

A country that works for all  
children and young people

**An evidence-based approach  
to creating a culture of  
inclusive opportunity through  
arts and creativity**

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Please sign our petition if you share our vision for building a better UK that invests in its future (the next generation of children and young people)



## Foreword by Anne Longfield and Camilla Kingdon



Over 2024, the Child of the North/Centre for Young Lives partnership produced twelve reports setting out practical, deliverable, evidence-based proposals for Government to boost the life chances of children across the country. We have used these reports to share many excellent examples of projects that are already making a huge positive difference to children's lives – highlighting that solutions exist, and positive change is possible.

Our focus has been on the twelve biggest challenges that our communities told us were holding back children, ranging from the lengthy delays for autism assessments, through the school attendance crisis, to the blight of child poverty.

Halfway through our series, we saw the election of a new Government, with new priorities, and a specific 'Opportunity Mission'. We believe that the successful delivery of that mission can be supported by the recommendations and good practice laid out in our twelve reports. This includes this final report, which puts forward an evidence-based plan to boost the creativity of this and the next generation of children and young people – a report which we decided to launch in 2025 to coincide with Bradford becoming the UK City of Culture.

Our society is not short of talent, but we are often too slow to nurture it, and too many children miss out on the experiences and opportunities that would support their own creativity. We frequently fail to harness the innate skills contained by our diverse communities and this hinders the ability of our country to flourish and thrive. This has occurred in the context of a wider cultural malaise over recent years where there has been a concerning decline in the value we place on creativity and the arts in our education system and in the school curriculum.

We need to be bold in our ambition to develop truly inclusive education and support creativity across our schools at a time when we have an attendance crisis, and many children feel they do not belong in the education system.

Unfortunately, this means that many children across the UK are missing out on the full benefits that education could and should offer. High rates of absenteeism, exclusion, and children missing

education are particularly prevalent among our most vulnerable groups—those with special educational needs and disabilities (SEN(D)), those from socioeconomically deprived backgrounds, and those living in areas of structural disadvantage (e.g., a lack of reliable public transport). These are children for whom a sense of belonging, safety, and connection to their school is often fragile or absent and we must address this problem at pace.

This report provides evidence, new ideas, and many excellent examples of existing good practice that could reverse the trend of educational disengagement and help all children feel they belong in education. This will, in turn, boost creativity, educational attainment, and social mobility. The report benefits from the work of the Durham Commission (a collaboration between Durham University and Arts Council England) convened to determine the role that creativity and creative thinking should play in education.

In the Labour manifesto, the Government promised to support the study of creative and vocational subjects in school. The Curriculum Review is ongoing as we write this Foreword. We hope the review will reach the sensible conclusion that sciences and the humanities must be taught in ways that nurture creativity, and the education system must recognise, reflect, and celebrate the huge benefits delivered by the arts for both wellbeing and school belonging.

Creativity and the expressive arts should be part and parcel of every child's education from primary school, and teachers need to be supported to deliver singing, music, painting, drawing, acting, and playful activities. We need to move away from the view that creative learning is a bonus. It should be a requisite of a good education. Embedding teaching for creativity into the curriculum would have a transformative impact. At a time when some children feel disengaged from what they are taught, we should be looking at arts-based approaches to the teaching of subjects like history or science.

This report proposes introducing an arts premium fund to develop the existing primary school workforce and train the next generation of teachers.

"Education should not be about choosing between knowledge and creativity".

"Our society is not short of talent, but we are often too slow to nurture it".

This new direction should be happening not only in primary and secondary schools, but in the proposed new nurseries attached to existing schools.

The report also calls on the Government to provide targeted 'cultural activities funding' through establishing a dedicated 'Cultural Enrichment Fund' to support children outside the normal school day, and to develop partnerships with local cultural institutions, enabling schools to host artist-led workshops, theatre productions, or music classes.

The report presents evidence showing that cultural institutions can provide fantastic opportunities to enrich children's educational experiences, rocket-boosting creativity, and nurturing the critical thinking skills that are so important to a modern economy. Arts, heritage, and cultural programmes should be embedded in our schools. The development of educational partnerships with cultural institutions can engage those children who may not always find it easy to benefit from more traditional learning approaches.

Encouraging children to work alongside artists, curators, and other creative professionals can help young people discover new career pathways, including those within our creative economy. This would particularly benefit students from underrepresented backgrounds, by providing access to resources and networks that might otherwise be unavailable.

We need to ensure all children and young people can see themselves reflected in British culture. Our society would be so much stronger for it.

This report makes a powerful case for opening up and using our rich cultural assets for the benefit of all children, including as part of a more inclusive education system. This would reduce inequality, boost outcomes and innovation, and broaden horizons.

Arts and creativity have been marginalised in schools for too long. The education system has often not nourished or prioritised childhood creativity beyond the early years. Education should not be about choosing between knowledge and creativity. Let's encourage our children and young

people to use their imaginations to create, imagine, experiment, and act so our economy can grow, and our society prosper.

We have argued throughout this report series that there is no greater investment than the one we make in our children. We cannot afford to continue to squander the innate talent that exists everywhere in our country. We must encourage our future Benajmin Zephaniahs, Ed Sheerans, and Bridget Rileys – we have a rich cultural heritage to nurture.

This report, and its predecessors, provide a roadmap to building a better country that works for all children and young people, wherever they live, and whatever their background. We urge the Government to follow these recommendations, and we ask everyone throughout the UK to help build a country that works for all children and young people.

**Baroness Anne Longfield CBE,**  
Executive Chair of the  
Centre for Young Lives

**Dr Camilla Kingdon,**  
Former President of the  
Royal College of Paediatrics  
and Child Health

## Guest editorial by John Wright & Rosie McEachan



### **Born in Bradford – A cultural campaign for inclusion and creativity in research**

Bradford has long been an inclusive city of resilience, diversity, and innovation. It is a place where communities have come together to shape a collective future, where creativity flourishes despite the challenges of economic disadvantage and health inequalities. It is also a city that has led the way in inclusive research, with Born in Bradford at its heart—a pioneering programme that exemplifies how research can be truly representative, collaborative, and embedded in the culture of a place.

Born in Bradford was not founded within the traditional confines of an established medical research infrastructure. Instead, it was created in response to the pressing need for health research in a city where no such framework existed. This absence provided an opportunity to rethink research methodologies, moving away from traditional top-down approaches and embracing instead a model in which families themselves became citizen scientists. From the outset, inclusivity has been its guiding principle. Born in Bradford has worked in partnership with the people of Bradford to ensure that research is not only conducted in the community but is shaped by the community.

At its core, Born in Bradford is about people – thousands of families who have contributed their experiences, insights, and data to help build an evidence base that drives meaningful change. The programme has become a blueprint for how research can be both scientifically rigorous and deeply human, capturing the realities of children and families in one of the UK's most diverse cities. It has shown that research should not be something that happens to communities, but something that happens with them and for them. Artists have been at the heart of Born in Bradford from its inception. Our poet-in-residence – Ian Macmillan – and our artists-in-residence – Ian Beesley and Carolyn Mendelsohn – have helped us connect with our families through art and poetry. The study has generated major Arts Council funding to support school and community-based arts programmes.

The conclusions drawn within this report, A country that works for all children and young people: An evidence-based approach to creating a culture of inclusive opportunity through arts and creativity, strongly aligns with our experiences at Born in Bradford. The report rightly highlights the power of creativity and the arts in shaping young lives, particularly for those who may feel excluded from traditional educational pathways. Just as Born in Bradford has embraced a whole-community approach to research, so must the Government take an expansive and inclusive approach to education – an approach that has arts and creativity at its heart. Every child, regardless of background, should have access to artistic, musical, and creative opportunities that enable them to flourish.

Bradford has always been a city of cultural richness, a place where different traditions, languages, and histories intersect to create something unique. Yet, too often, the arts and creative industries remain out of reach for children from our disadvantaged backgrounds. This report makes it clear that creativity should not be seen as an optional extra in education but as a fundamental right – something that must be embedded into every aspect of learning.

In Born in Bradford, we have long recognised the link between culture, wellbeing, and educational outcomes. Through projects that integrate storytelling and artistic expression into children's lives, we have seen firsthand how creativity can boost confidence, improve mental health, and foster a greater sense of belonging. The evidence is clear that when children engage in creative activities, they are not just expressing themselves artistically; they are developing critical thinking skills, building resilience, and forming deeper connections with their communities.

This report calls for greater investment in the cultural enrichment of children's education, and we wholeheartedly support this ambition. Schools must be equipped to nurture creativity, ensuring that every child, regardless of their socioeconomic background, has access to high-quality arts education. Moreover, partnerships between schools and cultural institutions should be strengthened so that children can benefit from the wealth of artistic

talent within their own communities. Just as Born in Bradford has worked with artists to ensure that research is truly inclusive, so too must we work to ensure that culture is accessible to all.

This year, Bradford is the UK City of Culture 2025 which presents an extraordinary opportunity. It is a chance to celebrate the city's cultural diversity, showcase its artistic excellence, and most importantly, create lasting change. Bradford2025 must not be just a year-long festival but a legacy that transforms cultural access for future generations. If we seize this moment, we can establish Bradford as a place where every child – regardless of postcode, ethnicity, or economic circumstance – has the opportunity to experience the transformative power of the arts.

Born in Bradford has always been about harnessing knowledge to create a fairer, healthier society. As we look to the future, we must ensure that creativity and culture are part of this mission. Research tells us that investing in the arts is not just about producing the next generation of artists; it is about developing well-rounded, engaged citizens who can think critically, collaborate effectively, and innovate boldly.

This report makes a compelling case for placing creativity and the arts at the centre of our education system and wider society. If we are to build a country that truly works for all children and young people, we must recognise that creativity is not a privilege – it is a necessity. Bradford, with its commitment to inclusivity, community-driven research, and cultural vibrancy, is leading the way. Let us ensure that this moment of national recognition as the City of Culture becomes a turning point for the whole of the UK – one where culture is not only celebrated but embedded in the lives of all our children for generations to come.

**Professor John Wright,**  
Director of Bradford Institute  
for Health Research

**Professor Rosie McEachan,**  
Director of Born in Bradford



## This report is a collaborative programme of work between Child of the North and the Centre for Young Lives.

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A full list of authors and contributors can be found at the end of this report.

### A note about language

#### *Children and young people*

In this report, CYP is used to refer to children and young people. A 'young person' in this context is a person over compulsory school age (the end of the academic year in which they turn 16 years old) and under 25 years old. In keeping with this definition, we use the words 'child' and 'children' in this report to refer to individuals from birth to the end of compulsory school age.

#### *Schools, nurseries, and educational settings*

In this report, we often use 'schools' as shorthand for 'schools, nurseries, and other educational settings'. A central message of this report is the need for a 'whole system' approach that includes all relevant stakeholders, and this includes all parts of the education system.

#### *Special Educational Needs and Disabilities*

Due to different manifestations of 'impairments', the terms 'SEN' and 'SEND' are often used interchangeably in the literature. In this report, we will use the term 'SEN(D)' throughout to include all children with additional needs (i.e., needs that require some support in addition to the 'off the peg' school offer).

### About Child of the North initiative

Child of the North is a partnership between the N8 Research Partnership and Health Equity North, which aims to build a fairer future for children across the North of England by building a platform for collaboration, high quality research, and policy engagement. [@ChildoftheNorth1](#)

### Who is the Child of the North?

The "Child of the North" is an archetype (like the "unknown soldier"), representing all the millions of children throughout the UK whose lives are blighted by inequalities. We use the Child of the North as a means of illustrating the inequities that affect children and young people. These inequalities are well captured by the differences in opportunities available to the child growing up in the North of England versus the South. But inequalities are present throughout the UK at both a national and regional level. These inequalities are bad for almost everyone and the future of the UK depends on their urgent eradication. The Child of the North represents every child who deserves a better start to life, regardless of where they live.

### About the N8 Research Partnership

The N8 Research Partnership is a collaboration of the eight most research-intensive Universities in the North of England: Durham, Lancaster, Leeds, Liverpool, Manchester, Newcastle, Sheffield, and York. Working with partner universities, industry, and society (N8+), the N8 aims to maximise the impact of this research base by promoting collaboration, establishing innovative research capabilities and programmes of national and international prominence, and driving economic growth. [www.n8research.org.uk @N8research](#)

### Health Equity North

Health Equity North is a virtual institute focused on place-based solutions to public health problems and health inequalities across the North of England. It brings together world-leading academic expertise, from the Northern Health Science Alliance's members of leading universities and hospitals, to fight health inequalities through research excellence and collaboration.

[www.healthequitynorth.co.uk @\\_HENorth](#)

### About the Centre for Young Lives

The Centre for Young Lives is a dynamic and highly experienced innovation organisation dedicated to improving the lives of children, young people, and families in the UK – particularly the most vulnerable. Led by former Children's Commissioner, Anne Longfield CBE, who has been at the forefront of children's issues for decades, the Centre's agile team is highly skilled, experienced, and regarded. It is already widely known and well respected across government departments, Parliament, local and regional government, academia, the voluntary sector, and national and local media. The Centre wants to see children and young people's futures placed at the heart of policy making, a high priority for Government and at the core of the drive for a future for our country which can be much stronger and more prosperous.

[www.centreforyounglives.org.uk @CfYoungLives](#)

### About the N8+

Collaboration lies at the heart of "Child of The North". The N8 has proved a useful organising structure but the Child of The North vision is to: (i) use the North-South England divide to show the impact of inequity on all children in the UK; (ii) bring together stakeholders from across the UK to build a better country for CYP. One aspiration is to link researchers from across the UK to support evidence-based approaches to policymaking. In particular, there is a desire to unite Higher Education institutes across the North of England so we can address problems in partnership.

### Quotations

The illustrative quotations throughout the report were taken from extensive qualitative and consultation work with children, families, and professionals.

