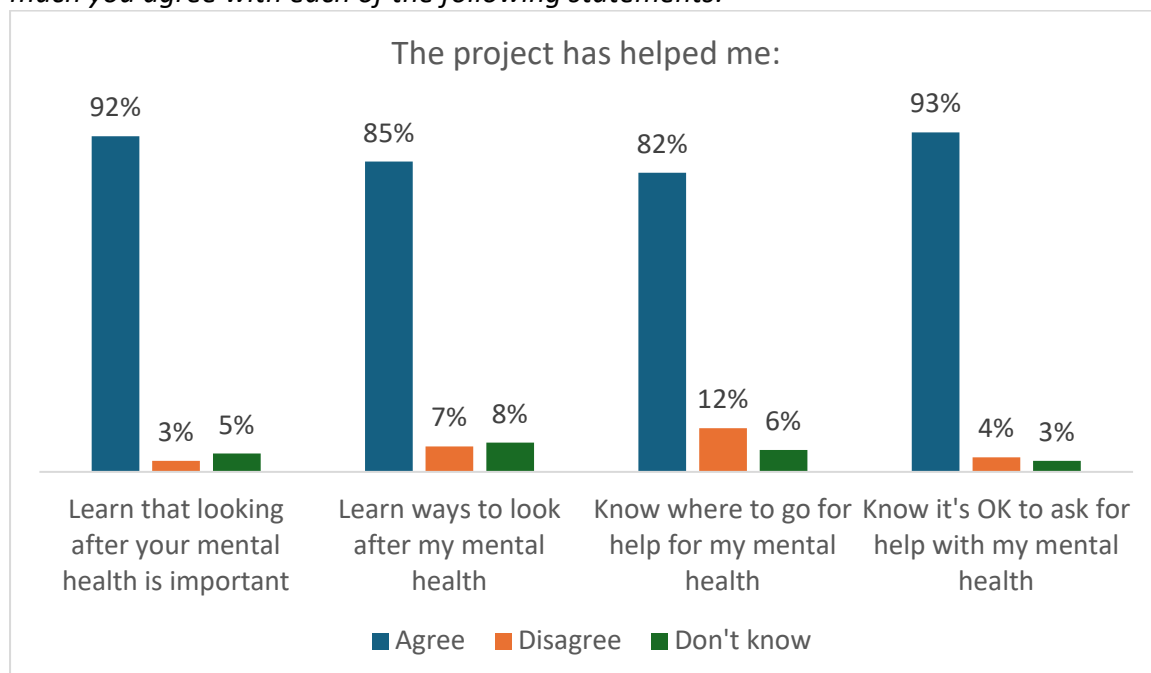
"It is a way of expressing yourself through something you love and because you're having fun whilst doing it there is no stress of the workload." (Survey respondent)

"Performing allows me to express myself and gives me something to look forward to every week." (Survey respondent)

4.3 Impact on young people's awareness of the importance of good mental health and techniques to cultivate it

The young people online survey supports the feedback from the project reports. Chart 6 shows that involvement had a positive impact on awareness of the importance of good mental health/how to cultivate it, with net agreement scores of between 82% and 93% for the mental health related statements.

Chart 6: Please think about what you have done as part of this project. Then tell us how much you agree with each of the following statements:



Base: 196 young people online survey completes answering this question

In the open-ended Q5. 'What has been the most valuable aspect of taking part in this project?' several respondents provided answers that are evidence in support of these three intended participant outcomes. These are included below:

"The most valuable thing to me would be to look after my mental health because I really struggle with it. I have learnt many ways that I am willing to try to get my mental health better." (Survey respondent)

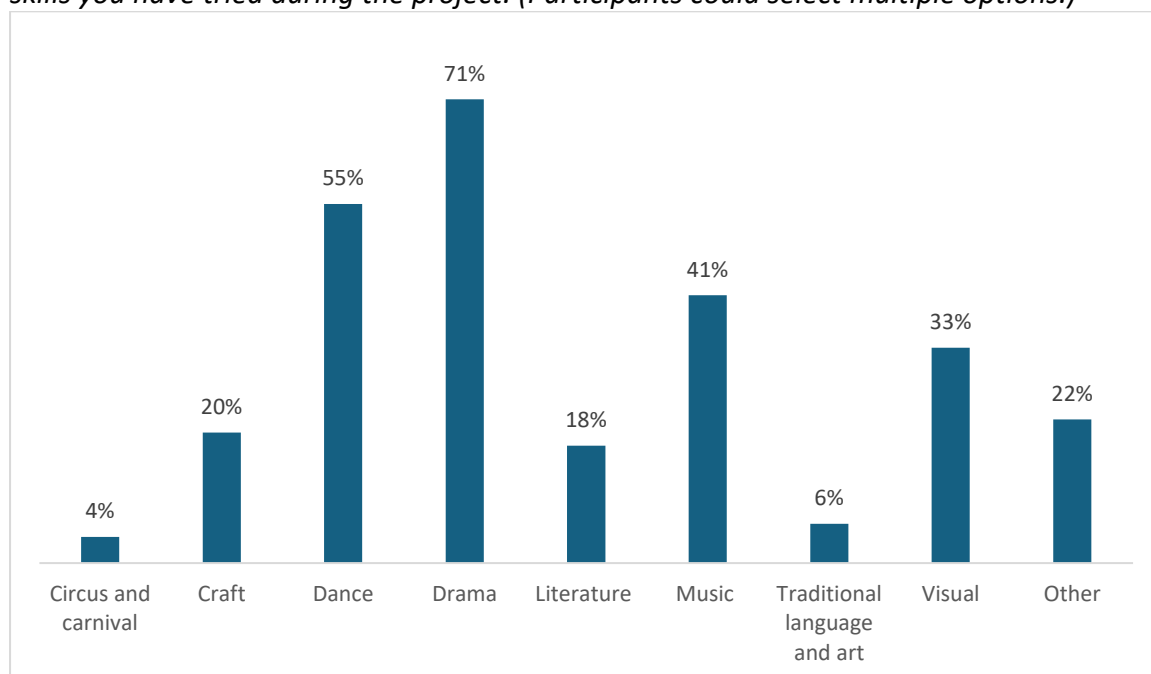
“This show was amazing to experience, and it really opened my eyes to the ways in dealing with mental health.” (Survey respondent)

“It has improved my mental health as I am constantly communicating with others who I can trust with any problems I have.” (Survey respondent)

4.4 Impact on young people’s arts-based knowledge and skills

The young people online survey supports the feedback from the project reports. One hundred and fifty nine young people responded to Q5 *During the project you may have had the chance to try out skills. Please select which skills you have tried during the project.* Chart 7 shows that the most common skills reported by survey respondents from the 8 projects were dance, drama (plays, film performance), music (song writing, singing, playing an instrument, DJing, digital), and visual art (painting, drawing, graffiti, digital).

Chart 7: During the project you may have had the chance to try out skills. Please select which skills you have tried during the project. (Participants could select multiple options.)



Base: 159 young people online survey completes answering this question

When asked in Q5. *‘What has been the most valuable aspect of taking part in this project?’* the survey respondents provided 22 answers which provide evidence for the intended participant outcome of ‘young people will have increased skills in a range of art forms’. Respondents mentioned a range of skills, such as dance, performance, embroidery, graffiti, as well as just the value of learning something new.

