

A summary of reflective discussions held on the 9 May 2025 with funded arts organisations on activity delivered under the ACNI Young People and Wellbeing Programme

Key findings

The event was designed to compliment the written evaluation findings and provide an opportunity for organisations to share learning with each other and the main funder, the Arts Council of Northern Ireland.

The full programme evaluation report can be found in full on [the Arts Council's website](#).

The Arts Council would like to thank the organisations attending this event for their invaluable insights and reflections on the programme. Details of those in attendance can be found in Appendix 1.

We also extend a big thanks to Ruth Flood of RF Associates for the evaluation presentation and use of the meeting space, Meet at 393.

Key takeaways

- Organisation and artistic collaborations played an important role in sourcing funding, programme reach and ensuring quality in activity delivered.
- The programme acted as an important catalyst for participant personal development.
- Sustained engagement by young people indicated relevance, enjoyment and offered longer-term opportunities for engagement in the arts.
- Showcasing activity raised project visibility and legacy.
- When young people are meaningfully involved in shaping content, outcomes and impacts are improved.
- Participation by young people can support personal development goals and act as a method for improved wellbeing.
- There was a significant gender gap across funded projects. In future, project design should reflect elements that engage and sustain the involvement of young males.
- Performance or showcase events can sometimes trigger disengagement or drop-outs.
- Digital platforms are important if the arts are to remain relevant and accessible to young people.
- Young people are looking for progression (e.g. vocational pathways), not just participation-based opportunities.
- Projects provided a platform / forum for exploring social and cultural shifts in wider society, for example relating to identity, climate change and mental health.
- Using different settings to delivering activity can increase accessibility and engagement, removing both attitudinal and physical barriers.
- Investment in professional development for artist facilitators is key to ensuring meaningful participation, including those with neurodiverse backgrounds.
- Embedding mentoring models within activity helped to build confidence and peer support systems.

Questions and grouped responses

1. What went well with your project?

Partnerships & Collaboration

- Strong partnership working between mental health and arts practitioners
- Engagement with new collaborators
- Growth in support from funders (e.g. Belfast City Council)

Youth Development & positive outcomes / impacts

- Increased confidence, self-esteem, skills, and resilience in young people
- Young people actively seeking help and contributing creative ideas
- Teenagers stepping into leadership roles and forming advisory groups
- Mentoring strengthened connections between junior and senior participants

Inclusivity, engagement and safe spaces

- The use of inclusive, safe spaces facilitated open discussions and peer support.
- There was strong engagement across age groups (especially those aged between 8–13 years)

Creative Achievements

- Development of original work and youth-focused resources improved project outcomes
- Hosting a film premiere was a major social celebration, engaging family and community.
- Participation based visual arts sessions sparked conversations about mental health
- Visits to cultural events, as a group, broadened perspectives and helped to strengthen bonds within the group.
- Consistent project delivery over two years provided a sustained platform for engagement
- Investment in arts practitioner development deepened knowledge and strengthened session content.

2. What evaluation approaches / practices have you used outside of those given to you by ACNI?

Mixed-Methods Evaluation

- A combination of qualitative and quantitative methods
- Feedback gathered from a wide range of sources: young people, parents, teachers, facilitators, partners, and audiences

Participant / Creative Centred Tools

- Arts Awards booklets to track individual progress
- Creative evaluation methods, e.g. drawing responses to questions
- One-on-one conversations and regular check-ins with participants
- Case studies capturing personal stories and impact

Observational Techniques

- Real-time observations during sessions by facilitators
- Recording significant emotional or impactful moments (“goosebump” moments)
- Value placed on informal observations to assess impact

Structured Frameworks & Partnerships

- Use of the UN Sustainable Development Goals and Social Value Engine as frameworks
- Collaboration with audience development agency (Thrive) to design evaluation
- “Five steps to wellbeing” used as a framework

Session & Performance-Based Feedback

- Tracking session activities and collecting in-session comments
- Measuring wellbeing and emotional responses
- Gathering audience feedback to assess how performances are received and understood

3. What have you learned that you will apply to other projects?

Challenges of youth engagement and sustaining involvement

- Engaging with young people is hard
- How do we continue the relationship with young people once the projects end?

Creative co-production

- Creative co-production with young people works. It creates better quality projects and content
- The value of arts in creating an environment of openness where vulnerabilities are shared and conversations around well-being built

Gender disparities in participation

- 100% female participants. Male participants did not complete the project
- Developing approaches that attract boys

Balancing artistic and wellbeing goals / outcomes

- Balancing the tension between mental health practice and arts practice
- Some participants tended to move back when performances came close

4. Looking back, can you give examples of the ways you have evolved your practice to meet the changing needs of young people?