### Acknowledgements

We would also like to thank everyone who participated in the research that is described in this report and would like to particularly highlight the contributions made by the participants working with organisations that provided the case studies and the quotes. Also thank you to Durham Youth Council for their contributions. The views expressed in this publication are those of the author(s) and not necessarily those of the organisations that funded the research.

## Key insights

Suspensions in state-funded schools increased by **94% ↑** between 2019-20 and 2023-24.

Participation in extracurricular activities decreased from **46%** pre-pandemic to **37%** post-pandemic.

Due to lack of funding in state schools, **93%** of children are being excluded from arts and cultural education.

In 2022, **2.4 million** people were employed by **creative industries**.

**86%** Of interns in creative industries were **unpaid**.

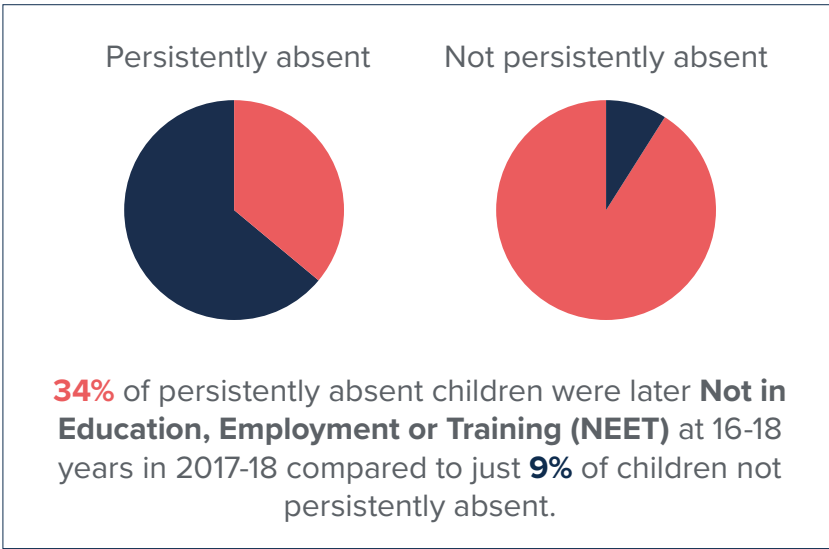
**£13m**

The UK's creative sector contributes nearly **£13m** to the economy every hour.

In the 2024-25 Autumn term, **39,200** children were **missing from education**.

**Engaging in the arts** can provide up to **3 months** of academic progress in English, Maths, and Science.

**Four** in five surveyed teachers said more can be done to celebrate diverse cultures in schools.



The least deprived children are **3X** more likely to sing in a choir or play in a band/orchestra than the most deprived children.

Pupils at Faith schools are **20%** less likely to become **NEET** than pupils of non-Faith schools.

**YEAR 7** pupils are at greatest risk of **disengaging from education**.

In England, **42%** of schools are no longer entering pupils for GCSE **Music**.  
**41%** of schools are no longer entering pupils for GCSE **Drama**.  
**84%** of schools are no longer entering pupils for GCSE **Dance**.

**6/10** Parents feel that the education system provides the **best outcomes** for all pupils.



# The language of culture, art, creativity and opportunity

The UK has a rich heritage in creativity and the arts, but the ubiquitous nature of these terms has led to a lack of precision in their use. There is extensive nomenclature used to describe culture, creativity, art, and opportunity. It is important to be transparent about the terms we are using if we want to use the power of creativity to create a cultural shift towards an inclusive education system.

The use of consistent terminology will allow a rigorous debate around the critical questions that must be considered by a government that wants to increase economic growth and improve outcomes for CYP. These questions include:

- How much more successful could the UK be if we nurtured the creativity of the next generation of talent?
- What if every child could have an education that stimulated and grew their innate talent by having creativity, and creative thinking as a valued and recognised element of the school curriculum?
- How much happier and more fulfilled could the next generation become if they were encouraged and supported to live with a creative mind and stimulated imagination?
- How do we create a cultural milieu where these skills are effectively nurtured through our education system?

## Defining culture

Culture is a broad and multifaceted concept that encompasses the beliefs, customs, practices, values, and behaviours within a society. It includes both tangible elements (such as art, literature, and architecture) and intangible aspects (such as language, traditions, and norms). Culture is a dynamical system that evolves over time, shaped by historical, social, and economic influences. The dynamic nature of culture explains how humans develop an understanding of the world (including their fellow companions on Earth) and acquire the skills that are required to survive and thrive within their environment. In this context, culture can be defined as the transmission of information and skills across space and time. The development of formal education systems reflects the importance of culture for healthy and prosperous societies. It follows that we must ensure our education systems include all CYP so that our whole population can possess the skills needed to live health happy lives and contribute towards a vibrant economy.

## Defining creativity

The Durham Commission is a joint research collaboration between Durham University and Arts Council England, convened to look at the role that creativity and creative thinking should play in the education of CYP. Their 2019 report uses the following definitions [1]:

**Creativity:** The capacity to imagine, conceive, express, or make something that was not there before.

**Creative thinking:** A process through which knowledge, intuition, and skills are applied to imagine, express, or making something novel or individual in its contexts. Creative thinking is present in all areas of life. It may appear spontaneous, but it can be underpinned by perseverance, experimentation, critical thinking, and collaboration.

"The UK is well known for being a country that is able to produce freethinking people who can problem-solve and invent. If we don't get it right, then we're going to lose that."

- Headteacher

**Teaching for creativity:** Explicitly using pedagogies and practices that cultivate creativity in CYP. An enormous body of scholarly literature over the last thirty years has shown that everyone is, or can be, creative to some degree. Creativity is not the sole preserve of artists, musicians, and performers, but of every human being across all walks of life.

As one of the defining features of humans, creativity is innate and comprises a combination of competences or capacities. Like many other innate capacities (such as physical strength), its constituents can be nurtured, improved, and developed. Building a relationship with creativity, with making, invention, and performance, can help sustain a person for a whole lifetime [2].

Innate human creativity (known sometimes as 'little c' or 'psychological creativity') is a term used to describe everyday creativity, drawn on to meet individual needs, solve problems, make decisions, or just pass time. In educational contexts, the outcomes of 'little c' creativity may not be new to others (like the teacher) but will be to the individual (the learner). In contrast, 'big C' or historic creativity is the creativity a Mozart, a Jane Austen, or an Einstein, uses every day to solve problems and create something new to the world, to generate ideas that are new to most of us, or new in the moment.

The exercise of creativity can be difficult but tremendously satisfying. It can be undertaken in solitude or in collaboration. In contrary to common belief, creativity is not reserved for just engaging with various art forms, but it can be exercised across thousands of other human activities. Creativity can require not only inspiration, but also needs incubation, persistence, reflection, and criticality.

Not only through improvisation and different types of play, but also by experimentation and investigation, testing of ideas, and reflection on outcomes, can we encourage learning. Part of that learning is to tolerate and learn from failure and thereby develop resilience and risk-taking [3].

Creativity is not confined to the formal contexts of the classroom – research indicates that outdoor education can positively influence children's personal and social growth, healthy development, wellbeing, and learning abilities [4]. For example, outdoor arts activities that invite children to imagine how the world looks from the perspective of different lifeforms help develop children's ecological imagination, defined as the ability to "see, hear, and feel beyond the visible world" [5]. Research into science education indicates that the stimulation of children's imagination is crucial for developing the ability to "create present and possible future states of the world" to inform public deliberation and global action for sustainable and just futures [6]. Outdoor education helps cultivate children's capacity to envision and progress the transformation of relationships between human society and the natural environment and empowers children to be scientifically literate agents of change [7, 8].

### Defining art

Art, as a subset of culture, refers to the expression of human creativity through various media such as painting, music, literature, theatre, video, photography, installation, and dance. While culture describes the broader framework of skills underpinning human experience, art serves as a means of interpreting, challenging, and reflecting upon that experience. In this sense, art can be seen

as both a product of culture and a force that shapes the culture of a society. Many definitions of art highlight its role in communicating emotions, ideas, and perspectives, which aligns with the broader function of culture in shaping collective identity and understanding. This emphasises the need to embed art in the education system so that we can build school environments where every CYP feels they belong.

The arts serve as a mirror to the cultural environment in which they are produced. When creativity is nurtured by a supportive cultural framework, artists can produce work that challenges norms, expresses identity, and enriches society. Conversely, when cultural constraints limit artistic freedom, the scope for creative expression is diminished. The Renaissance flourished due to patronage from powerful cultural institutions, leading to groundbreaking artistic achievements. Similarly, contemporary digital culture has reshaped artistic expression by providing new platforms for creative production and dissemination.

In summary, culture and art are deeply intertwined, with culture providing the context and framework within which art emerges. A culturally rich and supportive environment fosters creativity, enabling the arts to thrive and contribute to society's evolution. Our education system provides the formal structure that allows society to shape its culture and unleash the creative and artistic potential of the population. It is therefore imperative that a healthy society invests in its education system and ensures that the system works for all of the CYP within its population.

### Opportunity and the Opportunity Mission

Opportunity refers to the availability of resources, support, and pathways that enable individuals to improve their socioeconomic position regardless of their background. It encompasses access to quality education, fair employment prospects, and the removal of systemic barriers that hinder upward mobility. True opportunity ensures that talent and effort, rather than circumstances of birth, determine

one's potential to succeed and progress in life.

The Government has identified five Missions focussing on the strong foundations of economic growth, green energy, an effective health system, and safe streets. The Government's fifth mission is known as the 'Opportunity Mission' which aims to break down the barriers to opportunity for every child, at every stage and shatter the class ceiling. The ambition is that no matter who you are, or where you come from, the UK should be a country where hard work means you can get on in life. This currently is not the reality for huge numbers of CYP across the UK and opportunity is too often limited for large swathes of the population. In addition, a child's background can have a profoundly negative impact on the life they are able to build, regardless of how hard they work.

If we can reform childcare and education systems and make sure there is no class ceiling on the ambitions of CYP in the UK, then opportunities can be boosted for everyone and the economy. The Opportunity Mission must be supported by everyone across the UK so it can achieve its goal of breaking the link between a child's background and their future success.

"A complete education is a creative education".

- Lisa Nandy, Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport

# Policy recommendations

The UK needs to close the gap in educational attainment and social mobility by providing equitable opportunities for creative expression, mentorship, and engagement with inspiring role models. We need to ensure all CYP can see themselves reflected in cultural narratives, so we foster belonging, strengthen identity, and equip children with the skills they need to thrive. This approach will help CYP understand the value and importance of creativity and creative careers from the start and throughout their education. This ‘youth development strategy’ will provide a well-educated workforce and help support the vital role of the creative sector in driving the growth agenda. An investment to embed creativity and the arts in education will yield rich dividends for the UK economy in the long term.

We must leverage the UK's rich cultural assets for the benefit of CYP if we are to reduce childhood inequalities, and enhance health, wellbeing, social, and educational outcomes. These assets – museums, theatres, libraries, music programmes, historical sites, family hubs, public spaces, and community centres – offer more than extracurricular enrichment. They can act as catalysts within an inclusive education system for the development of empathy, critical thinking, and problem-solving skills. In addition, the vitality of these assets also depends on the artists, educators, and cultural practitioners who bring them to life, shaping transformative experiences for CYP. The integration of cultural experiences in education will ensure we expose young people to diverse perspectives and histories, helping them understand and relate to a broader world. This is particularly important for CYP from disadvantaged backgrounds who may otherwise have more constrained horizons.

We make three evidence-based recommendations that align with the new Government's Opportunity Mission and emphasise the need to consider culture when delivering the Mission to improve outcomes for CYP.

## 1

**Cultivate creativity and critical thinking through inclusive education**

We call on the Government to honour its manifesto pledge to support study of creative and vocational subjects in school. In its inspection frameworks, Ofsted must reflect the importance of creativity and the arts for attainment, inclusion, and thriving for all children, including children with SEN(D). Sciences and the humanities must be taught in ways that nurture creativity, and education – across all ages – must reflect the tremendous benefits delivered by the arts for wellbeing and school belongingness.

Creativity and the expressive arts should be at the heart of the primary school curriculum. Primary teachers should be trained, developed, and supported by specialists so they have confidence in delivering curricular art teaching and teaching creatively. Every primary school should be a 'singing school' – every child in primary education should feel free to sing, make music, paint, draw, create, play, and act. Teachers and schools should have the time, freedom, and resources to encourage, allow, and support such activities.

We call on the Government to embed teaching for creativity into the curriculum. This recommendation requires careful thought and planning but would have a profoundly liberating effect on curricular expressive arts in secondary schools and be otherwise resource-neutral.

Incorporating arts-based approaches and nurturing creative thinking in subjects such as history and science would increase engagement and retention by helping to show the real-world applications of learning. These collaborations would not only enhance students' educational outcomes but also support the pipeline of talent and innovation needed for the creative economy to flourish.

## 2

**Increase arts investment to create an inclusive education system**

We recommend a £150m arts premium fund to develop the existing primary school workforce and train the next generation of teachers to provide arts learning in parity and combination with other subjects. In 2019, the Fabian Society, Children and the Arts, and the Musicians' Union recommended expanding arts and music education, including free music or singing lessons for three years for every child who wishes to learn. We call on the new Government to deliver on these recommendations [9].

We welcome the Government's proposal for new nurseries attached to existing schools but recommend these are developed and staffed by those with appropriate cultural expertise in teaching preschool children. We call on the Government to double the early years premium (£388 per pupil versus £1480 and £1050 for primary and secondary schools respectively in 2024-25) and direct these funds towards developing the foundational skills needed within primary school and society.