“Having the opportunity to learn different skills such as embroidery.” (Survey respondent)

“Learning the arts and progressing in my abilities.” (Survey respondent)

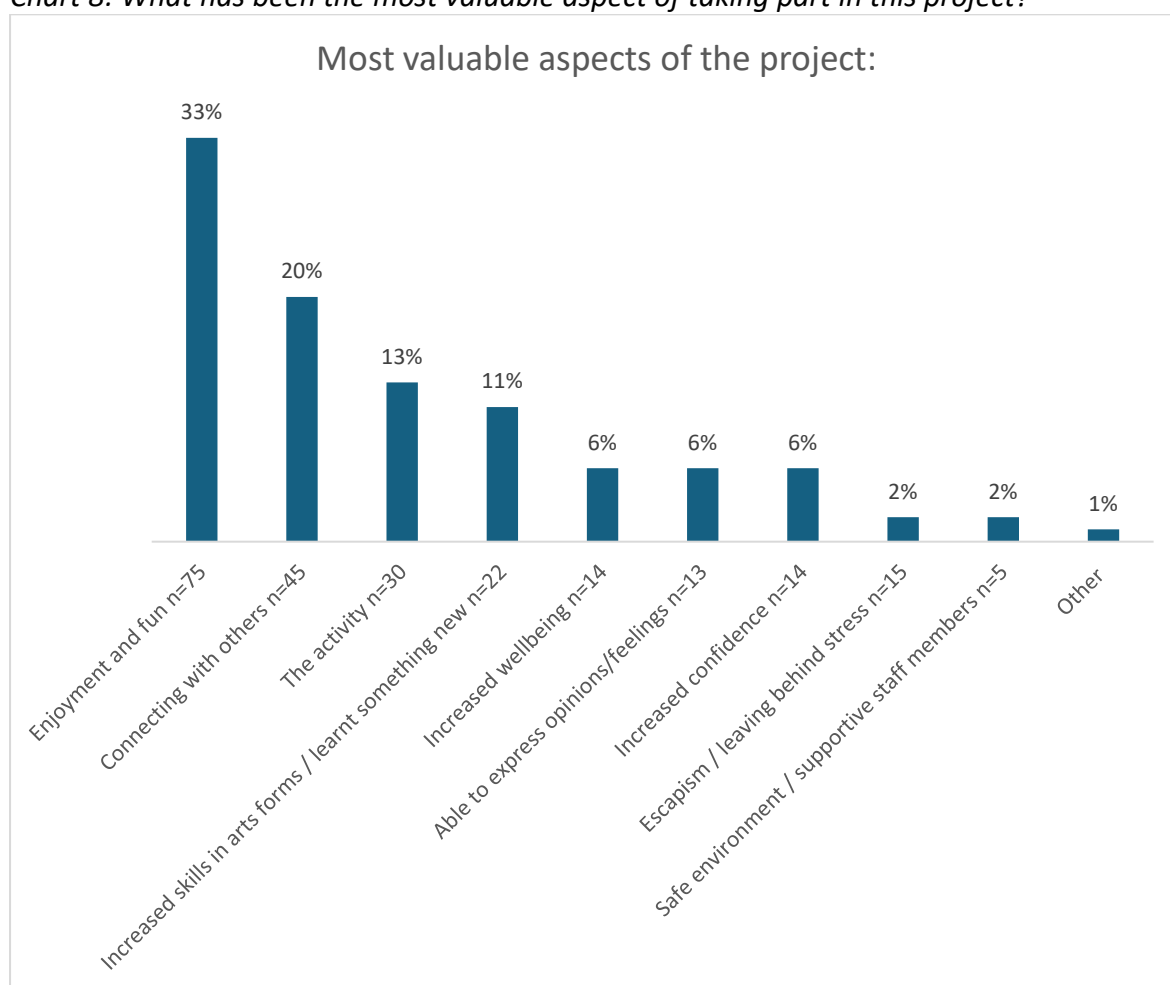
“I know how to express myself in movement.” (Survey respondent)

“Learning something new.” (Survey respondent)

4.5 Most valuable aspect of taking part in the project: summary

The young people online survey asked respondents Q5. *What has been the most valuable aspect of taking part in this project?* Over four-fifths of respondents, 86%, provided an answer (n=169). RFA coded the 169 responses across 13 themes which emerged from the data. There were 228 codable answers in total, as respondents often provided answers which could be coded across several themes. The most common 9 themes are shown in Chart 8. Approximately a third of young people most commonly considered the enjoyment and fun of being involved as the most valuable aspect, whilst a fifth also commented on connecting with others. Other valuable aspects were considered to be: the activity itself (13%) and art form skills (11%). Six per cent spontaneously mentioned increased wellbeing, being able to express themselves and increased confidence.

Chart 8: What has been the most valuable aspect of taking part in this project?



Base: 169 young people online survey completes answering this question, providing 228 codable answers

Table 8 provides additional information, by showing how many answers were coded under the intended participant outcomes. The most common valuable intended outcome was feeling less isolated and lonely, followed by increased skills in a range of art forms.

Table 8: Number of coded answers for each of the intended participant outcomes, answer to Q. What has been the most valuable aspect of taking part in this project?

Participants will:	Coded answer count
1. Have increased wellbeing from participation	14
2. Have increased willingness to express opinions or feelings	13
3. Feel less isolated/lonely	35
4. Have increased awareness of the importance of good mental health	2
5. Have learnt techniques to support good mental health	1
6. Have improved knowledge about sources of help for mental health problems	0
7. Have increased awareness that it's okay to ask for help	1
8. Have increased skills in a range of art forms	22

Base: 169 young people online survey completes answering this question, providing 228 codable answers

4.6 Overview of main impacts on young people of involvement in the projects as reported by 11 projects

Projects were asked to provide short free text summaries of the impact that their projects had on young people. Most of the data in these were qualitative in nature, based on observation and verbatim feedback from participants and parents. Some projects included short case studies to illustrate the impact of participation on some young people. Two projects also included quantitative data from feedback surveys which they had administered themselves.

Overall, projects reported that participation in the projects positively impacted on the young people's mental health and wellbeing, with many young people reporting feelings of safety and respect within the group settings. The projects reported that engaging in creative activities provided the young people with stress relief, relaxation, and an outlet for emotional expression. The project reports emphasised the long-term benefits of continued arts engagement, with participants recognising its role in supporting their mental wellbeing.

Projects also reported that participation facilitated self-expression and emotional connection, leading to improved mood and confidence among young people. The projects reported that activities such as drama, dance, and music proved particularly effective in encouraging self-expression and social skills. Notably, 100% of participants in some projects reported increased enjoyment in the arts.

Projects also reported that participation fostered a strong sense of community and emotional intelligence. They reported that participants developed coping mechanisms and improved their ability to articulate their emotions, while some parents had reported to the project leads that they had observed increased happiness and confidence in their children. The project reports included case study examples of anonymised individuals which highlighted the transformative impact of the projects, particularly for young people facing social isolation or for those with special educational needs, strengthening their self-esteem and social connections.

4.7 Project reports: Feedback that the programme is delivering against its intended outcomes: young people have improved wellbeing

The project reports included a range of ways in which the young people involved in their projects had demonstrated improved wellbeing as a result of their participation.

Improved emotional resilience and self-expression

Project reports described how the creative activities helped young people manage personal challenges, reduce stress, and increase joy, connection, and self-worth. The projects also emphasised that the supportive environment allowed the young people to explore their emotions constructively. Examples given included:

- Arts Ekta's "A dream called home" project reported that feedback from participants emphasised that working in a group where they felt safe, respected, and able to interact freely was a key motivator for good mental health and wellbeing. A foster parent noted how her foster daughter expressed her feelings through visual art during workshops.
- BEAM Creative Network's "Artistic Minds" included data from a feedback survey which found that three-quarters of participants reported improved mental health and wellbeing after taking part in the 20 week project. Additionally, all participants expressed increased enjoyment in arts-based activities.
- Boom! Inc's "Art for the Heart 2024" project report described how the project's calm and supportive environment enabled the young people to explore personal challenges privately. This fostered confidence, a sense of achievement, and emotional resilience. Feedback highlighted that art-based activities helped to reduce stress, promoted relaxation, and provided an outlet for the young people to express emotions that were difficult to articulate verbally.
- The Golden Apples Players' "The Tiniest Lifeboat" project reported that the project provided a safe and supportive space where young people could explore and communicate their emotions through various artistic mediums such as drama, music, dance, and visual arts. The young people learned to identify, understand, and express their feelings in a healthy and constructive manner. The Golden Apples Players' "Tiniest Lifeboat Project" also report described how weekly self-evaluation tasks allowed the young people to monitor their mental health and take control by learning positive steps for improvement.
- Tinderbox Theatre Company's "Holding Ground production and workshops" project report described how young people provided positive feedback about engaging in drama games and using dance and movement as forms of self-expression, which contributed positively to their overall wellbeing.

Increased confidence, increased social skills and increased connection with others

Project reports described how many of the young people experienced increased confidence and strengthened social bonds through group activities such as drama games, dance, music, and visual arts. Examples given included:

- DU Dance (NI)'s "IN YOUR HEAD' with Belfast Boys" project reported included participant statements such as "*I am myself. I am happy, I've made new friends, I am more confident.*" It reported that parents also observed significant improvements in their children's mental wellbeing since joining workshops focused on teamwork through dance.