Progression pathways

- Provision of work experience opportunities
- Providing space and opportunities for continuation (we need apprenticeships)
- Providing support, growth and development opportunities that grow in scale.

Innovation in space and settings

- New sites to perform or work in (including outside spaces).

Inclusivity

- Undertaking training with University of Atypical to meet the needs of participants with autism.

Mentoring support

- Providing mentoring for young people
- Providing more mentoring between seniors and juniors (taking the lead).
- Peer mentoring support

Appendix 1 – Event Attendees

Annmarie McKeever	BEAM Creative Network
Becca Wilson Ferris	Young at Art
Kelly Anne Collins	Young at Art
Dafydd Hall Williams	Ulster Touring Opera
Adam Wallace	Fresh Minds Education
Deborah Hamilton	DU Dance
Marianne Kennerley	Boom Studios
Eileen Branagh	Open Arts
Jemma Robinson	Open Arts
Benjamin Gould	Commedia of Errors
Ruth Flood	RF Associates
Javier Stanziola	Arts Council of Northern Ireland
Lorraine Calderwood	Arts Council of Northern Ireland
Graeme Stevenson	Arts Council of Northern Ireland

Appendix 2 – Verbatim Responses to Questions

1. What went well with your project?

- Partnership working
- Tangible achievements
- One founding member of our Enniskillen group in 2023 became the only person from Fermanagh to be accepted to Oxford University. She will study music and fed back that UTO played a big role in that achievement
- Balancing the needs of mental health practitioners with arts practitioners
- The value of 'safe place' for open discussions
- Full attendance
- New friendships and connections made
- The creation of resources for other young people
- Signposting
- Young people seeking help
- The film premiere was a huge social celebration involving family and friends
- New original work created with young people
- Young leaders working in a creative and well-being environment with peers
- Consistent delivery over two years
- Young leader's advisory groups established for our organisation
- Young people from schools with a high number of newcomers could engage without fears over the language barrier
- Going on cultural visits opens conversations into ideas of concepts and increases awareness of spaces in community
- Increased skills, confidence, self-esteem and resilience
- Attendance from the 8 to 13 age group
- Feedback from participants and parents
- Growth in support from other funders e.g. Belfast City Council.
- Connection between juniors and seniors grown through mentoring by seniors
- How well visual arts worked to generate conversations compared to other artforms
- Investing in an arts practitioner's strand of work
- Contribution of participants to creative ideas
- Empowered voices and active listening from peers
- Engagement with new collaborators
- Teenagers wanted leadership roles

2. What evaluation approaches / practices have you used outside of those given to you by ACNI?

- Arts awards booklet
- Tracking activities within sessions
- Measuring young people's thoughts and feelings on wellbeing
- Collation of comments from young people within sessions

- Audience feedback – reflects what performances communicate to others
- The value of observation to measure outcomes and impact
- Observations from teachers and facilitators after each session
- Collaboration with the audience development agency, Trive to create our evaluation
- Use of the UN sustainable goals (social value engine) as an evaluation framework
- Support and ‘check-in’ with participants during delivery
- Parental feedback gives context of how participants’ lives are impacted
- Five steps to wellbeing
- Gather feedback from a mixture of sources, beneficiaries, partners
- Evaluate through individual conversations and transpose
- Case studies of individuals
- Individual case studies, support worker, facilitator and parental observations
- Recording any ‘magic’ / ‘goosebump’ moments
- Use creative approaches – draw your response to questions

3. What have you learned that you will apply to other projects?

- Engaging with young people is hard
- How do we continue the relationship with young people post projects
- Creative co-production with young people works. It creates better quality projects and content
- Delivering Arts Awards
- The value of arts in creating an environment of openness where vulnerabilities are shared and conversations around well-being built
- 100% female participants. Male participants did not complete the project.
- Developing approaches that attract boys
- Balancing the tension between mental health practice and arts practice
- Some participants tended to move back when performances came close

4. Looking back, can you give examples of the ways you have evolved your practice to meet the changing needs of young people?

- Incorporating digital
- Provision of work experience opportunities
- Providing space and opportunities for continuation (we need apprenticeships)
- Wider / broader conversations to address current issues
- New sites to perform or work in (including outside spaces).
- Providing support, growth and development opportunities that grow in scale.
- Undertaking training with University of Atypical to meet the needs of participants with autism.
- Commissioning new operas to suit young voices, particularly boys who are going through voice change
- Mentoring for young people

- More mentoring between seniors and juniors (taking the lead).
- Peer mentoring