We recommend hardwiring structured extracurricular enrichment opportunities, focusing on arts, storytelling, and heritage projects into after-school and holiday programmes (e.g., the Holiday Activities and Food programme). Training and resources should help teachers integrate cultural enrichment into extracurricular activities. We recommend teacher training includes cultural engagement that encourages teachers to identify artistic potential in all pupils and direct them toward inspirational opportunities matched with their interests. Schools should be better resourced to offer premises outside lesson time and partner with organisations to run high-quality cultural clubs, mentoring programmes with local artists, and holiday arts camps that foster skills development and inspire interest in cultural careers.

We call on the Government to provide targeted 'cultural activities funding' to support such endeavours. We recommend establishing a dedicated 'Cultural Enrichment Fund' to support CYP outside the normal school day. This funding could be used to develop partnerships with local cultural institutions, enabling schools to host artist-led workshops, theatre productions, or music classes and thereby enrich the experiences of all their students.

## 3

**Enrich education by connecting schools to cultural institutions**

Cultural institutions hold significant potential to enrich educational experiences and foster better outcomes for CYP, especially when they partner with educational settings. In combination, these institutions can broaden young people's horizons, stimulate creativity, and nurture the critical thinking skills that are essential in the 21st-century economy by embedding arts, heritage, and cultural programming directly into schools, colleges, and community centres.

Moreover, educational partnerships with cultural institutions can offer alternative routes to engaging students who may not thrive in conventional academic environments, reducing the risk of disengagement. Partnerships between schools and cultural institutions (e.g., museums, theatres, and music academies) could create hands-on learning experiences that bring academic concepts to life while fostering confidence, collaboration, and communication – enabling school curriculums to adapt to a rapidly changing world. For example, initiatives that allow students to work alongside artists, curators, and other creative professionals could help young people discover new career pathways, including those within the UK's growing creative economy. This exposure would particularly benefit students from underrepresented backgrounds by providing access to resources and networks that might otherwise be unavailable.

Expanding access to cultural institutions for CYP in the UK's most disadvantaged areas is crucial if we are to foster inclusivity, boost educational outcomes, and bridge opportunity gaps. One effective approach is to prioritise partnerships with schools in socioeconomically disadvantaged or rural regions that often have limited access to cultural resources. Cultural institutions can proactively reach out to these schools, offering free or subsidised visits and establishing long-term engagement programmes that promote sustained learning and connection to the UK's cultural assets.

Schools could coordinate field trips and work with local cultural organisations, ensuring that children from all socioeconomic backgrounds experience these opportunities (with recognition of transportation costs as one of the barriers to inclusion). The UK could extend the reach of its cultural heritage by prioritising such solutions for disadvantaged areas, inspiring creativity and aspiration in children who might otherwise miss out on these enriching experiences.

# Principles

The historical development of formal education systems throughout the world is a testament to the importance of culture for societal prosperity and wellbeing. Culture ensures that every child and young person has the skills they need to thrive within our society. The following principles serve as a guiding light for the UK government as it seeks to drive economic growth and achieve its missions (including its explicit desire to improve outcomes for CYP through the Opportunity Mission). These principles are underscored by a recognition that culture is the keystone of social and personal development. A focus on the cultural shifts required across public service delivery would transform lives, reduce inequities, and promote wellbeing. We can create a fairer and more vibrant future for all CYP across the UK by integrating these cultural principles into public service policies.

## Our seven principles

1

**Putting our children first** - CYP's needs, interests, and rights must be a cultural priority for any society that seeks economic growth and population wellbeing in the long term. Children's development and wellbeing must be a central consideration within all policymaking, including policies that ensure equitable access to creative education, arts programmes, and cultural spaces. Developing policies that position children as active creators and not just consumers of culture is vital. Thus, we must encourage arts participation with and through educational settings and enable the next generation to express their voices and explore their identities through creative endeavours.

2

**Addressing inequity** - Socioeconomic inequalities map directly to cultural access inequities. Tackling these disparities is essential so all children, regardless of background, can benefit from the transformative power of art and cultural engagement (including, but not restricted to, formal education). We must make certain that all CYP, regardless of socioeconomic status, have access to high-quality cultural and creative experiences. Addressing arts funding regional inequity is essential to promote equal access. Concurrently, the creative industries must be supported to help reverse economic stagnation in our most disadvantaged areas. We must ensure the UK makes the best use of all its assets especially the brilliant young, creative minds located across all our communities if we are to create sustainable growth. A failure to support the creativity and cultural opportunities of all CYP will starve the UK of talented individuals within the future workforce.

3

**Adopting place-based approaches** - Every UK community has its own unique cultural heritage and identity, reflecting differences in the opportunities available and desired within these localities. Place-based approaches are needed to leverage local resources, traditions, creativity, and local artists to engage young people and create culturally relevant opportunities. Educational establishments offer a mechanism for operationalising a place-based approach for effective community engagement so tailored place-based approaches can be grounded on 'lived experience' insights. A cultural shift in how we reach, and approach families must be planned and aligned

4

**Working together effectively across our public services** - The needs of CYP and their families cannot be confined to silos such as 'health', 'education', and 'wellbeing'. A cultural shift is desperately needed to build a country that works for all CYP. Arts and creativity must be integral to service provision, with collaboration between schools, local authorities, health services, and cultural organisations the key to maximising the impact of policies. Unified efforts can ensure arts and creative activities are integrated into broader policies aimed at improving educational attainment, mental health, and social inclusion. For example, local councils could be supported to help schools partner with libraries, community theatres, and music programmes to create accessible, enriching cultural experiences reaching underserved CYP. Shared goals, pooled resources, and a commitment to cultural inclusion will allow public services to unlock the transformative potential of the arts for every child and allow their creativity to be unleashed for the benefits of all.

5

**Putting education at the heart of public service delivery** - Creative education is not a luxury but a necessity. Embedding wider cultural learning in schools and nurseries equips children with essential skills such as critical thinking, empathy, and problem-solving, while fostering future creativity and resilience. A collaborative approach, involving cultural institutions, artists, and public services, extends creative opportunities beyond the classroom into the community. Schools must be equipped with adequate and equitable resources, enabling them to integrate cultural learning into their curricula without compromising core educational goals. Additionally, cultural education should reflect and celebrate the diverse histories and identities of all children in our communities. This not only fosters pride and belonging but ensures cultural relevance and resonance. We can unlock children's potential, bridge inequalities, and embed creativity as a cornerstone of public service delivery by prioritising education within cultural strategies.

6

**Establishing universities as the 'Research and Development' departments for local public services** - Universities are uniquely positioned to act as engines of innovation and evaluation for cultural policies targeting CYP. Universities can identify best practice and adapt strategies for maximum impact through research methodologies and public service collaboration. Rich in creative and academic expertise, universities also promote widening participation and are central to regional multi-agency networks. They can co-design and evaluate projects that enhance CYP's lives, promoting inclusivity, celebrating heritage, and developing the skills and expertise base fit for the 21st century. Universities can help address inequalities in arts access by fostering partnerships between academics, cultural practitioners, and public services and ensure that cultural offerings reflect the diverse identities of communities within the UK. We can ensure that arts initiatives not only enrich lives but also align with broader efforts to tackle structural inequalities and support the most vulnerable by embedding universities into the development of cultural strategies.

7

**Using and sharing information across public service providers effectively** - Data and insights about cultural engagement, attendance, and outcomes are critical for creating impactful cultural policies that are maximally effective. Sharing information across sectors enables public service providers to tailor cultural programmes to community needs and identify gaps. Integrating data from education, health, and social care with cultural organisations allows for targeted activities and can build comprehensive pictures of where gaps exist and how to address them. A collaborative data-sharing framework is essential to monitor long-term impacts, such as the effect of cultural activities on education, mental health, and social mobility. This includes evaluating how cultural activity participation influences these factors over time. Establishing secure, ethical, and transparent protocols for data sharing across public services is vital to ensure privacy while unlocking the potential of cultural engagement to improve lives. Once again, we must include artists and cultural practitioners in this process.

# The evidence

The Government have committed to 'breaking down the barriers to opportunity for every child, at every stage, shattering the class ceiling' and 'boost child development goals' through their Opportunity Mission. The Opportunity Mission seeks to use education as the most powerful tool we possess for addressing social and economic inequality and growing the economy [10]. The evidence overwhelmingly supports the approach being taken by the government, reflecting the importance of culture, creativity and arts within human society.

Joseph Henrich has proposed that the ability to transfer knowledge through culture is essential for survival [11]. His viewpoint is exemplified by the fate of Burke and Wills, who perished from starvation during their ill-fated 1861 expedition in the Australian outback. Crucially, the location where they died was abundant in food and sustained Aboriginal communities who had long inhabited the area. The key issue was that Burke and Wills lacked the necessary skills to survive in that environment. Their story serves as a stark reminder that human success relies on the cultural transmission of locally and temporally relevant information.

Culture, therefore, stands out as one of humanity's defining features. While other species exhibit cultural behaviours, the extent to which humans preserve and pass on tradition is a critical distinction that sets us apart from all other animals and allows us to shape environments that support human life and allow humanity to thrive. In this context, art is a vital tool for knowing, and communicating what is known, about oneself, and one's place in the world.

In the UK, most people do not face extreme survival challenges requiring them to find food and shelter in untamed wilderness. However, vast swathes of the population still experience early mortality linked to where they live. The 2010 Marmot Review exposed significant health disparities across the UK and, by 2020, the situation had deteriorated further [12, 13]. Many people now face longer periods of ill health, life expectancy gains have stagnated, and life expectancy has declined amongst the poorest women. The gap between affluent and deprived regions has widened, with residents of deprived areas in the North East of England experiencing significantly worse health outcomes than those in similarly deprived areas of London. However, on a global scale, living standards continue to improve, supporting Hans Rosling's assertion that while conditions remain dire in many places, overall progress has been and can be made ("things are bad but better") [14]. This progress has been driven

by efficient knowledge-sharing mechanisms, such as academic peer review, and well-established institutions for information transmission (i.e., 'education'), including nurseries, schools, colleges, and universities.

Since 2020, inequality has deepened within the UK. Lockdowns have worsened existing disparities, leading to increased poverty and greater numbers of families facing multiple vulnerabilities. Food insecurity has risen, physical health behaviours have deteriorated, and mental health concerns have surged. Financial hardship has made families more vulnerable to poor mental wellbeing. Educational disparities have widened, with teachers expressing growing concerns about the disproportionate impact on vulnerable students, including those with SEN(D). The solution to these problems is known – we need to give children and young people the skills they need to survive and thrive in the world. These skills will help everyone in the UK enjoy a healthy and happy life, and a well-educated and healthy population will grow the economy. We know that education is how we can impart the skills that CYP and the UK require, but too many children feel they do not belong in the institutions established to teach creativity and understanding. Thus, we need to rebuild the UK as an inclusive place where every child feels they belong in the education system.

Inclusivity is not just about addressing the needs of the most vulnerable; it is about creating a school culture where diversity is celebrated, and every child's individuality is recognised and honoured. In a world that is increasingly diverse, schools must reflect the communities they serve by fostering mutual respect, understanding, and empathy among all pupils. This is why extracurricular activities, peer support systems, and initiatives that promote social connection are so vital. These opportunities help children form friendships, develop a sense of identity, and build resilience – all key factors in promoting regular school attendance and academic achievement.

The evidence shows that schools which value inclusivity, belonging, and good communication with families have a better understanding of their students, particularly those from minority backgrounds [15]. In turn, this understanding allows the school to help children feel that they belong, and this increases the likelihood that pupils remain engaged. If inclusivity is not embraced, then children are likely to become disengaged and miss the advantages afforded through education. In support of this argument, new analysis of the Connected Bradford dataset demonstrates that children are over three times more likely to become Not in Education, Employment or Training (NEET) at 16-18 years when they disengage from the education system and are persistently absent from the classroom [16]. Indeed, 34% of persistently absent children were later identified as NEET, compared to just 9% of children who did not have such attendance issues. In a demonstration of how inclusivity can counteract these effects, a novel analysis of National DfE data shows that pupils attending faith schools, which often show increased ratings of a sense of belonging across the students, have a 20% lower rate of NEET compared to pupils from non-faith schools [17].

These analyses show that schools must be rewarded for creating inclusive environments that emphasise creativity and art, ensuring that every child feels safe, valued, and ready to learn. Initiatives must be championed within the government's Opportunity Mission that can bring communities together, support families, and ensure that every child and young person experiences the joy of belonging in a school community that nurtures their potential. The vision for education must be one where inclusivity and belonging are not optional add-ons but central pillars of a system that works for all. Through sustained effort, collaboration, and a commitment to justice, we can build an educational landscape where every child has the opportunity to flourish – artistically, creatively, emotionally, and academically.

One of humanity's greatest achievements has been the establishment of institutions dedicated to ensuring future generations have the skills needed to survive and prosper. The existence of nurseries, schools, colleges, and universities underscores the fundamental role that learning skilled behaviours plays in human progress. In fact, reductions in social inequalities in the UK have been directly linked to broader access to education, ensuring that all children – regardless of background – receive the information they need to survive and thrive. Education has the power to save lives by equipping parents with the knowledge to support their child's development, helping schools provide effective learning, and enabling young people to make informed choices about their health and career options.

**"We're thinking, rational, physical, aesthetic creatures – we're not purely academic. We are rounded complete individuals. And to deny the opportunity therefore for creativity in an artistic, in an aesthetic and cultural sense, is, in essence, to deny someone an aspect of their humanity."**

- Headteacher



## Reducing inequalities in creative opportunities

Global research underscores the profound influence of cultural traditions on behaviour, demonstrating that education and cultural heritage are deeply interconnected. The key question is how we can embed arts and creativity into education to drive systemic change while considering local contexts. The success of arts and creativity in improving the lives of the next generation will largely depend on their ability to address the physical, mental, cultural, and social dimensions of human experience in a place-based manner.