- St Oliver Plunkett Youth Club's "Positive Creations - Let's give it a try....." project report described how a young person with autism found a sense of belonging through the arts activities such as graffiti, which significantly improved their confidence and self-esteem. Their parents observed that their child now regularly attends the youth club and is eager to participate in future art initiatives.
- Ulster Touring Opera's "Ulster Youth Opera Belfast and Derry/Londonderry Youth Opera Workshops" project report included feedback from the workshops which showed that 92% of participants reported a positive impact on their self-esteem, with 62% strongly agreeing. Additionally, 96% felt the project helped them express their opinions, and 85% said it improved their ability to express feelings. A specific case study highlighted a young person who initially was shy and hesitant but became progressively more engaged over time. This participant went from singing softly at the back to volunteering for a solo line in a group performance. Their parent noted that this newfound confidence extended to singing more frequently at home and improved social interactions.

Opportunities for leadership

Some projects included youth volunteer or co-design opportunities that empowered participants to take leadership roles while promoting a sense of purpose. Examples provided included:

- Boom! Inc's "Art for the Heart 2024" report which noted that the project included a youth volunteer programme. This initiative allowed young people to strengthen their appreciation of the arts by taking on responsibilities and contributing meaningfully to the programme.
- DU Dance (NI)'s "IN YOUR HEAD' with Belfast Boys" project report explained how some participants joined the Company Youth Steering Group, representing their peers due to the confidence they gained during sessions. This opportunity allowed them to take on leadership roles within the group.
- Fuel's "Digital Minds" project report described how one young person took a lead role in co-designing activities during the project. They influenced project milestones and shaped artistic aspects through their input.

Improved physical fitness

Some projects described how their dance-based initiatives contributed not only to emotional wellbeing but also physical fitness, which further supported overall health. For example, Open Arts' "Take 2: Movement & Mentoring" project report described how participants explored emotions through dance and reflected on how movement affected them physically and emotionally.

Increased community engagement and inclusion

This theme was also emphasised in several of the project reports. For example:

- Arts Ekta's "A Dream Called Home" project provided vulnerable young people, including refugees, with a platform to express their opinions and share life experiences. The concept of Little Amal, symbolising displaced children worldwide, was reported as resonating deeply with participants facing personal hardships. Refugee participants contributed artwork for a welcome quilt, which gave them a sense of solidarity and belonging within the group.

- Boom! Inc's "Art for the Heart 2024" Programme managed to engage parts of the wider community that were traditionally difficult to reach.
- Ulster Touring Opera described how its project successfully expanded access to opera beyond urban centres like Belfast into rural areas such as Fermanagh and Derry.

4.8 Project reports: Feedback that the programme is delivering against its intended outcomes: young people have increased awareness of the importance of good mental health and techniques to cultivate it

The programme has delivered on its intended outcome of increasing young people's awareness of the importance of good mental health and techniques to cultivate it through various impactful approaches used by the funded projects.

Open conversations and peer support

Project reports describe how their focus on open conversations and peer support has been instrumental in increasing young people's awareness of mental health and equipping them with coping mechanisms. For example:

- Arts Ekta's "A dream called home" project reported that the workshops facilitated discussions among young LGBTQ+ participants about their negative experiences, fostering a safe space for reflection on mental health challenges.
- Fresh Minds Education's "Lost Voices Resonate: An EmotionEcho Jam Club" project reported that the group engaged in numerous discussions about recognising signs of emotional or mental distress and explored strategies to foster positive mental and emotional wellbeing.
- Fuel's "Digital Minds" project report described the benefit on the young people of taking part in open discussions which explored the importance of good mental wellbeing, signs of poor mental health, and ways to address these issues. Participants shared personal struggles, which helped to destigmatise mental health issues and encouraged further discussion.
- The Golden Apples Players' "The Tiniest Lifeboat" project reported that the project used devised drama to practice having "open conversations" about mental wellbeing. As part of the project, the young people were encouraged to harness the positive power of social media and to spread their message to other young people in Omagh.

Practical techniques for cultivating good mental health

Project reports describe how the projects have effectively used creative expression as a tool for cultivating good mental health, providing young people with practical techniques for this. For example:

- Boom! Inc's "Art for the Heart 2024" project report described how creative workshops in journaling, mixed media, and metal-smithing taught the young people how artistic expression can relieve stress and regulate emotions. The journaling workshops helped the young people to process their emotions, while hands-on crafts promoted mindfulness and focus. Participants reported understanding the connection between creativity and mental wellbeing, committing to incorporating these practices into their daily lives.

- DU Dance (NI)'s "IN YOUR HEAD' with Belfast Boys" project report described how the dance sessions included relaxation activities alongside physical challenges to help participants focus their minds and build confidence. Young people expressed that dance allowed them to emotionally regulate, express themselves creatively, and gain confidence through performance. Parents observed improvements in emotional regulation, academic performance, social connections, and overall happiness.
- Fresh Minds Education's "Lost Voices Resonate: An EmotionEcho Jam Club" project reported that the group had developed resources which included techniques and activities to support wellness and resilience.
- Open Arts' "Take 2: Movement & Mentoring" project report described how dance was used as a medium for self-expression, helping participants communicate feelings more effectively. The warm-up exercises reduced anxiety and built emotional resilience. The reflective workbooks encouraged positive thought processes by helping participants identify strengths and set goals.

4.9 Project reports: Feedback that the programme is delivering against its intended outcomes: young people have increased skills in a range of art forms

The project reports provided evidence that the projects have successfully increased arts-based knowledge and skills among young people through their variety of tailored workshops and activities across different art forms. Key examples included:

- BEAM Creative Network's "Artistic Minds" project report reported that 65% of participants reported learning new skills, and 100% enjoyed the arts-based activities.
- Boom! Inc's "Art for the Heart 2024" project report provided examples of skill development, for example in journaling workshops, participants explored the integration of visual elements with written reflection, learning techniques such as layering, collage, and composition. In the metalsmithing sessions, the young people learnt some fundamental jewellery-making skills, including texturing, shaping, and finishing metals.
- DU Dance (NI)'s "IN YOUR HEAD' with Belfast Boys" project report described how young people developed stage presence, learned stage etiquette, explored new dance forms, and contributed creatively to movement material. This enhanced their vocal, physical, and performance skills.
- Fresh Minds Education's "Lost Voices Resonate: An EmotionEcho Jam Club" project reported that the young people learnt from professional artists who held workshops for the group in preparation for the group leading their own workshops with other young people. This included: colour theory, use of fonts, creating posters and art work using AI, origami, painting, drawing techniques, improvisation, devising, performance, hosting skills and content creation.
- Fuel's "Digital Minds" project report described how the project provided hands-on training in digital art mediums such as graphic design, photography, music production, animation, and more. The young people used modern technology to express their personalities and viewpoints creatively.
- Open Arts' "Take 2: Movement & Mentoring" project report described how the young people learned the entire process of creating a dance piece—from warm-ups to choreography and performance.
- Ulster Touring Opera's "Ulster Youth Opera Belfast and Derry/Londonderry Youth Opera Workshops" project report described how the workshops enhanced the young

people's singing and acting abilities while fostering an appreciation for opera as an art form. One participant even expressed interest in pursuing further vocal training.

- Tinderbox Theatre Company's "Holding Ground production and workshops" project report described how the young people enhanced their overall creative capabilities by engaging in the workshops involving dance, drama, creative writing and drawing.
- The Golden Apples Players' "The Tiniest Lifeboat" project reported that the young people developed significant skills over the course of the 20 week project: they created devised practicals, performed these for live audiences in schools and completed a showcase performances for a live audience in a professional theatre.

4.10 Additional points made by the projects

Some projects expressed concerns about the potential negative impact of funding cuts on young people's wellbeing in Northern Ireland. There was a strong desire for continued investment to sustain these impactful initiatives which have had such a demonstrable positive impact on young people's wellbeing.

5. Project case studies

Case study 1: Open Arts – Take 2: Movement & Mentoring

Open Arts and background to the project The mission of Open Arts is to inspire and support the creativity and artistic development of disabled people. 50% of board members and 3 out of 4 staff members have a disability. Open Arts engages with disabled people in delivering high quality activities and events across a range of art forms. It does this by promoting artistic excellence and encouraging the participation of people with and without disabilities. In August 2024, Open Arts facilitated 11 young people from the Mae Murray Teen Hub in an intensive week-long dance summer scheme. The young people had physical and learning disabilities including some with additional complex needs. They were supported by dance access assistants from Open Arts and the Mae Murray Foundation. The Mae Murray Foundation was set up to allow people of all ages and abilities to take part in activities, experience the world, and enjoy friendship together, in an inclusive environment. Its values and mission are closely aligned to that of Open Arts.
Take 2: Movement & Mentoring project details Open Arts received an Arts Council of NI grant of £8,553 to deliver this project, and additional funding, from the charity Kinder House, of £834. This project was a repeat of the August 2023 project delivered by Open Arts which was also funded by Arts Council of NI. Six of the young people had previously attended in 2023, and they were joined by five new participants in 2024. The project took place over five initial intensive days, from 11am until 3pm. These days were followed by two continuation workshops on the lead up to the final performance at the Bounce Festival. The young people worked with professional dancers (Helen Hall and Linda Fearon) who taught them choreography techniques such as warm up games; mirroring; improvisation; partner and contact work. They explained the importance of physical warmups and stretches to improve flexibility and avoid injury. The young people were encouraged to contribute their ideas and moves into the finished piece. Throughout the week they had mentoring visits from members of Luminous Soul dance company, which is Open Arts dance development company for disabled adults. Throughout the creative process the young people were exploring ideas, thoughts, and emotions and how they could translate these into how their bodies move. They had the freedom to discover how we all connect and communicate in different ways by using dance as the catalyst. This week was followed up with more rehearsals to prepare for a performance as part of Open Arts event “The Big Takeover” at the Cube performance space at the Crescent Arts

Centre, part of Bounce Festival, the annual arts and disability festival. This was attended by 95 audience members.

The young people also worked towards achieving their Arts Awards at the Explore and Bronze levels. Arts Awards are accessible for young people with disabilities, because there is flexibility in how the activities are delivered and in the format that the young people can access and evidence beyond the written word, such as video, audio and drawings.

The young people created workbooks of their involvement in Movement & Mentoring which helped them self-reflect and process how dancing made them feel and celebrate both their achievements and the positive connections made.

The young people will repeat their dance performance again in early March 2025 at the Girdwood Community Hub. They will receive their Arts Awards at an awards ceremony after the performance. They will each receive their Arts Awards certificates, their workbooks and a Luminous Soul t-shirt.

Where participants were from

The participants were from across Belfast and Antrim. They included young people at risk of isolation / social exclusion, young people at risk of mental health issues and young people who were deaf, disabled or neurodivergent. They were aged between 12 and 18.

Date of activities

The projects took place in August 2023 and August 2024.

The impact on young people

Young people have increased skills and confidence

The biggest impact of the project was the increased self-confidence of the young people, and they felt more equipped to express and communicate their feelings through the medium of dance. Open Arts did not dictate how the performance came together. The performance was developed from the young people's ideas which were facilitated by the professional dancers.

Having the opportunity to showcase their new skills in a professional arts venue, part of a local arts festival, in front of their peers, friends and family has resulted in increased confidence, greater self-awareness, strengthened relationships and a curiosity to continue their creative journeys.

The young people have learnt the process involved in creating a dance piece from inception through to performance. This includes the importance of warm up (physical and vocal), choreography exercises such as mirroring; group work; communicating; music and rehearsing. The sharing of ideas and working collaboratively with others have all impacted on their communication skills and the new relationships they have developed.

Throughout the project the young people evidenced their learning by recording what they had achieved and enjoyed in their Arts Award workbooks, which contributed to improved project planning skills. They recorded what steps they would take and listed the skills they

would use so as to achieve their goal of performing a dance piece that they had helped choreograph.

At the end of the project these workbooks were verified by Trinity College London and the young people achieved an Arts Award in either Explore or Bronze certifications. For those who have progressed to the higher level of Bronze, this progression recognises personal growth, boosts confidence in their artistic abilities and will motivate them to continue developing their skills and knowledge in the arts.

Open Arts considers that having achieved their Arts Award is incredibly important for the participants' sense of self-worth, as it celebrates their unique skills and contributions. The sense of accomplishment fosters a positive relationship with the arts, encouraging the young people to continue exploring their creative potential.

Young people have learnt techniques to support good mental health

All the young people, but especially those new to dance found the warm-up exercises at the start of the sessions very beneficial. These not only prepared them physically to take part, but also helped to relax and lower any anxiety they may have had. This has helped build their emotional resilience and they can apply these techniques in times of stress in the future. The Arts Awards workbooks were a great tool to help the young people reflect on their experiences and consider how they felt and why. Thinking and identifying what they were good at, what they wanted to learn and how to plan also promoted positive thought processes for the young people.

"I have learnt how to concentrate which helps me to be a bit more calmer."

"I learnt how to work together with my friends. The week at camp has made me feel happy, excited and good all-round."

Young people have increased wellbeing from participation

The project had a profound impact on one young person who is a wheelchair user, who doesn't frequently engage in activities and on occasion can display challenging behaviour. From the first session they were engaging, laughing and taking part in the activities with no hesitation or disruption much to the surprise of the team leader who had never previously seen them engage so quickly especially in unfamiliar surroundings and with new people.

Young people have shared their experiences

All the young people were excited to share their experience with friends, family members, and teachers. They enjoyed showing the skills they learnt, who they have been working with and that they performed at a professional arts venue. Their families and friends enjoyed seeing their performance and celebrating their achievements.

"It's really important for parents as well to just see that achievement like for any parent if you're child's disabled or non-disabled."

The project has promoted the positive creativity of young people with disabilities

Open Arts considers that one of the most important impacts of this project has been the way in which it has challenged stereotypes about the capabilities and potential of young people with disabilities in the arts. Through their achievements and the public performance, the young people demonstrated their skills and creativity, and amongst the audience created a greater societal recognition of their talents. The Arts Awards achieved also helps to advocate for more inclusive opportunities within the arts sector.

The project has inspired participants by showing them new possibilities. For example, a wheelchair user who initially attended as an audience member in 2023, later participated in the project in 2024 after realizing that she could dance despite her disability.

"One of the participants that was in [the project] this year had just been here as an audience member because her mum was volunteering with that particular festival and she just had no concept, so she's a wheelchair user as well, and she had no concept that as a wheelchair user that you can ... dance."

Open Arts hopes that projects like this can contribute to the pipeline of future dance talent.

"Open Arts wants to inspire and support the creativity and artistic development of disabled people. And what I would really hope is ... some of those teenagers that we worked with will be turning 18 soon and we have a whole adult programme for them to explore. So it's that thing about developing the kind of pipeline of talent. Because you know, as a non-disabled child, if you want to be a dancer, you kind of know that whenever you're six or seven, you don't suddenly do it as an adult. So that's what we've been really trying to build up, particularly over the last eight years, so that more disabled children and young people know that that's an option. Because a lot of them don't."

Positive impact on project partners

The Mae Murray Foundation has developed further links with Open Arts and has received exposure to the use of arts to support the positive wellbeing of young people. Four Kinder House representatives travelled from Denmark to see the performance, and Open Arts is hoping to receive more funding from Kinder House to support the project again in 2025.

Reflections and learnings

What worked well

Open Arts consider that the partnership approach with the Mae Murray Foundation was a key part of the project's success. It allowed the teenagers to participate independently from their parents, which is crucial for their own personal development.

"For the teenagers that we were working with in this project, they would ... never have the opportunity to go to a summer scheme like this and not have a parent in the room or a family member as a carer. So working with Mae Murray, it meant that these teenagers, because they're teenagers, they want to be away from their mum and dad for the summer holidays, ... enabled us to do that. Because we both recognise where our skills are and where we complement each other."

They considered that the high production values of the finished performance were also a key strength. The performance can be viewed here: <http://openartsni.org/projects-movement-mentoring/>

"I think it's really important the fact as well, that a big thing of what we do, ... is that the end result is always a really high production value. Because we have been going for over 30 years as an organisation and we're still fighting that idea that people are like, 'oh, isn't that really cute that they're able to do a dance?' You know, they took part in a really intensive summer scheme. They worked with really fantastic choreographers, and they did a fantastic performance. And that's why they deserve to be in the professional theatre as you know, like any other mainstream middle class performing arts academy."