Transforming education in this way can save lives. In countries like the UK, creativity and the arts are a critical tool in the fight against preventable diseases and ill health (physical and mental). We can take meaningful steps toward reducing the inequalities that continue to devastate our communities if we foster inclusive education with a strong emphasis on creativity.

Creativity thrives in an environment where cultural values support innovation, artistic expression, and intellectual curiosity. A cultural milieu that nurtures creativity requires:

1. Reduced inequalities in creative opportunities.
2. An inclusive education system with knowledgeable and empowered teachers.
3. Democratised access to cultural institutions and the arts.
4. Improved employability within the arts and creative sector.

We consider these requirements in turn and lay out below the evidence that shows why the Government must ensure that every person growing up in the North of England, and across the UK, has access to an education that develops their creativity across early childhood, through formal schooling, and into adult life.

The experience of inequality begins in childhood [18]. The evidence shows that social, educational, and economic inequality is increasing, and that today's children are getting shorter and going hungrier in comparison to previous generations [19]. In addition, these inequalities are strongly correlated with geography and socioeconomic background. Educational inequality starts early in life, but every stage of the system can play a role in shaping – and reducing – inequality [20].

Inequalities have been exacerbated by government reforms that have sought to enforce a so-called 'knowledge curriculum' [21]. The overstuffing of subject curricula prevents learners from putting their knowledge into action if recall is prioritised over more purposeful and productive thought [22]. The TALE (Tracking Arts Learning and Engagement) project noted that cultural citizenship is cultivated through both action and identity, not just knowledge [23]. Even OCR, one of the UK's top assessment bodies which traditionally supports exams, has stated it is possible to have 'too much of a good thing'. OCR have argued that the current volume and pressure of exams at GCSE and vocational Key Stage 4 qualifications in England are excessive [24].

The UK's state school system presents an outstanding opportunity to level the playing field for disadvantaged children. However, it also highlights the stark reality that educational inequalities persist. Schools alone cannot bridge these gaps, as external societal factors often create significant barriers to student success. Many children struggle to engage in education due to external hardships beyond the school gates. The UK's increasing emphasis on academic attainment has exacerbated many of these challenges, while the marginalisation of arts and creativity in schools has deprived many children of an environment where they can thrive. These factors contribute to the current school attendance crisis and the widespread rise in mental health issues among students.

**"The arts build confidence and team-building skills."**

- Pupil

To effectively combat childhood inequalities, we must foster an education system that prioritises inclusivity and integrates creativity into learning. This requires determining what information should be passed to the next generation, how best to deliver it, and how to tailor approaches to different demographic groups. It is essential to involve artists and cultural practitioners in this process as what works for White British boys may not be effective for girls of South Asian heritage, for example.

This is an issue of social justice: CYP from disadvantaged backgrounds deserve access to opportunities to be creative and to practise and experience the arts just as much as their more advantaged peers. The 21st century skills of critical thinking, communication, collaboration, and creativity need to be cultivated in all children, not just some of our children, if we want them all to thrive in our rapidly evolving global society [25].

The Social Mobility Commission reported a relationship between occupational attainment, cultural activities, and good academic performance [18]. Whether elite or mainstream, the type of culture is not relevant. Similarly, communicating and sharing experiences, especially with those who have a similar taste (e.g., sports or music) is more beneficial than the experience itself. The type of cultural capital gained from participation in these activities can give individuals an advantage over those who are not able to participate, as they may better develop and grasp 'non-cognitive'

skills [18]. A report by the Nuffield Foundation argues socio-emotional skills (such as engaging in positive social interactions, cooperating with others, and showing empathy) are as important as cognitive skills in achieving good GCSEs and earning a decent income after school [26].

The [Child of the North](#) report about addressing poverty with and through education settings noted that current poverty measures are failing to consider the many extrinsic factors that can prevent families from accessing available resources (e.g., after school coding clubs and walks in the countryside). The report pointed to the importance of using existing educational settings for enrichment activities such as creative and cultural programmes, music, drama, and dance. Children told the Children's Commissioner in 2021 that what they wanted above all from their community was space to play outside of their homes and their schools [27]. There are pronounced inequalities in CYP's ability to access enrichment activities, which are especially pronounced in music and sport [28]. Youth clubs, which have long offered enrichment opportunities to children from less well-off families, are also in decline [29].

This report does not look to creativity and the arts as a salve or a sticking plaster to mitigate the consequences of economic and social inequality. In addition, as highlighted throughout this Child of the North report series, inequalities in education cannot be solved by the education system alone. However, there is evidence that by working collaboratively across public service sectors, we can better support children to thrive by providing better opportunities to be creative. Moreover, we can look to schools to be the anchor institutions helping provide these opportunities. Children need and deserve school, home, and leisure environments that enable them to grow and thrive in safety, and to become the best versions of themselves in childhood as well as in adult life.

## An inclusive education system

### *Embedding creativity into the National Curriculum*

Currently, not all children feel there is a place for them in our education system. We need to ensure that every child feels included and has a sense of belonging. We need to provide children with firm foundations for their schooling and for the rest of their life, cultivating a child's love of learning and their imaginations. We need to ensure that high-quality creative and cultural experiences are available to every child and to give all CYP the best possible start in life. A good pedagogy that supports fostering creativity will help provide the space for more children to thrive.

Within the enactment of the current national curriculum, there are limited opportunities for creativity and responsiveness to local need. In some disciplines, the curriculum is extremely prescriptive, with an emphasis on key facts to be learned and retained, eroding scope for teacher

autonomy. Yet simultaneously, in other areas of the curriculum, the specification is vague, leaving many schools teaching from scripts.

Creativity should be present in the teaching of every subject that a young person experiences during their education, and the expressive arts should be an essential part of that education. The arts are not 'a nice to have' or an additional bonus on top of an education, but are as essential as the sciences, the humanities, and sports and exercise.

No school can be better than its teachers. Above all, we need to empower teachers to teach creatively. Here the focus is on teachers' own capacity to teach for creativity, who know and understand the context (the school, curriculum, resources, out-of-school opportunities, and students). These teachers can then plan effective and engaging learning experiences for their students, whether formal or informal, in school or out.

The Yorkshire creative education charity 'IVE' runs a programme called 'Applied Creativity Labs', in which young people are presented with real-world challenges, such as air pollution, food sustainability, single-use plastic and waste reduction. They are provided with access to experts in a relevant field, then collaborate over nine weeks to give a presentation on their proposed solution to the challenge. The pupils involved in IVE acquire knowledge and experience in collaboration and innovation and gain oracy and self-efficacy skills. Teachers have commented on the enormous difference that participation in the programme can make to subsequent classroom interactions by previously shy and withdrawn class members.

However, there is not necessarily any creative thinking going on even if the lessons are creative, the students enjoy them, engage with tasks, participate fully, and learn something. Thus, it is important to encourage students to think creatively and think about their own thinking – a concept known as metacognition. Indeed, evidence suggests that metacognition has a substantial impact on pupils' academic success [30]. Students need opportunities to foster creative thinking. It is important that teachers know and understand what counts as creative thinking within the curriculum, and that they recognise the attributes of creativity on the part of the learners, understanding how to nurture and grow those attributes. There are several tools available to help with this, such as the Evaluation of Potential Creativity (EPoC) project, but if teachers cannot bridge between teaching creatively and teaching for creative thinking, these tools become ineffective.

A recent international survey of educational attainment conducted by the Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) showed that capacity for creative thought can be improved by appropriate schooling when students believe that creativity is something that can be taught, and where teachers value creativity [31].

While the expressive arts have a particular role in teaching CYP to be creative, there is no such thing as a 'creative subject'. All subjects are, or can be, creative. People can be taught to be creative through learning the sciences and the humanities as well as the arts. For example, to study physics or geography and to thrive in doing so, requires the exercise of creativity. At the same time, even so-called 'creative subjects' can be taught in rather uncreative ways.

The exercise of creative faculties can be foundational to both employment and leisure in adult life. For example, participating in activities such as

art, drama, creative writing, or programming classes regularly (i.e., once a week) is associated with better performance in creative thinking than doing so infrequently [31]. For this reason, it is essential that creativity should be placed at the heart of education and childhood experience. If this essential capacity is left un nourished, then an adult's sense of being able to bring about new possibilities in the world can wither and decline, and we are all the poorer.

Despite its rewards, the English National Curriculum has not prioritised the nourishing of childhood creativity for nearly two decades, except, perhaps, in the early years. The Times Commission on Education has proclaimed the school curriculum too narrow and called for sport, music, drama, debating, and dance to be integral parts of the curriculum, not an optional extra-curricular add-on [32]. Similarly, Pearson have recently published a report advocating for the development of a more creative curriculum to ensure all children are able to access a wider and more varied educational experience [33]. While the UK does take part in PISA for literacy and mathematics, it chose not to opt in to the recent PISA Test of Creative Thinking. Teachers and learners have shared that the current school curriculum is overloaded with content, and that recall of knowledge is prioritised at the cost of helping young people to think and to put knowledge into practice. It seems easier to argue that every five-year-old is creative, than every fifteen-year-old even when it is accepted that everyone is or can be creative. But what if these are the same children ten years apart? What happens in their lives in and out of school that diminishes their ability to be creative and to think creatively?

Young people have shared their experiences concerning diminution of creativity in their education from primary to secondary, the over-emphasis of testing and writing in their current schooling, and their reliance on extra-curricular and enrichment activities to develop creative interests

[34]. Education should not be about having to choose between knowledge and creativity. Young people should be equipped with the knowledge that they need now, and in later life, while being encouraged to use their imaginations in putting that knowledge to good use through creating, imagining, experimenting, and doing [35].

Following the publication of the Durham Commission, Arts Council England together with the Freelands Foundation and Durham University established a network of eight Creativity Collaboratives, consisting of 92 schools [18]. As part of these collaboratives, several schools partnered with a local business, cultural institution, or university to pilot effective ways to teach for creativity. These collaboratives found that the key requirements to support teaching for creativity included:

1. Adequate time both within and outside the classroom to experiment, share, and develop practice.
2. Effective peer-to-peer support, mentoring, and school leadership involvement to build confidence and reduce fear relating to teaching for creativity.
3. Developing a whole-school approach to teaching for creativity.

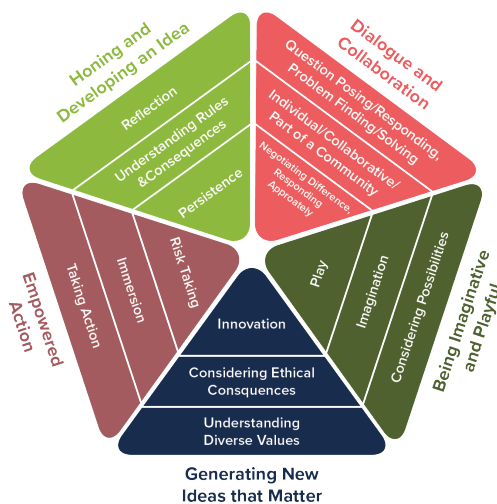
Consequently, teachers and leaders came together to develop teaching for creativity, away from their everyday school context, and to increase teacher agency. Peer-to-peer observation opportunities between the collaboratives' teachers at different schools were also developed [36].

The Cornwall Creativity Collaborative has made Penryn College's 'Teaching for Creativity' toolkit freely available. [The Better Prepared for a Creative Future toolkit](#), created by experts at the University of Exeter, is a hub of resources for school leaders,

teachers, researchers, and parents/carers, aiming to educate and promote creativity in young people (see Figure 1).

Preliminary data from the Creativity Collaboratives piloting the findings of the Durham Commission suggests that teaching for creativity can also have a beneficial effect on teacher retention.

**Figure 1.** Penryn Creativity Collaboration model of creative skills



Arts interventions and teaching for creativity are also crucial in teaching young people with SEN(D). Sunningdale School in Sunderland, a specialist school for children with severe, profound, and multiple learning difficulties aged 2-11 years, for instance, does not teach the National Curriculum. Instead, the school places play and creativity at the heart of its curriculum, since it is in the exercise of everyday creativity that young people with complex needs can develop their self-efficacy as they grow into adulthood.

Sunningdale School serves as a useful reminder that inclusivity means meeting the needs of all children - including the neurodiverse student population. It is widely recognised that 1 in 7 students are neurodivergent and our schools must support the educational needs of the neurodiverse population [37]. In the UK, over 70% of autistic pupils are educated in mainstream schools rather than separate specialist provision [38]. Thus, understanding school experiences, engagement in creative opportunities, and providing support for autistic and neurodivergent pupils is a matter of national urgency in the context of the current school attendance crisis [39]. Moreover, the evidence suggests that autistic pupils are over-represented in those experiencing emotionally based school avoidance [40, 41]. Creativity, and cultivating a positive environment for creativity, could make a significant positive contribution to the attendance and mental health crisis playing out across our schools and help increase understanding and appreciation of the various and creative ways that different human skillsets can contribute towards a healthy and happy society. Creative endeavours at school can enable all students to express differences in their real-world experiences. Creative opportunities can also provide a 'safe space' for neurodivergent pupils, including those who experience significant anxiety and heightened mental health challenges, and provide routes where CYP can express themselves in ways not available through other academic endeavours. It is therefore critical that we create school environments that appreciate all varieties of creativity and that enable neurodiverse student communities to engage in creative expression. Employers increasingly recognise the value of increasing creativity through a neurodiverse workforce, and it is of paramount importance that we build this same approach within our schools.

In a statement to Channel 4 News, the Department for Education (DfE) promised a review of the current curriculum and assessment, where they

acknowledged the importance of the arts and creativity for young people and the lack of access to the arts many pupils face. The Labour manifesto for the 2024 election promised to support children to study a creative or vocational subject until they are aged 16 years and ensure that accountability measures reflect this [42]. These important priorities must not be forgotten in the heat of UK politics.

### *The early years*

There is currently a larger focus on creativity in the early years, and this time in a child's life is crucial for building the foundation for lifelong learning. However, here too, inequality in the experience of learning is pronounced. In 2018, the Education Policy Institute reported that, on average, even from the early years, disadvantaged children were four months behind their peers, this rose to nine months behind at Key Stage 2, and 18 months behind at Key Stage 4 [43].

The short- and long-term impacts of early childhood education and intervention have been well-evidenced for many years. Programmes that focus on early childhood development (e.g., offers of early years education) have been found to enhance social skills, including improved peer relationships, lower rates of delinquency, and improved self-regulation abilities [44]. Children who receive early educational support are more likely to perform well at school and pursue higher education [45, 46]. Research also suggests that for the most disadvantaged children, high-quality early childhood education has an even more profound impact on children's cognitive and socio-emotional development [47].

This, in turn, contributes to greater social mobility and helps reduce intergenerational cycles of poverty [48]. Indeed, research has demonstrated that there are clear benefits to programmes such as Sure Start for health as well as education, especially for children with SEN(D), with benefits even found for youth misbehaviour and crime [49, 50].

The breakdown of the Sure Start programme and the slashing of early intervention funding has been identified as “a historic mistake”. Clearly, as the [Child of the North report on Sure Start](#) argued, further investment is needed to ensure that the most disadvantaged children do not carry the consequences of this disadvantage for the rest of their lives.

The exercise of creativity is key for a preschool child to make sense of the world and their own place and agency within it. Early years learning is by its nature, multi-, or even, pre-disciplinary, and an expressive arts perspective is especially important across all learning at this stage: movement, singing, object learning, making, make-believe. The development of creativity is a key part of a happy childhood and the foundation of learning as a child grows and enters the later stages of education [51]. Ofsted’s most recent ‘Best Start in Life’ document observed, for instance, that “creativity in the form of stories and imagination push children to ask questions, increasing their ability to form new ideas and concepts” [52]. Yet creative learning environments do not occur spontaneously – they need to be carefully and thoughtfully constructed based on evidence and good practice.

The DfE have created online resource pages for the early childhood education workforce to support practice regarding the Early Years Foundation Stage (EYFS). As a specific area of learning in the EYFS, there is a large section on [creativity and imagination](#). While a valuable means of supporting teaching for creativity, the demands, pressures, expectation, and lack of time faced by early years staff cannot be ignored. To be carefully and thoughtfully constructed (such as through a combination of creative and slow pedagogies), it is not simply a case of ‘teaching creativity’. It requires a joined-up, whole-setting approach to creativity and the arts, so they are nurtured and fostered in everyday life and reflected in events and engagement with the cultural sector.

While creativity is recognised as a ‘Characteristic of Effective Learning’ in the EYFS, the understanding of creativity as a key element of high-quality early years experiences is still at a preliminary stage. In comparison with many other European countries, the early years workforce in England is poorly paid and has a low bar for qualifications [53, 54]. This low status and low pay is driving professionals out of the sector and contributing to the decline in qualified staff entering. Evidence from the Sutton Trust details the crucial role that qualified early years educators play in children’s learning and development, especially for families that are low-income and considered most vulnerable. However, the data indicate that there has been a rise in the number of unqualified staff in the early years sector. For example, in 2018, one in seven staff were unqualified compared to one in five in 2023 [55].

In addition to adequately trained staff in early years settings, families need to be given the suitable tools and knowledge to enable their children to develop creative skills through their home environment. There are measures in place to do so, but currently not all families engage with them, particularly those who are most vulnerable. Services such as Family Hubs could help see greater outreach and impact to promote a positive and impactful home learning environment, holding creativity at the heart to help promote personal, social, and emotional development as well as communication and language skills – which is a growing issue across the North of England (see earlier Child of the North reports). A better qualified workforce that has a deep understanding of the arts and creativity in the early years would also be able to facilitate the creation of this environment and support children and their families to understand the importance of creativity and the benefits of children engaging in creative activities from a young age [56].

Our children deserve a rich and well-supported education in their earliest years. It is imperative our teaching workforce is better paid and better

qualified, alongside parents and families receiving additional support. While the Government’s proposal for new nurseries that are attached to existing schools is welcomed, these must be developed and staffed by those with appropriate expertise, rather than filled by those with a specialism in teaching older children.

## Democratising access to cultural institutions and the arts

A productive, creative disposition can satisfy certain psychological needs, like constructing understandings of our world and its people, enabling reflective communication, and generating competence in interaction with the world. The affective responses arising from the satisfaction of such needs can underpin feelings of wellbeing, confidence, resilience, and a comfortable engagement with opportunities that come our way [57]. There is strong evidence of engaging with the arts benefiting physical and mental health across the lifespan [58-60].

A 2010 meta-analysis commissioned by the UK government found that participation in structured arts activities could increase young people’s cognitive abilities by 16-19% [48]. There is also high-quality, if limited, evidence that arts programmes can reduce youth offending [61, 62]. The previous [Child of the North report](#) on improving mental health and wellbeing drew attention to the project Next Door But One, which uses theatre projects to improve mental health. The evidence suggests that higher participation in the arts correlates with pro-social behaviour (e.g., giving to charity) even when controlling for factors such as socioeconomic position and parental background [63].

However, the benefits conferred by engagement with the arts can vary enormously across social backgrounds. A study using the Millennium Cohort

Study – a research programme that routinely captures data from 12,000 young people born in or near the year 2000 – identified participation gaps in the arts. The analysis found that young people growing up in the South East of England are twice as likely to play music outside of school compared to young people in the North East (the region of England with the highest level of child poverty) when analysing data from 2015 (when participants were around 14 years of age). Likewise, young people in the South East were 40% more likely to participate in dance outside of school compared to their peers in the North East. Similarly, while half of young people in London report playing a musical instrument, this is true for only a third of young people in the North East [64, 65]. The evidence shows that CYP in the A productive, creative disposition can satisfy certain psychological needs, like constructing understandings of our world and its people, enabling reflective communication, and generating competence in interaction with the world. The affective responses arising from the satisfaction of such needs can underpin feelings of wellbeing, confidence, resilience, and a comfortable engagement with opportunities that come our way [57]. There is strong evidence of engaging with the arts benefiting physical and mental health across the lifespan [58-60].

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There are benefits of the arts for learning for wellbeing, school belonging and engagement, in addition to the arts being worth experiencing and practising for their own sake [67-69]. As such, the benefits of arts opportunities must be made available for more young people to continue with their arts interests outside of formal examination at Key Stage 4 and beyond – just as we would not expect children or adults to stop engaging with sport and physical exercise if they are not studying PE for a qualification. Whether under a Local Authority or Trust, schools are required to enable children 'to take part in sports, music, and cultural opportunities that enrich the curricula and support wider development' [70]. Indeed, in the 7% of British schools that are independent, where the business model is driven by the fee-paying parents' expectation of high attainment and a rich school environment, a high-quality arts offer ranks highly when parents choose the school to which they pay fees [71].

Schooling is about more than just lessons and the curriculum. Schools are key anchor institutions within their communities, particularly disadvantaged communities; a strong enrichment offer is key in

strengthening school belonging, particularly for those children who struggle to develop a strong affiliation with their schooling through academic attainment [15]. The Durham charity, [Investing in Children](#), for instance, offers small grants directly to children in care so they can access enrichment opportunities in music or sport. CYP need to be able to see a place for the arts in their own lives and in the place where they live. The Cultural Learning Alliance argues that we need a "focus on representation, breadth, and relevance across the arts curriculum, resources, and practice so that children can see themselves reflected in what they are learning" [72].

The UN Convention on the Rights of the Child states that all children should have the right to age-appropriate play and recreation and to participate freely in cultural life and the arts [73]. The Scottish Government sets the UN Convention as its base standard for children's rights, and indeed the arts and creativity are seen to play a larger part in children's education in both Scotland and Wales. Schools in the Republic of Ireland have also been trialling 'Creativity Clusters'. These 'clusters' consist of 3-5 schools, including primary, secondary, SEN(D) schools and youth reach organisations, that will tackle a shared learning vision or challenge by collaborating on an innovative creative project. The Durham Commission mentions the 'affective property of the arts', whereby the expressive arts can play an essential role in school belonging and engagement.

The NEU, the largest teaching union, has diagnosed, in concert with 14 national arts education organisations, an "arts apocalypse" in education [74]. The National Association of Head Teachers (NAHT) has warned of a "naïve undervaluing" of the arts in the current education system. The evidence shows a stark decline in the expressive arts in English schools. Indeed, the fall in entries of expressive arts subjects at GCSE between 2015 and 2024 now stands at 34% [75]. The number of students taking drama GCSE has declined by 39.4% since 2010 and GCSE entries for Design and Technology in England saw a staggering 71%

decrease between 2010-2022 [67]. Lack of curricular arts in schools has had a knock-on effect on teacher training and recruitment. The most recent data suggest that Music recruited only 40% of its target to Initial Teacher Training, Design and Technology 39%, and Art and Design 66% [76].

Music is perhaps the expressive art which can most strongly generate feelings of joy, self-efficacy, and belonging. Indeed, there are multiple studies that show compelling evidence of the benefits of learning an instrument and social music-making [77]. The decline in music participation represents a severe threat to the cultural life and wellbeing of the UK's future generations [78]. Initiatives such as the Music Opportunities Pilot and Labour's planned National Music Education Network are therefore welcomed. Schemes of this type are paramount and should be scaled up to cover areas of the UK where they are most needed, especially in the North of England. Classical music in particular needs support to prevent it becoming exclusively enjoyed by the older and the more affluent. The educational pipeline that supplied the infrastructure for professional careers in a range of music is, at present, severely restricted.

**Schools are key anchor institutions within their communities.**

The remarkable story of Feversham Primary School shows that well-taught music not only cultivates an engagement with music but with the whole school culture, and even attainment in other subjects. Located in a deprived area of Bradford where most of their students speak English as an additional language, the school faced significant challenges resulting in it being placed into special measures. However, through determination and innovative change, Feversham Primary experienced an extraordinary transformation through the school's embrace of music in the curriculum. Music became a tool for connecting with pupils, inspiring them to take pride in their learning while bringing parents closer to the school community [79].

Cultural institutions play a key role in developing children's creativity and their relationship with the arts. Some children are taken by parents and family members to craft sessions, museums, galleries, concerts, and theatres, alongside other activities. As the child grows up, they can choose which of the activities they have been exposed to that they wish to develop further [46]. For many other children, the spaces of cultural institutions are closed unless, and until, their school takes them. As already discussed, enrichment activities in schools are presently hard-pressed and unequally distributed. Indeed, local government revenue funding of culture and related services has decreased by 39% in Scotland, 40% in Wales, and 48% in England [42]. In addition, since 2010, support for local museums, galleries, and theatres has fallen by £166.8 million, a drop of 30% [80].

Nonetheless, many cultural institutions do place young people at the heart of their offer. Institutions dedicated to artforms typically thought of as 'high cultural' – such as the Whitworth Gallery in Manchester, the Liverpool Philharmonic, and the Royal Opera House – have outstanding programmes for children. The programme, Into Opera, has seen outstanding results in primary schools in Norfolk [81]. My Primary School is at the Museum was a project which tested the hypothesis that there may be beneficial learning, social, and cultural outcomes for the museums and for primary school children

and their families when a significant portion of their learning takes place in a museum setting.

In another example, [The Bluecoat](#) in Liverpool has developed exhibitions designed specifically for young children to experience alongside their parents, fostering early engagement with contemporary art. One interactive and immersive exhibition was designed to be touched, explored, and responded to through play. Similarly, Ludworth Primary School has a partnership with Locomotion, one of the Science Museum Group of Museums, which holds the highlights of the national collection of railway vehicles. Locomotion offers a programme of creative STEM learning to young people. Ofsted was particularly impressed with the project and how it has inspired pupils to have careers in architecture and engineering.

There are several material considerations which bear on children's access to creative activities. Many parts of the North of England suffer from poor transport and other infrastructure, which inhibits young people's engagement with cultural institutions. Additionally, the lack of provision of enrichment activities and curricular arts is especially stark in schools with a high proportion of children from low-income families.

Greater collaboration across society and decisive leadership is key to emphasise and promote the importance of participating in culture. For example, the Tyneside programme, City of Dreams, conducted qualitative research involving many teenagers, who made the simple but effective recommendation that some performances should be timed at 4:30pm, so that the teenage audience can travel home more independently than they might be able to later at night.

Numerous organisations delivering cultural education across the North of England report that the biggest challenge in delivering to schools, and in welcoming young people through their doors, is transport. The infrastructure which sits underneath arts and cultural learning should be investigated urgently, with an understanding that transport is

likely to consume a significant proportion of the resources needed to develop this kind of education. Food, particularly hot food, can be helpful in encouraging CYP facing disadvantage to feel that spaces that they might find intimidating are open to them. Looked-after children may also need additional support in the form of chaperones to escort them between home and the setting. Again, it is essential that funders recognise these measures are essential in the delivery of such programmes.

We can ensure that all CYP are provided with opportunities to engage with cultural institutions and the arts (and thus reap the benefits to the economy) if we understand the barriers to participation.

**"It was interesting to see some children shine in these activities who don't normally shine in curriculum subjects in school. I think it has also broadened our children's ideas about what they might like to do when they grow up."**

- Teacher

## Improved employability within the arts and creative sector

Cultural venues promote economic, social, and personal wellbeing. However, they also develop stronger communities through facilitating the ambitions, opportunities, and outlooks of local communities by providing a strong contribution to place branding and making areas attractive to workers and enterprises in the education and tourism sectors. Arts and culture are not only intrinsic to economic growth but also facilitate productivity and sustainable development [75, 82].

Standards of literacy and numeracy are top educational priorities for effective social mobility, but it is also clear that skills needed for the fastest-growing creative sectors of the economy are being neglected [83, 84]. The Northern Culture APPG found that the fastest way to address economic inequalities and to level up regions is through culture [85]. Creativity and the arts need a greater presence in children's education, both for the sake of the economy and those children whose talents risk being wasted due to a lack of opportunity [86].