Ideally Open Arts would like to have the funding to set up their own youth dance company which meets monthly. However, they are currently hoping to raise sufficient funds to be able to offer Movement & Mentoring again in 2025.

Open Arts developed the project from their experience of the first year. They found that it was better to have longer days in the initial week, followed by 2 workshops, rather than shorter days initially in the first week, followed by a greater number of 2 hour workshops.

Positive impact on Open Arts

The Arts Council funding and experience of the project has contributed to Open Arts staff developing their experience in Arts Awards. Open Arts now has a staff member who is an assessor for the Arts Award. Open Arts is the only Arts Award Centre in Northern Ireland that can deliver past the Discover and Explore stage, to Bronze and Silver levels.

Key comments to share with Arts Council of NI

Need to enable equitable access for young people with additional needs through more flexible grant funding conditions

Open Arts is frustrated by Arts Council NI's capping of access costs at £3000 and the fact that the access costs have to come out of the project budget and cannot be in addition to the budget.

They highlighted that there are considerable costs involved in funding the access assistant dancers and staff to provide the essential personal care that the young people need to use the changing place, helping them to have their lunches, having staff trained in manual handling who can use hoist systems etc. It would not be possible for these young people with disabilities to take part in the Movement & Mentoring project without receiving this access support.

"Access costs are capped in terms of how much you can ask for, but also that comes out of the project budget. So any child who has, whether that's because of their disability or language barrier, they will only ever enjoy £7,000 worth of activity, whereas a child who has no access requirements can enjoy a full £10,000 of activity. So in my mind, that is discrimination."

Need to improve the accessibility of evaluation methods

Open Arts would also like Arts Council NI to adopt a more progressive approach to evaluation, similar to the approach used by BBC Children in Need. This involves grant recipients attending an outcomes workshop and working for the day with a facilitator and other projects to explore how they might collect data appropriately to demonstrate outcomes. Data collection often involves Open Arts doing a lot of observation work along with the artists, talking to parents, talking to access partners, and summarising how an activity went and the observed impact on the participants.



Images from the Take 2: Movement & Mentoring project, Open Arts

Case study 2: Bardic Educational Arts and Media (BEAM) – Artistic Minds

Bardic Educational Arts and Media (BEAM) and background to the project

BEAM creates and delivers bespoke and interactive learning experiences through the arts, and has engaged over 250,000 people in its programmes throughout the island of Ireland.

Using arts-based mediums such as drama, story-telling, scriptwriting, animation, creative media, film production, photography, music, art and dance BEAM explores a wide range of social and life issues such as anti-bullying, conflict resolution, anti-social behaviour, anti-racism, cultural identity / diversity, inclusion and many environmental issues.

Artistic Minds: project details

BEAM received a grant of £7,800 to deliver the Artistic Minds project. Arts Council of NI was the sole funder. The Artistic Minds project was a continuation of the project funded by Arts Council of NI in 2023.

20 girls aged between 12-16 took part in Artistic Minds. They attended 20 x 2 hour sessions over an 18 week period. The first four sessions focused on learning about mental health and wellbeing and goal setting including:

- Mental health: gratitude, emotional wellness, goal setting, emotional regulation
- Confidence building: self-awareness, communication skills, self esteem
- Physical health: exercise, nutrition, relaxation

The young women contributed their ideas for what they would like to do for the rest of the programme. They then took part in workshops using art forms to explore and health and wellbeing themes. Each workshop focused on a different area of interest each week. Sessions included

- Acting/Drama
- Art
- Arts and Crafts
- Baking
- Boxing
- Cooking
- Dance
- DJ-ing
- Nutrition
- Slime
- Weights
- Yoga

Thirteen artists were involved in delivering the project, with experiencing ranging from 5 to 10 years. The BEAM project lead facilitated the first four sessions which focused on mental health, and then subsequent sessions were led by skilled artists and facilitators.

Where participants were from
Participants were from Coalisland, County Tyrone. They were recruited via the Ogras Youth Club, where the sessions were held, and via other community groups or youth clubs. The participants included young people at risk of isolation / social exclusion and young people at risk of mental health issues.
Date of activities
The project lasted 18 weeks and took place between June 2024 – October 2024
The impact on young people
BEAM perceive that the impact of the programme on young people was multifaceted and overwhelmingly positive. The programme created a safe space for young people to grow personally, socially and emotionally while engaging in creative arts-based activities tailored to their needs and interests. BEAM collected its own baseline and post project evaluation data, which evidenced the positive impact of the project. BEAM also observed the sessions delivered by the artists and facilitators and gathered feedback from them. <i>“We do a baseline at the very start of each project as well as onsite visits by the project manager. An evaluation is then completed at the end of the programme. We also gather facilitator feedback from each workshop. Facilitator feedback can be hard to gauge impact as they are usually in for one session.”</i> All the participants reported more enjoyment of arts based activities and reported enjoying all the arts based activities. All the young people expressed interest that if a similar project was to happen again, that they would love to participate. Some of the young people that were not part of the Ogras Youth Club have since joined. 75% of participants would recommend Artistic Minds as a project to get involved with. Young people had increased confidence and increased willingness to express opinions or feelings The young people were given a sense of ownership over the project, which empowered them and gave them a voice in shaping their experience. Many participants experienced significant growth in confidence. Initially hesitant to express themselves, they became more vocal and engaged as the project progressed. <i>“Artistic Minds built confidence and gave young people a voice. The project created friendships and an outlet to socialise and learn new skills. We delivered many workshops in health and wellness, including, drama, dance, sports, arts and crafts and holistic sessions. This created opportunities for young people to learn and engage in coping strategies, relaxation strategies, confidence building, learning new skills and building friendships.”</i>

Young people made friends and felt less isolated and lonely

The project fostered new friendships among participants, creating a supportive group dynamic where cliques did not form.

"There were lovely friendships formed over the 18 weeks ... Some of the group didn't know each other. Within a group of 20 girls, they all got on great and became a strong team. They sat in different places each week and really took the opportunity to mix with everyone. Maybe it was to do with activity that was happening as well, but they never veered towards the same group of friends to sit beside. On this project the group worked well together, always very helpful, complimentary and encouraging each other."

Young people had increased wellbeing from participation

75% of participants reported improved mental health and well-being after completing this programme. For some young people, the project provided an outlet to escape personal challenges or stresses in their lives.

Young people had learnt techniques to support good mental health

All the participants said they would recommend arts based activities to help with 'stress', 'social skills', 'confidence', 'self-esteem' and as a 'safe place to be able to talk about fears'.

The sessions included activities that promoted mental well-being by offering strategies for relaxation and coping with life's challenges. The group highlighted that Artistic Minds had helped them to 'identify goals', 'speak positively to themselves', 'know how to put coping mechanisms in place', 'learn new skills'.

Young people had learnt new skills in a range of art forms

Young people gained new skills such as arts and crafts, drama, baking, as well as coping mechanisms for stress and relaxation. 65% of participants said they had learnt new skills from being part of Artistic Minds.

Reflections and learnings**What worked well**

BEAM appreciate the fact that Arts Council of NI enables impactful projects that make a real difference in communities while offering free opportunities to participants without any financial pressure. This project, and others which have been funded by the Arts Council of NI, are "impactful" and an "absolute joy to manage." For the staff involved from BEAM, they see it as a privilege to get to know the young people involved and then seeing the positive impact on their lives.

BEAM consider that the project worked very well. It aligned with BEAM's organisational ethos and values which are high quality, respect, inclusion, open-mindedness, consistency, honesty, and integrity.

"For Beam, Artistic Minds fed into our values and ethos. Our vision is to make a difference through creative art. Beam strive to deliver projects that are quality, include respect, inclusion, open mindedness, consistency, honesty, integrity. For BEAM as an organisation this project ticked every box for us, which is always amazing."

The project fitted seamlessly into BEAM's vision of making a difference through creative arts, and in delivering high-quality creative arts projects that address strong issue-based topics.

"It's imaginative play/discussion and interactive based approach that is incorporated from Primary School, that I think is applicable to all ages. It is a very impactful and powerful way to deliver key messages. Beam use creative arts to explore issue-based themes. The participant is fully involved from the beginning of the session in a fun, interactive and age-appropriate way."

Young people enjoyed the relative autonomy they had to choose to experience different arts and creative activities to support their mental health and wellbeing. They appreciated the free activities and trying new things that they would not have been able to access easily without the project.

"To have the programme youth led is important. This engages participant from the beginning. Delivering a project that the service user will not want to miss, only helps to keep attendance high. As the weeks went on the group got more confident in voicing what activities they would like to participant in."

BEAM have a no phone policy at the workshops, and they considered that this worked really well in encouraging the young people to interact with each other, as well as giving them time to switch off from their phones and the mental demands that these place on them.

"Beam have a no phone policy within workshops. We ask that they are silenced where possible. Phones are such a huge part of poor mental health. For this age group, the phone is their life and everything is documented. Encouraging them to spend a 2-hour session without them was easier than anticipated. The group were so distracted by the activity they never needed to check phones. That was until break times, or at the end when whatever masterpiece had been created needed to be recorded"

BEAM learnt from the previous year project where they had experienced some difficulties in recruiting participants to attend workshops at the BEAM space. Instead they decided to locate the project in a more deprived area with higher levels of need than in 2023, and to partner with a local youth club, Ogras Youth Centre. The workshops were held on a night when the youth club was not open.

The partnership with the Ogras Youth Club contributed to the success of the project, as not only did it provide a venue but it helped to publicise the project and recruit members to the project from the Youth Club.

The workshops were so popular that there was a waiting list of 8 additional young people. When three male participants dropped out, BEAM were able to give their places to three young women who were on the waiting list, and said that there was demand for more places, *"I could have recruited two or three times over."*

Positive impact on local artists

BEAM highlighted the positive impact that the project had on local artists through employing them to deliver the sessions.

"As a creative arts company, we are lucky to work with a variety of very talented and diverse artists. We have a huge database of access NI checked facilitators and artists. Everyone who worked on Artistic Minds are local artists. To be able to create some employment within our local area and use local talent fits perfectly into the ethos of Beam."

Encouraging males to participate in future

Ideally BEAM wanted to recruit a group that was more of a gender mix. Three male participants signed up, but they only attended for the first session or two before not returning. BEAM have reflected on this and consider that workshops specifically aimed at male participants in future may be more successful than mixed gender workshops. BEAM would like to do a focus group to help them better understand what would encourage male participants to want to get involved and to stay involved.

Offering the project in a new area

If BEAM were to run Artistic Minds again, they would like to offer it in Dungannon, which is a deprived area where local young people would particularly benefit from this type of project. BEAM would also aim to partner with a youth club, as they consider that this contributed significantly to the project's success in attracting participants.

"It really worked for the project this year to link in with local youth clubs. The more deprived areas have a huge database of young people suitable for projects like this. Getting the right people involved from the early recruitment stage is imperative in making a project a success."

Key comments to share with Arts Council of NI**Value of Arts Council of NI visiting a project session**

BEAM has a long standing and positive relationship with the Arts Council of NI and enjoy working with them. They would welcome the opportunity for the Arts Council to visit their funded projects when they are in operation. They acknowledged potential challenges in scheduling visits but strongly believed these would be beneficial for a range of reasons as they would provide:

- Accountability and validation: a visit would allow the Arts Council to see firsthand that the programme is being delivered as promised.
- Understanding impact: witnessing the project in action provides a deeper understanding of its impact on participants. BEAM emphasised that seeing "the happy faces" and "the difference you are making" cannot be fully captured through written reports.
- Reinforcing the need for the project and its success: observing attendance numbers, participant engagement, and enjoyment would reinforce the importance of funding projects like this and highlight their success.

- Connection with the young people: meeting the young people and hearing their stories directly would provide valuable insights into how these types of projects have a positive impact on them.
- Enhanced reporting: seeing the project live could help to inform future evaluations or funding decisions by providing qualitative evidence beyond surveys and written feedback.

“The Arts Council are fantastic to work with and have funded some excellent projects for Beam over the years. They are helpful, encouraging and extremely approachable.”



Images from the Artistic Minds project, Bardic Educational Arts and Media (BEAM)

Case study 3: Fresh Minds Education – Lost Voices Resonate: An EmotionEcho Jam Club

Fresh Minds Education and background to the project

Fresh Minds Education is an innovative charitable social enterprise which addresses the emotional health and wellbeing needs of children and adults through harnessing the power of creativity and connection.

It delivers innovative, evidence based, and trauma informed mental health and resilience interventions directly to parents, teachers and children and it is their vision to ensure that no child or young person experiences emotional distress or bereavement alone.

In 2023, Fresh Minds Education received £9000 from the Year 1 Young People and Wellbeing programme to fund the 'Lost Voices' project working with young people with lived experience of loss, grief, bereavement, suicide and poor mental health. As a result of receiving the Arts Council of NI funding, Fresh Minds Education alongside the young people successfully applied and secured grant funding of £41,000 from BBC Children in Need for a social impact project. This enabled Fresh Minds to extend the project beyond an initial planned cohort of 12 young people, to instead include places for 45 young people from across Antrim and Newtownabbey, Mid Ulster, Mid & East Antrim and Causeway areas. The project was run by a youth project leader with programme management support.

Over a year, these 45 young people worked with artists to make a difference to their community. They developed a series of themed conversation podcasts, and a spoken and visual campaign to share their stories and unique view of the mental health issues they had experienced, to be shared with other young people.

The young people worked as co-producers with professional musicians, artists, mental health leaders and writers; personal testimonies, music, spoken word and stories circulated on digital platforms. These became unique pieces of mental health content that helped them express sometimes difficult thoughts and emotions, in ways in which were helpful and healing for them. They also produced bespoke pieces of visual art (posters, logos, graphic images etc) through participatory workshops that were hosted on a new digital platform which they created for young people <https://fmelostvoices.com>

The young people passionately hoped that their project would lead to continued funding from BBC Children in Need. They got involved in applying for more funding to expand the project. However, they were disappointed when their Expression of Interest application was subsequently not approved by BBC Children in Need.

As the Lost Voices project was intense and emotionally demanding Fresh Minds Education asked the participants what their need was, now that the project had concluded, and that continued funding was no longer available to support its development or expansion. The participants said that they now needed to have some downtime, they need to have more fun with the arts, and they needed to recuperate from the intense introspective work and their disappointment at the ending of the project due to lack of funds. It was time to

regulate. During the project the young people had found music and self-expression to provide a release and finding this resulted in the idea for the Emotion Echo Jam Club.

Lost Voices Resonate: An Emotion Echo Jam Club: project details

This project was a development of the Lost Voices project which was part funded by the Arts Council of NI in 2023.

Fresh Minds Education received £8,020 from Arts Council of NI to deliver the project. It lasted 10 weeks, with regular evening and weekend meetings, and over the course of the 10 weeks, 35 young people participated, many of whom were new to Fresh Minds Education who were seeking to take part in an arts based mental health project. The young people were aged 13 to 18. Twenty girls and 15 boys took part.

The activities were led by the young people and five professional artists held workshops for the group in preparation for the group leading their own workshops with other young people. Older participants then helped the younger participants to engage with the project. It included music writing workshops, recording and filming. Other art forms explored included colour theory, use of fonts, creating posters and artwork using AI, origami, painting, drawing techniques, improvisation, devising, performance, and hosting skills.

In summary the project involved arts-based workshops with young people, who then shared the outputs of their creativity with others via a platform and further workshops.

Where participants were from

The young people were mainly from the Antrim and Newtownabbey area from rural communities. The neurodiverse group of young people included young people at risk of social isolation and exclusion and young people who had experience of mental health issues. The project enabled cross-community contact between Protestants and Catholics.

Date of activities

Lost Voices: Mar - Dec 2023

Emotion Echo Jam Club: Sept - Dec 2024

The impact on young people

Young people appreciated the positive contribution that involvement in arts projects can have on wellbeing, and they had increased wellbeing from participation

The group took leadership on how they wished to explore art and how they wanted to use it for content and resource creation. They held a shared passion about the benefits of art, and implemented this throughout their project process. The group expressed the enjoyment they felt when using art to express and create and how they felt singing, acting and music enhanced their confidence and bond with one another as well reducing stress, anxiety and resulting in an improved sense of health and wellbeing.

They created activities that encouraged other young people to express and create using arts, and to use arts as a means of opening conversations around emotional and mental health.

While not therapy per se, the arts-based projects the young people feel that the project had significant therapeutic benefits on participants, helping them to regulate their emotions and recover from the intense emotional experience of the personal processing of the Lost Voices project.