While creativity has been undervalued in government and in many English schools in recent years, creativity is greatly valued by employers and by the organisations that represent them [87]. The World Economic Forum, in an annual series of reports over the last few years, has been consistent on the need for creativity as a capacity essential in the workplace of the future [88]. Analytical thinking and creative thinking remain the two most important skills for workers in 2023. Analytical thinking is considered a core skill by more companies than any other skill and constitutes, on average, 9% of the core skills identified as necessary by companies. Creative thinking meanwhile ranks second, ahead of resilience, flexibility, and agility; motivation and self-awareness; and curiosity and lifelong learning [88].

In addition, the Social Mobility Commission reports that thinking for yourself is the skill most wanted by parents for their children's education [18]. Communication, teamwork, and problem solving are abilities valued by employers and delivered by an education which values creativity and creative thinking [89]. As the Labour Together paper

'Broad and Bold: Building a Modern Curriculum' suggests, "subjects like art and music (...) build creative capacities that are of use far beyond a stage or studio" [90]. Human creativity remains vital for original thought, problem-solving, and strategic thinking. Artificial Intelligence can imitate the products of human creativity and can augment human thought by providing new tools and insights. Nevertheless, AI cannot replace the unique qualities of the human imagination. The innate human capacity for original thought, emotional intelligence, and deep human connection, setting us apart from AI, will be essential for the jobs, employers, and sustainable economic growth of the future.

A recent report proposed that the system has failed to produce future employees that have the skills and qualities that employers seek by shifting to a disproportionately knowledge-based approach to education [67]. The Government has recognised that education, as it is currently framed, could do better in developing young peoples' creativity and has commissioned a review of curriculum and assessment, where part of the remit is to address skill gaps in the economy such as the creative industries [91]. However, the growth potential of the creative industries cannot be realised unless arts and cultural experiences are widely available. Opportunities to interact with art and express creativity not only enrich our lives but have the potential to reveal a talent or spark an interest that could ultimately become a career or a business in its own right [92].

The Creative PEC's 'The State of Creativity' report made a call to prioritise creative education, pointing out that the majority of work in the creative industries is highly skilled [93]. Indeed, 95% of creative occupations consist of higher-skilled roles compared to 46% of workers in the general economy [94]. In her maiden speech as the Culture Secretary, Lisa Nandy identified culture, media, and sport sectors as being crucial to the national growth mission [95]. Earlier, she declared the intention to put 'rocket boosters under our growing industries – film and theatre, TV, fashion, video games, heritage, and tourism – to take the brakes off the

economy, create opportunity for every child, and to export our incredible talent across the world' [96]. However, in the same week that further investment in the UK video games industry was announced, it was revealed that the DfE withdrew funding from the computing hubs for English schools, risking the entrenchment of inequities, with only the most privileged pupils able to access the equipment and skills required to pursue a career in this field.

It is widely acknowledged in public policy that arts, culture, and heritage define who we are, help us understand our background, and allow us to forge a better future. The statistics suggest that arts, culture, and heritage are also major economic sectors. Figures from the Department for Culture, Media and Sport (DCMS) suggest that the cultural sector – which includes sub-sectors such as the arts; film, TV, and music; museums, and the operation of historical sites and similar visitor attractions – accounts for 703,000 jobs and contributes £30.6 billion in Gross Value Added (GVA) to the UK economy [97].

However, the success of the UK's creative industries, regardless of how they are defined, must not be taken for granted; and creativity is also much needed in sectors that do not sit under this definition [98]. Government support for training for the creative industries in the global stage has been inconsistent and even complacent [99] – the GVA of the creative industries was £124.6 billion in 2022, representing 5.7% of UK GVA, but this growth has slowed since 2024 according to DCMS [100].

There is a skill shortage in key areas of the creative industry. A House of Lords report, *At Risk: Our Creative Future*, found that skills were the biggest obstacle to further growth in the creative industries, with employers finding it twice as hard to recruit skilled workers compared to the average across the rest of the economy [101]. There is low take-up of apprenticeships in, and falling enrolments in Further Education qualifications relevant to, the creative industries, with the lowest level of enrolments in the North East of England [102].

It is also the case that entry into creative industry careers and development opportunities is grossly skewed by family background and educational experience (with factors such as ethnicity and gender adding further intersectional barriers). Working-class representation in the creative industries is at the lowest level that it has been for a decade. Low pay for younger workers earlier in their career is a significant barrier to access for CYP who come from low-income families. A recent Creative PEC report concluded that just 8% of workers in TV and radio are from a working-class background; social mobility in these industries is demonstrably getting worse [103]. There are also pronounced geographical inequalities: in 2023, the median earnings in the creative sector ranged from £39,995 for London down to £15,800 in the North East [104]. In looking towards inclusive economic recovery, the Local Government Association has commented on the lack of diversity across the audience, employees, and leadership of cultural organisations [105].

For too long, the cultural sector has 'made do' and resolved that the 'show must go on' despite the different kinds of inanition it has suffered in the last decade and despite using its creativity to do more with less. The success of the UK's cultural and creative industries is now seriously imperiled by this neglect and urgent action is needed. According to the Council of Skills Advisors, making sure that every student has access to creative subjects such as art and design, drama, and music, as well as encountering relevant and meaningful culture, will allow them to enter adulthood with the essential skill set [106].

**Just 8% of workers in TV and radio are from a working-class background.**

**"It's so important for young people's mental health to have access to spaces where their creativity is nurtured, respected and not assessed, where they can try different creative arts activities, sports, and wellbeing activities. Engaging with art is so rewarding, and it's heart-breaking that so many children miss out on access to art and culture due to lack of opportunity, financial reasons or feeling that they aren't 'good at art' at school and that art isn't for them. Every child should have the chance to engage with culture and to use their creativity to express themselves through art making, as it offers enormous benefits to overall confidence and wellbeing which has an impact on all areas of life" [107].**

**- Kirsty Gbasai, Bolton Lads and Girls Club.**





# Play Commission

The Raising the Nation Play Commission was launched in June 2024. The Commission is chaired by entrepreneur and author, Paul Lindley OBE, in partnership with the Centre for Young Lives. It is designed to spark a national conversation about how to encourage and support children and families to play more. It also lays the foundations for the Government to develop a National Play Strategy in England, which will be set out in its final report in June 2025.

## Supporting an inclusive culture of creativity through play

Through the lens of seven themes – learning through play; places to play; time to play; right to play; digital play; parents and play; and play and health – the Commission is investigating play through a call for written evidence, oral evidence sessions with expert witnesses, a series of visits, and by consulting CYP and families.

There has been a notable absence of vision for optimising opportunities to play from recent governments despite the innovative work being done by many different organisations and experts to boost children's access to play and to keep play on the policy agenda. There has not been a National Play Strategy for England since 2008. Since then, many of the opportunities and spaces for children to play have been lost and children in England are increasingly unhealthy and unhappy. Compared to previous generations, they are spending less time outdoors, less time with their friends, and less time playing.

In the other nations of the United Kingdom, play has been recognised by the devolved governments as a policy tool to deliver better outcomes in health and education, as well as address inequality and poverty. Above all, children's right to play is recognised by law in Wales and Scotland. In England, however, play continues to be overlooked as a policy priority, even though maximising the opportunities for children to play is the most natural and easiest way to improve their mental and physical health and boost their creative potential.

The fundamental benefits of play are clear. It is the cornerstone of children's physical and mental wellbeing and their cognitive, social, and emotional development. Play is a powerful pedagogical tool for creative learning and developing fundamental artistic skills. This is as much the case in later childhood and adolescence as it is in the early years.

Despite these benefits, the Commission has heard how children face barriers to play in almost every direction. At school, their breaktimes are being curtailed and sometimes even withheld. At home, many children do not have access to outdoor

space, especially children from minority ethnic communities and children living in disadvantaged areas. Hundreds of playgrounds have closed, along with more than half of all youth centres and nearly all Sure Start Centres. School playing fields have been sold, there are more cars and vans, moving and parked, on our roads, and public spaces and streets feel less safe for children to play. Many parents have less time to play with their children.

A culture has embedded itself in communities, most notably seen in the 'No Ball Games' signs that appear in many public spaces, which, at best, is ambivalent towards children's needs and, at worst, is actively hostile towards them. This cultural milieu is being shaped by policies that actively exclude CYP from consideration.

The 'Raising the Nation Play Commission' is building on the work that Play England and other leading play organisations have done to make the case for a more playful future in England. It is showing that thriving childhoods are an essential part of building a thriving society and must therefore be a crucial part of the Government's Opportunity Mission. The commission is accumulating evidence showing that play has a vital role in the Opportunity Mission and thus 'play friendly policies' should be central to political decision-making.

The Commission's Interim Report was published in February 2025, focusing predominately on its first three key themes of evidence-taking: learning through play, places to play, and time to play. From the evidence gathered so far, the Commission is clear that we need to see a cross-Government National Play Strategy for England, potentially led by the DCMS to get all our children playing again. This should include a long-term vision to ensure all children can easily access local formal and informal places to play at home, in school, and in the public realm.

The Commission's Interim Report also argues that local authorities need new guidance on how to provide sufficient play opportunities and how to communicate these opportunities to parents and

families, as well as a commitment to embed play within their local priorities. The report calls for a plan to re-establish a skilled workforce of playworkers, ensure play is covered as part of initial teacher training and as part of all teachers continued professional development, and argues that Ofsted should include 'play sufficiency' as a measurement of school performance. Schools also need clearer guidance of what constitutes quality play-based learning and how it benefits children within the curriculum.

With the evidence showing a fall in school playtime, the Commission proposes the Government looks at: (i) ringfencing time to play within the school day for breaktimes and lunchtimes; (ii) how to incorporate play as a ubiquitous lesson learning technique; and (iii) how to discourage schools from using the withdrawal of playtime as punishment for bad behaviour.

To support parents, the Commission is also proposing a low-cost national campaign aligned with the International Day of Play - June 11th - to encourage parents to play with their children, and to provide opportunities for children to play with others, as part of the Government's drive to improve 'school readiness'.

During its evidence sessions, the Commission has heard how the current planning system routinely ignores children's right to play when new developments are built. Some forward-thinking developers do consult with children to co-create genuinely playful neighbourhoods – but there is a strong argument for this to be the norm for all developers.

The Commission also argues for a culture change in how society views children playing outside. Our streets need to become more play-friendly – many residents close their street to traffic, at specific times, for street play with the support of their local council, but it should be much easier for this to be organised everywhere across the UK.

On the International Day of Play, the Commission will publish its final findings and recommendations and set out the case for a joined-up, cross-Government play strategy to encourage and support our children to play again. The play strategies and play sufficiency duties of Wales and Scotland provide lessons and inspiration for England and show what can be achieved when children's health and wellbeing underpins Government policy and practice. Play is an essential ingredient in the drive to create an inclusive environment for all CYP within the UK.

**"Play is at the centre of happy childhoods. The decisions adults make can have a huge impact on how easy or difficult it is to play, where and when it's possible, and even put up new barriers to play."**

- Paul Lindley OBE

# Innovative approaches trialled in the real world

The recommendations laid out within this report are based on innovative ways of working that have been trialled in real-world settings. In this section, eighteen evidence-based approaches are highlighted – new tools and ways of working – designed in alignment with the principles set out in this report. These innovative approaches are inspirational and demonstrate the transformational benefits that could be achieved across the country if the new government committed to supporting a cultural shift to better support learning and development of creativity and the arts. These are innovative ways of working that have been trialled in real-world settings. They are offered here not as blueprints for copying, but to inspire **creative** new thinking and practice. Moreover, it is hoped that the Opportunity Mission will allow better sharing of learning across the UK as everyone works together to build a country that works for all CYP.

1

Hand Of

"I am looking forward to starting high school because I have enjoyed making new friends. I feel more prepared and organised now I know where some things are in high school".

- Participant

Hand Of is a charity that gives disadvantaged CYP unique creative opportunities to work alongside professional artists, musicians, archivists, academics and more. Based in Newcastle, Hand Of works with children and young people across the North East, with a particular focus on those with SEN(D) or Social Emotional and Mental Health difficulties (SEMH), from socioeconomically disadvantaged backgrounds, or who are Looked After Children, fostered, or living in local authority children's homes and not attending school.

In every Hand Of project, CYP work collaboratively with professionals to create live performances, films, sound walks, or art exhibitions which are authentically theirs, featuring their creative decisions and their creative voices.

The process of facing challenges and overcoming them, when experienced in safety through the arts and with the support of experienced and talented professionals, builds social resilience and trust that CYP can use to face other transitions, challenges, and obstacles in their lives.

Hand Of's pedagogy is underpinned by the belief that learning, in of itself, is a rewarding experience – it feels good, it is fun, and we want to do more of it. Co-creating projects together with professionals enables CYP to re-discover the pleasure of learning, which helps them to re-engage or to remain engaged with education beyond the end of the project.

#### The North Tyneside Sound Walk

Hand Of's North Tyneside Sound Walk project takes place every year in August and sees up to 60 students working together with 8-12 musicians, artists and creative professionals creating an alternative audio guide to North Tyneside, and an accompanying art exhibition. The project includes a breadth of activities including musical composition, script writing, heritage research, artefact handling, theatre activities, sound recording, photography, and sculpture. Students and artists walk along the sound walk's routes, freely recording, sketching, and exploring the sites, sights, and sounds that interest them. Back at school, they further research the history and the stories behind each of these places of interest, before presenting their research through the final recorded sound walk.

For previous Sound Walks, they have composed, recorded, mixed, and edited their own music and audio recordings, written theatrical scripts and ghost stories, designed game shows, recorded podcast-style fact files, and even crafted news jingles and historical raps. Alongside this, children created drawings, paintings and sculptures inspired by local histories and their trips to the coast that were showcased in an art exhibition.