"These projects are not therapy, but they are therapeutic, and they have therapeutic benefit because we don't sit at the surface level."

The group developed their leadership skills, and continuously stepped out of their comfort zone by trying these new skills. This allowed them to feel a sense of ownership over their work. The Lost Voices group hosted a summer programme and other events where they led workshops, activities, discussions and continuously took leadership of the project. They had the freedom to participate in the project activities as much or as little as they liked.

Young people had increased awareness of the importance of good mental health, of techniques that help to cultivate good mental health and increased willingness to express opinions or feelings.

The group spoke about the importance of good mental health throughout the activities. They had many conversations around what they need to look out for when their emotional or mental health is suffering, and they explored ways they could cultivate positive mental and emotional health. They created resources that helped open the conversation on this complex topic and bring awareness to its importance. These resources also helped to explore techniques and activities for wellness and resilience. Involvement in the project meant that young people knew where they could go to seek help.

"You've got young people who are finding their way and their coping mechanisms to manage life."

Young people had increased arts-based knowledge and skills in a range of art forms

The group developed a range of arts-based skills throughout the Lost Voices and Emotion Echo Jam Club projects.

The group created resources such as podcasts, posters, artwork, presentations, user guides, creative writing, and composed music. They undertook research, held discussions, and hosted activities to implement in their resource creation. The group developed new skills in using different software and new skills in recording audio/video, and worked alongside professionals to develop skills in art, drama, directing and graphic design.

Young people felt less isolated and lonely

The projects successfully engaged young people who typically do not engage in other services. This engagement fostered friendships among a diverse group of participants.

"With engagement comes the potential for friendship ... These young people would not find each other in the world out there because they are so diverse and different to one another."

The group developed listening skills, they got to explore different support approaches and communication skills. The group deepened their ability to work as a team and to support their peers. They created awards for other young people for overcoming adversities. They also created 'hopeful hot chocolates' which they designed and sent out to students returning to school.

"We can anchor them into their own community so that they know that there is somebody there for them should they need to talk about mental health."

The group attended different events such as St. Johns Ambulance, The Baton of Hope and schools assemblies to promote the project, to connect with other young people and adults working and raising young people. The group also hosted the launch of their own event, greeting guests, and presenting the work completed on the project.

The young people involved continue to engage with Fresh Minds Education and to cascade the work and the mission down to younger peers. Young people felt they had a safe space to come to, to connect with their peers and to make a difference for other young people experiencing emotional distress or bereavement. The group have expressed that the project helped them to connect back with life, find purpose and relieve loneliness.

Fresh Minds Education recently held a celebration reunion event with participants to talk about the projects and to develop ideas for future projects. The event underscored the importance of engagement, as it brought together a diverse group of young people who formed friendships that would not have been possible otherwise. The event also reinforced that participants felt supported within the project community, knowing they could return for help or volunteer in future projects.

Fresh Minds Education reflected that the progress made by the young people who had participated was visible, as they showed significant personal growth, including increased confidence and willingness to engage socially.

"For example, we would have had young people who spent maybe two sessions sitting in the car outside the door and in their third session they got to the chair nearest the door and here we are at the reunion, and I just noticed that that same young person is sitting at a spot which is furthest away from the door."

The peer-led approach of the projects fostered a sense of responsibility and continuity.

"At the reunion we've seen some of them come along and now they would like to be a young leader."

Young people had improved knowledge about sources of help for mental health problems and have increased awareness that its ok to ask for help

The activities have had a multiplier effect as the group developed their networking skills, connecting with schools, clubs, and other organisations to encourage engagement with

their project and the Lost Voices platform. The group reached out to professionals and local representatives to spread the work and invite them to the launch.

Reflections and learnings

What worked well

Fresh Minds Education consider that both projects worked well and delivered a range of positive outcomes for participants. The projects had a profound positive impact on participants' mental health and wellbeing, including preventing self-harm and suicide among vulnerable youth.

The flexible structure of the project allowed for greater participation and catered to the varying needs of young people. For example, the young people took part in weekend project activities, as well as activities after school. This enabled more young people to take part.

Positive impact on Fresh Minds Education

Fresh Minds Education considers that the success of the 'Lost Voices' and the 'Lost Voices Resonate: An Emotion Echo Jam Club' projects have built on the positive experiences of the Arts Council of NI's ARTiculate programme. The programme's success has led to strategic growth, enabling Fresh Minds Education to apply for larger funding opportunities and develop new initiatives.

"The Arts Council supported us with the original [funding from] the very first ARTiculate programme, this model has been progressed and processed slowly, incrementally. It's found more structure, it's found more excellence, more ability to deliver outcomes for young people. It's found better governance, better practice in terms of the involvement of young people. It all started way, way back in the very first ARTiculate programme when we were supported to work with 'hard to reach' teenagers who we then supported to deliver children's work."

Fresh Minds Education has plans to create a Youth Advisory Board, allowing young people who wish to continue influencing and shaping the organisation the opportunity to do so.

"It has led to us now developing the subgroup on the board ... It's really been significant."

The projects have also helped Fresh Minds Education to develop broader community networks to enable them to reach a wide range of young people.

In addition, staff at Fresh Minds Education have developed their own skills.

"We learned how to build websites, we've learned how to build podcasts ... together with the artists, we ... did it and now we know how to do any of it before these projects."

Fresh Minds now regularly employs artists throughout the organisation to help it achieve its vision for children and young people. Working with ACNI has directly increased the number of artists who are now employed throughout the organisation.

What worked less well

Young people experienced a sense of loss when the initial Lost Voices project concluded, despite efforts by Fresh Minds Education to manage endings consciously. The disappointment of their expression of interest application contributed to feelings of being overlooked despite their efforts, achievements and commitments to mental health and social impact during the project and hopes to cascade this process to a rising number of young people presenting for support.

Fresh Minds Education had empowered the young people to take the lead in writing the Expression of Interest resulting in a vulnerable application, but when this was not approved to go into the application phase, the organisation reflected on this experience and has learnt from it, by deciding that Fresh Minds Education staff should input more proactively in future to help young voices to be heard in that particular environment.

What happens next for the young people involved with Fresh Minds

Fresh Minds Education aims to support young people until their needs are met, after which they encourage them to move on and live their lives and thrive. They emphasise the importance of creating space for new participants while ensuring that those who leave know they can return if needed.

"When enough of a young person's need is met, we begin to empower them to go, to lean into life knowing they have an anchor, that they are connected and that they are not alone. This approach creates space for new young people to come into the process."

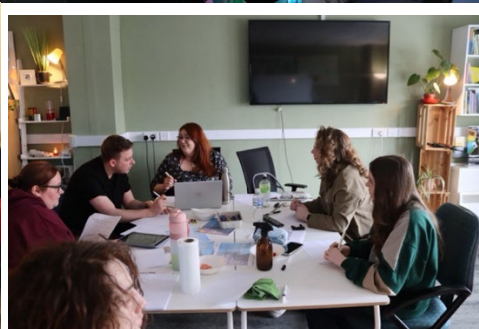
Opportunity for future funding of similar projects

Fresh Minds Education hopes to achieve future funding primarily through the National Lottery's "Empowering Young People" programme. They have already submitted an application and are in the final stages of the review process. This funding would allow them to expand the model developed as a three-year project, extending beyond their current area of Antrim and Newtownabbey to reach many more young people in need.

"Whilst we've a geographical presence where we are, because we are issue based, we naturally attract young people who are affected and impacted by the issues and who will find a way, or we will help them find a way to be able to engage."



Images from the Lost Voices project 2023, provided by Fresh Minds Education



Images from the Emotion Echo Jam Club project 2024, provided by Fresh Minds Education

6. Conclusions and recommendations

The funded projects have variously achieved the outcomes set out for the programme.

Participation had a positive impact on the mental health and wellbeing on the young people engaged. Young people:

- Have increased wellbeing from participation
- Have increased willingness to express opinions or feelings
- Feel less isolated/lonely
- Have increased awareness of the importance of good mental health
- Have learnt techniques to support good mental health
- Have improved knowledge about sources of help for mental health problems
- Have increased awareness that it's ok to ask for help
- Have increased skills in a range of art forms

In addition, non arts sector project partners have had exposure to the use of arts to support positive wellbeing of young people.

As the Arts Council of Northern Ireland and the National Lottery go forward, we suggest that consideration is given to the following points when designing a similarly targeted initiative:

- **Monitoring and evaluation of the programme:** Despite being prompted to complete the end of project report, only 11 out of 18 year 2 projects submitted one. In addition, whilst there was better engagement in year 2 with the young people survey than in year 1, ideally more projects would also have been able to achieve quantitative feedback from young people. These issues affect the ability to create a robust evidence base around the impact of arts-based projects. We suggest that projects are better incentivised to submit data for evaluation purposes.
- **Monitoring and evaluation accessibility for participants:** It is also clear that not all participants can provide feedback through quantitative surveys. Therefore, ideally different methods would be built into evaluation processes and budgets to collect data from these groups. Projects would also welcome visits from the Arts Council of NI team to see the impact for themselves.
- **Project reach:** The programme seems to have had limited reach amongst boys, older teenagers, and in the North and West of Northern Ireland. These are elements to be aware of and future programmes should consider how to engage with these groups and in these geographies.
- **Project stretch:** Whilst the evaluation has not included a detailed value for money exercise, the funded organisations have done well to achieve a lot with relatively small amounts of funding. It is important to note that the achievements reflect other resources being used by the organisations, for example funding for overheads and staffing. Therefore, these impacts are only possible due to the organisations accessing other funding sources.
- **Ongoing funding:** Eleven organisations that were funded in year 1 also accessed funding in year 2. Evidence from the case study interviews demonstrate that projects were able to build on their learning from year 1 and may have delivered a more effective approach in their second year given their opportunity to develop their programming. This underlines the role that ongoing funding can play and that there are potential opportunities whereby multi-annual funding may be more efficient for the Arts Council of NI as well as arts organisations themselves.

7. Appendix

Year 2 project description summaries

Projects were asked to provide a short description of their project activity and focus (100 words maximum) in the end of project report. It asked them to include who the project had targeted and how they had been engaged. The following sections include the verbatim descriptions from the 11 projects who submitted end of project reports by 5 February 2025.

Arts Ekta – A dream called home

We engaged with local organisations who work to support the wellbeing of vulnerable young people facing difficulties such as mental health, LGBTQ+ stigma, immigration issues and family dynamics. Workshops were delivered with experienced facilitators lending the participants a platform within a safe environment to express their views on 'home'. Inspired by their individual ideas, they took part in designing their own fabric patches which were all collaborated into one large quilt piece. This was given to Little Amal as a welcome gift when she visited Belfast. Participant ideas were recorded and used as groundwork for a projectable digital animation piece.

Bardic Educational Arts and Media (Beam) – Artistic Minds

20 young people registered, aged between 12-16, to take part in Artistic Minds. All females. 20 sessions took place over an 18 week period. The sessions focused on mental health and wellbeing exploring the following:

- Mental Health - gratitude, emotional wellness, goal setting, emotional regulation,
- Confidence Building - self-awareness, communication skills, self esteem
- Physical Health - exercise, nutrition, relaxation

The following workshops took place to explore the above:

- Holistic Therapies exploring positivity, goal setting, gratitude and emotional well being
- Yoga
- Boxing
- Dance
- Art
- Djing
- Acting/Drama
- Baking
- Cooking
- Arts and Crafts
- Slime
- Nutrition
- Weights

Boom Inc! - "Art for the Heart 2024" Courses and Workshops for Children and Young people that promote good mental health

The project empowers young people to manage their mental health through art and craft. It provides lifelong skills to support well-being into adulthood. Deliver creative programs

fostering sustainable skills and emotional resilience. Create a calm, private space for self-expression and joy. Objectives:

- Ensure effective administration, funding, and partner coordination.
- Run a 12-month workshop program for 12–18-year-olds, including art journaling, mixed media, and metalsmithing.
- Develop and deliver a youth volunteer program with training.
- Workshops will be based on Boom Studios' experience, offering structured learning and creative exploration.

DU DANCE NI - 'IN YOUR HEAD' with Belfast Boys

'Belfast Boys' (12-18yrs) explored mental/emotional wellbeing and masculinity issues through workshops, film and dance performances. This included a Masterclass with Dylan Quinn, creation and performance of dance theatre piece, 'Dis-Connect' at The MAC. Collaboration with a filmmaker and sound composer on a site-specific film short, 'Tough to be Calm', (premiered at The MAC, and shown at CINEMAGIC). They held an audience participation session, 'All Boys can Boogie', a week long Summer Session and a 'Day of Dance' in Crescent Arts Centre. BB mentored the junior BB and Barnardos young male participants, developing leadership and creative skills to support mental well-being.

Fresh Minds Education - Lost Voices Resonate: An EmotionEcho Jam Club

We worked with 35 young people from across the Antrim and Newtownabbey area to participate in the project. They worked as coproducers with professional musicians, artists, mental health leaders and writers; personal testimonies, music, spoken word and stories circulated on digital platforms. These became unique pieces of mental health content that help them express sometimes difficult thoughts and emotions, in ways in which were helping and healing for them. They also produced bespoke pieces of visual art (posters, logos, graphic images etc) through participatory workshops that were hosted on FME digital platforms for young people 'Lost Voices'.

Fuel - Digital Minds

Across Summer 2024 we designed & delivered 2 x week long programmes with groups of teenagers from the county Fermanagh area. These were hosted in the Find Centre in Enniskillen and delivered as multi-media digital arts projects.

The young people explored identity, personality, passions & future aspirations, with each day featuring digital art mediums such as graphic design, photography, music production, song writing, film making, digital art, video/audio editing. We explored & co designed briefs with each group around themes of hope for Enniskillen & positive mental wellbeing with branding, prints, flags, tourism advertising & video pieces as outputs on the programme.

Open Arts - Take 2: Movement & Mentoring

In August 2024 we facilitated 11 young people from Mae Murray Teen Hub in an intensive week-long dance summer scheme. There were young people with physical and learning disabilities including some with additional complex needs. Throughout the week they had mentoring visits from members of Luminous Soul dance company, Open Arts dance development company for disabled adults. This week was followed up with more rehearsals to prepare for a performance as part of Open Arts event "The Big Takeover" at the Crescent

Arts Centre, part of Bounce Festival, the annual arts & disability festival. The young people also worked towards achieving their Arts Awards Explore and Bronze levels.

St Oliver Plunkett Youth Club - Positive Creations - Let's give it a try....

The project aims to design and develop a mental health and wellbeing art initiative with young people aged 12-18 from Crossmaglen and the surrounding localities to build emotional resilience and equip them with the skills to cope with everyday challenges and life events. Young people will be engaged and encouraged to express themselves creatively, by offering a range of art-based taster workshops based on their needs and interests, a structured programme through a vision they can identify with and working towards an end goal of participating in a showcase event, that endorses positive mental health throughout.

The Golden Apples Players - The Tiniest Lifeboat

The Tiniest Lifeboat was a project for teenagers to develop the skills and confidence to articulate their thoughts and feelings to those around them - especially peers, parents and teachers. We utilised the tools of drama, music and dance to express our fears and insecurities and developed the confidence to communicate more openly with those around us.

Tinderbox Theatre Company - Holding Ground production and workshops

Our project is called HARMONY - A young people's wellbeing project. We engaged a dance facilitator and a drama facilitator who were trained by Tinderbox Artistic Director and Creative Producer to lead workshops in using creativity to explore well-being and positive mental health in young people. The focus was on creative expression and on looking at different ways to express and overcome negative thought patterns, beliefs and behaviours. The facilitators worked as a team with groups across Carrick, Belfast, and Bangor. The young people participated in 3 sessions across 2 or 3 different workshops. This was a very positive project, and we really enjoyed delivering it.

Ulster Touring Opera Ltd - Ulster Youth Opera Belfast and Derry/Londonderry

Ulster Youth Opera has delivered workshops at The MAC (Belfast) and The Playhouse (Derry), engaging young people in opera through singing, acting, and movement. In Derry, lower turnout led to a successful collaboration with St Columb's Cathedral Children's Choir, expanding participation. In Belfast, additional funding from Belfast City Council allowed workshops to increase to fortnightly from September 2024 to March 2025, doubling engagement and impact. The programme provides high-quality training led by professional artists, fostering confidence, creativity, and accessibility to opera for young people across Northern Ireland, extending beyond the initial scope of this award.