The content focuses on micro-histories and local stories, intentionally avoiding obvious connections with the syllabus in favour of focusing on the joy of learning. As a result, children develop vital skills like teamwork, confidence, self-esteem, and resilience – transferable skills that benefit them in engaging them with the curriculum when they go back to school.

The Sound Walk also provides opportunities for incoming Year 7 students to familiarise themselves with their new school and its surroundings, make new friends, and explore their local area. Enabling the school to meet some of their most disadvantaged new students, identifying intervention and support ahead of the new academic year.

Data collected by the school identified four key impact areas:

- **Attainment:** students who attended the Sound Walk project made academic progress in line with their peers, achieving a Working Towards+ grade at a higher rate than both their disadvantaged peers and Year 7 as a whole.
- **Attendance:** By the following March, their attendance averaged at 94.5%, which is higher than both the year groups' average attendance, and the attendance of students with similar circumstances and needs.
- **Attitude to learning:** In their attitude to learning and behaviour, students who attended the Sound Walk also exceeded their disadvantaged peers who did not attend, matching the overall Year 7 scores.
- **Independent learning:** Students who attended the Sound Walk outperformed their disadvantaged peers and the overall Year 7 average in terms of independent learning and homework routines. The school attributed this to the 'independent nature' of the Sound Walk activities, as well as their ability to identify interventions such as Chromebook loans early on, resulting in a smoother transition to the requirements of secondary school.

## 2

## Morecambe Bay Curriculum

"This was an opportunity where you could just go for it — and that was wonderful!"

- Primary teacher

The Morecambe Bay Curriculum (MBC) is a groundbreaking initiative that embeds creativity, sustainability, and place-based learning into education. Supported by Lancaster University, Lancaster and Morecambe College, the University of Cumbria, and the Eden Project, the MBC equips children with the skills, knowledge, and values needed to address climate challenges while fostering meaningful connections to their local environment. At its heart, the MBC demonstrates how creativity can transform learning and teaching, using art and co-design as tools to inspire students and educators alike.

Currently there are 234 members of the MBC movement, and the resources have been shared with 300 schools and colleges, and over 100 early years settings. MBC are now in the process of disseminating further training and support so that teachers can adapt and embed these activities within their local curricula.

#### Fundamentals of MBC art

- **Integrate contemporary art into curriculum design:** Develop educational resources and lesson plans that incorporate diverse contemporary artworks, emphasising relevance to environmental, social, and place-based topics.
- **Enhance teacher training in art practices:** Offer professional development for teachers, focusing on tools and techniques from contemporary art to build students' core skills in attention, critical thinking, and problem-solving.
- **Utilise co-design methods for place-based learning:** Introduce co-design techniques that empower teachers to integrate local knowledge and perspectives into their teaching, using practical toolkits and the 'Head, Heart, Hands' framework.

#### The Head, Heart, and Hands framework

The MBC uses the *Head, Heart, and Hands* framework to ensure holistic learning:

- **Head (Knowledge):** Students explore local environmental issues like biodiversity, climate change, and human impact, gaining a solid foundation of knowledge.
- **Heart (Values):** Activities cultivate empathy and a sense of place, encouraging students to care for their local environment and community.
- **Hands (Skills):** Students develop practical and creative problem-solving skills through hands-on projects, connecting abstract concepts to real-world applications.

A key strength of the MBC is its integration of contemporary art practices into education, enabling students to explore environmental themes creatively. The use of art fosters interdisciplinary learning and emotional engagement with the local landscape.

#### Recent projects

These projects illustrate how contemporary art can serve as a lens through which students understand and connect to their environment, transforming local ecosystems into vibrant classrooms.

- **Exploring birdsong with soundwaves:** Students analysed and interpreted birdsong, creating clay sculptures inspired by the visual patterns of soundwaves. This project combined auditory learning with tactile creativity, making abstract concepts tangible.
- **Sculpting wading birds' feet:** By studying the anatomical structures of local bird species, students created sculptures of wading birds' feet, blending scientific observation with artistic interpretation. This activity encouraged reflection on the ecological roles of these birds and their significance to Morecambe Bay.
- **Technology and artistic perspective:** Inspired by contemporary artists like Hannah Tuulikki, Andy Holden, and Marcus Coates, students used drones and virtual mapping tools to view the Bay from new angles. These tools helped them understand their environment in ways that combined creativity with critical thinking.
- **Multimedia installations and habitats:** Students engaged in creating sculptures and sound installations based on local wildlife, such as migrating birds, to explore the Bay's diverse ecosystems. These activities linked environmental science with expressive arts, fostering a sense of wonder and care for their surroundings.

#### The co-design process: breaking free from constraints

In 2023-24, the MBC undertook its most ambitious project yet: the creation of 16 co-designed educational resources. These spanned Early Years (2), Primary (4), Secondary (5), Further Education (4), and SEN(D) (1), with each resource tailored to embed creativity, environmental learning, and place-based education into classrooms. These resources were shared at the annual MBC conference and continue to be disseminated through online platforms, providing teachers with materials that go beyond the National Curriculum.

The MBC's co-design process brought together educators and academics to create these innovative resources. The resulting resources not only fulfil statutory requirements but also encourage

creative methods like problem-based learning, outdoor experiences, and design projects, ensuring students engage deeply with the material.

#### **Creativity as a catalyst for change**

By integrating contemporary art and collaborative co-design into the curriculum, the MBC equips students and teachers to think creatively and act boldly in addressing the challenges of the 21st century. Through projects that engage the Head, Heart, and Hands, the MBC builds a generation of environmentally conscious, innovative problem-solvers. Its success shows how creativity, rooted in local contexts, can inspire transformation in education and beyond, offering a model for how schools everywhere can empower their students to shape a sustainable future.



**“They so reconnected with the Bay—it was heart-warming.** They pestered their parents into taking them to see the structures and go on the beach. The children came back and said they’d been on train journeys they hadn’t been on before and experienced so many different things.”

- Early Years teacher

**"It gave me a way for my research to be useful and to have a genuine impact on the local community."**

- Academic

## 3

Theatre Hullabaloo,  
Play on Prescription,  
and Place to Play

"We definitely feel like it's something that is worthwhile continuing and actually adds a lot of value to the offer of children's services."

- Stakeholder

A suite of early years focused creative play interventions can be found at Theatre Hullabaloo, one of the UK's leading children's arts charities. Their home, The Hullabaloo, is located in Darlington, in one of the 1% most deprived wards in the UK and is a purpose-designed venue which aims to bring high quality performance and play to foster imagination and creativity for family audiences. Since it opened its doors in 2017, over 130,000 people have visited, and 97% of those surveyed reported it was an important place for them and their families.

At the heart of The Hullabaloo is a creative play space which houses a rolling programme of artist-designed play environments, free for people to access whenever the building is open. These unique child-centred and magical play environments are designed to promote attuned engagement between caregiver and child to support stronger attachment, imaginary play and speech and language development.

Theatre Hullabaloo are currently offering two pioneering programmes for the early years: *Place to Play* and *Let's Play: Play on Prescription*. Both programmes are dedicated to fostering creativity with a strong imaginative pretend and creative play focus. The theatre does this by combining arts practice and creative play interventions, carefully hosted, with insights into developmental education. They are actively attempting to combat inequalities in exposure to creative practices within the community and at home. The interventions are free and available for any family that walks through the doors or is referred by their health visitor or social worker. Parents leave with take-home knowledge around play and an experience that is tailored to their child.

#### Let's Play: Play on Prescription

This initiative is the first socially prescribed creative play intervention for infants 0-3-years and their carers. This programme emerged in response to the COVID-19 pandemic, addressing key developmental areas such as language and play in children, as well as isolation and feelings of low parental confidence in adults.

Each session in the intervention is child-led, semi-structured and tailored to the needs of the parents and children in attendance. Participants begin with a welcome song which helps the adults to learn each other's names. Different bespoke songs are chosen for the cohort alongside developmental signposting like beat keeping, coordination, and even inhibitory control. The sessions are carefully hosted and modified based on the chemistry of the group in an attempt to make all caregivers feel welcome.

Music is followed by a less structured creative play offer. An array of thoughtful and age-appropriate play materials and books are presented to the group. Parents are offered a cup of tea or coffee at this time and invited to connect with other carers while they play

with their babies. It is stressed that this is a time for the adults as well as their children. At the end of the session lights are lowered and carers bring their babies back to the circle at their leisure. Parents are provided with a handout containing ideas for activities at home, and a lullaby is sung.

The first peer-reviewed evaluations of *Creative Play on Prescription* found that parents' trust in the providers, paired with calm feelings toward the programme, made it possible for the host and artist facilitator to deliver practical parenting knowledge to each cohort. An exchange of ideas around creative play and activities for their child at home was observed amongst other interactions considered peer support. Preliminary evidence is emerging indicating that babies are not the only ones benefiting from Let's Play: Play on Prescription. Parental mental health and wellbeing is impacted as well. Furthermore, stakeholders for this programme have advocated for its continuation.

#### Place to Play

Inspired by the impact of the creative play spaces and the play programmes on local families, Theatre Hullabaloo, in a partnership with Public Health South Tees, Tees Valley Combined Authority, and Arts Council England, has begun a place-based pilot project – Place to Play – replicating the play offers in Family Hubs in Redcar and Middlesbrough.

Spaces within family hubs are transformed into a world of creative play lifted from The Hullabaloo and in-situ for three months or so for local communities to access. The play spaces provide playful environments for Let's Play sessions too, enabling closer working with local family services to ensure referrals are made for those families who will benefit most.

The creative play installations are only the foundation to the Place to Play project giving parents and carers a space to make and do creative arts with other families in their community. Activities are semi-structured and child-led, reinforcing Theatre Hullabaloo's core belief in the value of the shared creative experience between very young children and their caregivers.

## 4

## Mortal Fools

These young people are helped to develop resilience, confidence, and independence.

Northumberland-based Mortal Fools are champions of the voices of young people in the North East, and of inclusion and breaking down barriers in the arts. They co-create compelling, socially relevant, and high-quality theatre, film, and creative projects led by children, young people, artists, producers, schools, arts venues, and communities.

Participants and audiences often come from the kinds of backgrounds that are severely under-represented in the arts. Mortal Fools work with these young people and their communities in weekly, youth-led, deep-level engagements so they can engage with the lifelong benefits that engagement with different kinds of performance can bestow. The majority of young people with whom they collaborate have complex intersectional needs, and these young people are helped to develop resilience, confidence, and independence.

Mortal Fools' artistic practices are rigorously grounded in neuroscience and social science research to ensure their practices are wholly inclusive and generate maximal inclusiveness.

Throughout Mortal Fools' programmes, young people are encouraged to tell stories that are relevant to them, thereby developing a strong sense of ownership in the artistic output and strong bonds of belonging in their communities. CYP work alongside professional artists in equitable relationships to co-create original performance-based art using themes and ideas which are relevant to their lives, amplifying their voices and experiences and giving them power and autonomy as cultural consumers and artists in their own right. The programme supports CYP to engage in cultural activity in deep, meaningful, and impactful ways, in accessible and place-based settings.

Mortal Fools have seen astonishing results with young people facing severe deprivation, with looked-after children, and with children at risk of suicide, self-harm, and other harmful behaviours. Each building block is evaluated by key indicators, and wellbeing is measured by participants. The practice is highly reflective, with feedback on each session providing the grounding for the next one.

The Young Leaders programme recruits young beneficiaries in the governance of the organisation, to give them experience of a professional environment. The reach of Mortal Fools' practice has been extended through the creation of MELVA, an early intervention online resource to improve mental health for 7–11-year-olds to talk openly about, and better understand their mental health, emotions, and wellbeing. Through an online film, lesson plan, activity booklet toolbox, user guide, and adventure digital game, young people and their adults are helped to scaffold the development of resilience pathways, positive emotional responses, and a shared understanding of how to look after oneself and others. Through the Connect programme, Mortal Fools also upskill practitioners and institutions, providing training in creative leadership to individuals, teams, and organisations.





## 5

Echoes of Resilience:  
Refugee Voices in Art

"It feels good to  
make art; I can  
express myself."

- Participant

The refugee art project, funded by the Arts Council England, aimed to provide a platform and a safe environment for the refugee community of Blackburn and Darwen to express their thoughts and voices through the medium of art. The primary objective of this project was to acknowledge the refugee community of Blackburn, giving them a voice and a means to express themselves artistically in a safe environment. The project takes a holistic approach by combining tailored curriculum workshops, robust safeguarding measures, and dedicated family support teams.

Workshops were held once a week for seven weeks at the Blackburn Art Museum community gallery where they provided a structured yet nurturing environment for participants. At each session, around 20 students attended, with ages ranging from 10 years to 50+. The programme catered to individuals with various needs, including language difficulties and social, emotional, and mental health challenges. In light of the success of the workshops, the Refugee Arts Alliance (RAA) was formed which aimed to continue the support and development of refugee artists.

The project had a significant positive impact on the community:

- **Emotional wellbeing:** Participants reported feeling safe and confident in expressing themselves through art. For many, it was their first time creating art, and the experience was empowering.
- **Community response:** The project was well-received by the Blackburn community. The stories told through the exhibition opened people's eyes to the experiences of refugees, making previously hidden narratives visible and impactful.
- **Personal development:** Participants gained confidence in their abilities.

The RAA continues to support the refugee community through:

- **Art classes:** Providing a platform for creative expression, fostering emotional wellbeing, and mental health.
- **Exhibitions:** Offering opportunities for participants to present and exhibit their work.
- **Education and qualifications:** Creating pathways to further education and qualifications in the arts.

The exhibition, 'Echoes of Resilience: Refugee Voices in Art' has successfully created a vibrant, empathetic, and diverse artistic community. The project highlighted the importance of giving refugees a platform to share their stories, fostering understanding and empathy within the broader community. Through collaborative partnerships and innovative initiatives, the RAA empowers individuals to thrive socially, emotionally, and educationally, making a lasting impact on the lives of refugees in Blackburn and Darwen.



# 6

## Helix Arts

Helix Arts is an arts charity, collaborating and connecting with the local communities to bring about meaningful changes to their health, prospects, communities, and their environments. Based in North Tyneside, the charity is deep-rooted within the community and hopes to deliver great, positive change. Helix Arts works in and around public settings, such as hospitals, care homes, prisons, schools, clubs etc., aiming to create spaces where individuals feel comfortable and at ease, particularly for those who are often forgotten or overlooked.

A core principle of the charity is that art, cultural practices, and everyday creativity can help move towards a renewed sense of community, where the little voices are heard, people feel healthier and more optimistic, and have a greater understanding of the world around them. They aim to equip individuals with the necessary skills and outlook to tackle the uncertain futures they may face. Artists are supported and involved in regular communication to create a safe space with the shared ambition to collectively nurture, care, and respect one another.

Helix Arts has three core values: authenticity, ambition, and creativity. It utilises all art forms, including dance, music, film, and drama, to champion youth voices and foster social agency. Collaborating with schools, youth centres, and community settings to co-create, deliver, and evaluate creative projects is key to allow for the celebration and advocacy of young people. The arts, cultural and historical projects taken are underpinned by a clear objective yet produce a wide range of results due to the coproduction and bespoke journeys emphasised.

# 7

## Middlesbrough Institute of Modern Art

The Middlesbrough Institute of Modern Art (MIMA) is an international art gallery and museum that brings together art, people, and ideas to make a creative community space. MIMA was opened in 2007 by Middlesbrough Council and is now part of Teesside University. It serves as a cultural and community hub, promoting public engagement through a commitment to equity, diversity, and inclusion.

Driven by the aim to positively impact society, MIMA transforms art into action in the world and is supported by a regular flow of national and international artists, curators, policymakers, and funders. Each year, over 12,000 school children experience MIMA through museum visits where the Philosophy for Children method is used to invite speculation, reflection, and imagination. The learning team regularly supports whole schools to achieve national accreditation Arts Awards. MIMA's work with a local primary school highlights a number of positive impacts for children, including increased confidence, improved wellbeing, newfound pride, and improved communication skills.

The Middlesbrough Collection, built over 150 years, houses over 2,250 works, featuring pieces by local Tees Valley artists as well as global contributors. MIMA's initiatives help communities develop new skills, foster creativity, and encourage the move towards an open and inclusive future. From programmes that address holiday hunger to early years projects, the museum takes a family-friendly approach. MIMA's artistic and learning programmes are integral to the cultural ecology of the North East of England and is internationally recognised for its civic mission and community engagement. MIMA is dedicated to collaborative learning, research, and innovation, continually commissioning, collecting, and reinterpreting modern and contemporary art.

## 8

## Beyond School Gates: Children's Contribution to Community Integration

The Beyond School Gates project, funded by the British Academy and Nuffield Foundation, examined how children's perspectives, experiences, interactions, and friendship networks feed into community integration in three towns in the North West of England: Bolton, Blackburn with Darwen, and Preston. The interdisciplinary team consisted of academics across six universities in the UK and staff from The Linking Network, an organisation that supports schools as they enable children to make 'meaningful connections' across lines of difference.

This multi-methods project consisted of gathering different types of data, including:

- 444 surveys of children aged 9-11
- 181 surveys with parents/carers
- 109 interviews with children
- 130 pieces of creative work by children
- 50 interviews with 57 local stakeholders

It was found that policymakers and local stakeholders lacked a 'clear vision' for working with children in middle childhood, or between the ages of 5-12, despite the fact that children in this age group contribute to community integration in significant ways.

### Archives of memory: Narratives in the past

For most schools, lack of resources means that any creative work by school children is generally only saved for a year, limiting access to the historical memory of children's experiences of community integration. National and regional archives have greater strengths in this area, though the responsibility lies primarily on local communities to place a value on preserving this history. Therefore, archival research in national, regional, and local collections was combined to strengthen the historical understanding of CYP's experiences and contributions to community integration.

Within national and regional collections, it was found that:

- Children consistently took up opportunities to voice their opinions about key social issues, using methods such as poetry or letter-writing to do so
- Children were profoundly shaped by experiences of community integration within school (both in positive and negative ways), working as creative collaborators with trusted adults

- Children responded positively to engagement with arts-based methods, including storytelling, enabling those who might not always voice their opinions to join in

The historical research for this project underscored the significance of using creative methods to open up spaces for children to freely express their views on community bonds and ways to strengthen them.

### Curating collections of memory in the present

In collaboration with the British Library and the Linking Network, a creative programme called 'Journeys' was designed to encourage children across five primary schools to share more about their role in shaping their community. This consisted of an online workshop, featuring former Children's Laureate Joseph Coelho and children's illustrator Viviane Schwarz, and a follow-on set of creative activities.

For the creative activities, each school was provided with a set of books and materials associated with the theme of 'journeys'. Children were invited to complete a map worksheet with prompts, such as 'a journey through a place I belong' or 'a place I was made to feel welcome', and to create an original map charting their own 'journeys'. In-depth interviews with 26 of the participants helped to draw out the meaning behind their artwork, with a total of 130 original pieces documented in total. Some of the most important findings from the thematic analysis of this creative work include:

- Safety: some children identified their bed as a 'safe' place, while for others, parks, libraries, or places of worship made them feel like they belonged.
- Culture: forms of secular, religious, and cultural belonging were important to participants, as were opportunities to share their beliefs and practices with others.
- Wellbeing: children spoke candidly about things that worried them or made them sad, including divorce, bullying, and illness; they valued friendships and relationships with trusted adults as ways to overcome these difficulties.

In particular, when children do not feel safe and secure, they are less likely to engage in activities that support community integration. For this reason, the work that many schools do to strengthen these bonds are essential, often providing the only opportunity for children to make friendships across difference.

**Empowering children to share their stories: Changing the narrative**

One of the aims of this project was to provide new insights into how children contribute to community integration. Curating a collection of children's original creative work enabled our project partners, particularly those in policy and practice, to understand how children's experiences shape their sense of community, and how this, in turn, related to their own initiatives for supporting community integration. By mapping children's journeys through their communities, and contextualising these journeys with in-depth interviews, it was possible to provide a model for our partners of potential changes they could make to their practice for community outreach in response to children's lived experiences. To continue to share the results of this work, the team will be working alongside the British Library and Seven Stories: The National Centre for Children's Books on a co-curated digital video documenting the children's views from Journeys. Through this collaborative work, the aim is to deliver a message to children: that their lived experience and voices matter, and that they are capable of changing the stories about their local communities.

When children do not feel safe and secure, they are less likely to engage in activities that support community engagement.



## 9

## The Royal Armouries

"We have what we call an umbrella approach, so a topic we're covering in history we'd also cover in English... building links between different parts of the curriculum and to empower those who have more barriers to writing."

- Teacher

The Royal Armouries in Leeds is the national museum of arms and armour, and a pioneering museum dedicated to building cultural capital for CYP in their locality. Through a range of exhibitions and programmes, the museum tackles important issues facing the community, serving as a key cultural institution that is driving positive outcomes for all CYP.

### Mightier than the Sword

One project, is a literacy programme that aims to enhance the development of literacy and oral skills in primary school pupils. Mightier than the Sword uses innovative drama techniques, interactive storytelling, and world-class artefacts to inspire writing, discussion, and reflection. Literacy levels in Leeds are below the national average, specifically among the most disadvantaged. This project was designed to address this by offering an immersive and engaging learning environment combined with storytelling and live performance, resulting in an unforgettable experience that aims to deliver long-term benefits to CYP in Leeds. Schools are supported by the Formal Learning Manager (who manages the project), the core Education team, an industry expert who is a professional storyteller and previous professor of primary school literacy, freelance education staff, the Live Interpretation team, and the Royal Armouries Librarian and collections team.

The project is based on the following three principles:

- Spoken language, drama, and creative writing skills: allows pupils to be inspired to create their own hidden stories.
- Pupils' attitudes towards writing: improves and transforms literacy into something exciting which they are motivated to do.
- Improving emotional literacy: reflected in their confidence, social engagement and interaction, and approach to creative writing.

The workshop touches on key topics such as gender identity, patriarchy, bullying, and mental health, supporting pupils to develop their emotional literacy, as well as confidence, social engagement and interaction, and thus improving their approach to creative writing. Not only does this programme improve the literacy skills of pupils, it also provides a learning experience for teachers, whereby they can build on existing knowledge and enhance their teaching by drawing on further resources – ensuring a collaborative approach to tackling literacy attainment.

### Hidden Stories

The Hidden Stories project at the Royal Armouries is designed to explore the gendered and queer histories embedded within the museum's collection. By collaborating with volunteers and members of the LGBTQ+ community, the project creates a platform for examining how gender is reflected, enforced, and represented in historical objects such as arms and armour. This exploration is showcased through a creative exhibition and a trail, encouraging visitors to engage with and rethink traditional narratives displayed in museums. The Forgotten Battles exhibition ran successfully in the museum from September 2023 to November 2024 and received positive feedback from participants and visitors.

One of the key goals of the project is to diversify gender representation within the museum. It uncovers and highlights the histories of LGBTQ+ individuals, offering a broader, more inclusive view of gendered histories that are often overlooked in traditional museum settings. The project also works to increase accessibility by focusing on marginalised groups, particularly those underrepresented in museum collections, making the Royal Armouries' collection more accessible. This approach encourages visits from diverse audiences, including those who may not have seen themselves reflected in past exhibitions.

Hidden Stories aims to establish long-term inclusive practices at the museum, ensuring that the stories of LGBTQ+ individuals and other marginalised groups are consistently represented in future exhibitions, while also providing a safe, supportive space for LGBTQ+ community members to explore their histories, reduce social isolation, and foster mutual understanding and community cohesion. Furthermore, the exhibition aims to destigmatise gendered histories by challenging the erasure of LGBTQ+ histories, contributing to broader societal conversations about gender and improving the dialogue surrounding historical gender identities. The project also plays a significant role in raising the museum's profile within the cultural sector, positioning it as a leader in inclusive and diverse historical storytelling.

Through these efforts, the Hidden Stories project transforms the Royal Armouries' exhibits and creates a more inclusive space where diverse identities are acknowledged and celebrated, enriching the broader cultural landscape and fostering a deeper connection with the public.

**At the Sharp End: tackling violent crime together in West Yorkshire**

The At the Sharp End exhibition, developed in collaboration with the West Yorkshire Violence Reduction Unit, addresses the pressing issue of violent crime and its profound impact on communities. The exhibition combines objects, evidence, and personal accounts to engage visitors with the realities of violence and the efforts made to combat it.

A central aim of the exhibition was to highlight the work of the West Yorkshire Violence Reduction Unit, which employs a multi-agency, community-led approach to address violent crime. The exhibition incorporates the voices of the community, featuring interviews and testimonies from victims of crime, former perpetrators, community workers, and those who have benefited from community projects. These personal accounts are presented through quotes and audio-visual materials, ensuring that the exhibition is rooted in real, lived experiences.

The design of the exhibition was carefully crafted to resonate with young people, both as its primary audience and as a key group affected by violent crime. Specially designed mounts and graphics were used to convey the progression of weapons, from their intimidating presence on the streets to their confiscation, containment, and eventual destruction, symbolising the journey towards safety and resolution. This design approach aimed to both educate and inspire, showing the potential for change and the importance of community-driven solutions to violence.

"I was doing burglaries and armed robberies, I was kicked out of school so I had no education... When I came [here], everyone was welcoming. I've been on an apprenticeship, I'm going to retake my GCSE's... If I can do it, everyone can do it, you can change everything."

- Volunteer



10

Leeds School  
Library Service

These installations aim to harness the power of play to strengthen the building blocks of early language development.

Leeds is fortunate to still have a dedicated school library service (SLS), especially as many similar services nationwide have been reduced or closed. It is essential that the service continues to be acknowledged for its importance and receives the necessary resources to sustain and grow its high-quality provision in the future.

#### **Books, Bags and Boxes**

Leeds SLS acts as a support service to local primary schools in Leeds. The Books, Bags and Boxes initiative offers schools the opportunity to borrow boxes packed with key resources on a termly basis, ensuring children have access to diverse, up-to-date, and engaging texts across a range of curriculum areas. The service provides a range of high-quality resources that are cost-effective and efficient, allowing children to also access reading for pleasure alongside curriculum resources. Qualified librarians are on hand to give professional advice as well help manage and organise school reading areas, intending to increase attainment levels in schools by highlighting and boosting reading for fun.

An online survey conducted by the SLS, found that the service was essential and of high value to entitled schools. The SLS allowed schools, which often struggle to provide diverse resources that cover both the curriculum and reading for pleasure, to have access to a wide range of high-quality resources without the strain or pressures on budgeting. Participants also appreciated the continued investment in resources and the insights and advice from librarians were deemed to be invaluable. Thus, the SLS carries an important duty in supporting literacy attainment and educational provision of primary schools in Leeds.

#### **'Play Together, Talk Together' Leeds**

In 2019, 17.8% of children in England did not meet the expected level in communication and language, with the figure rising to 18.9% in Leeds. In response, a series of vibrant [play installations](#) to support early speech and language development through creativity and play were launched. Seven colourful, playful learning installations were created for parents and children to enjoy together. Designed by artists and play practitioners, these installations were developed following consultations with families in Leeds. Located at the Compton Centre Community Hub and Library in Harehills, a multi-agency hub providing a range of services, the installations are designed to be fun, accessible, and intuitive. They promote behaviours that support early language and communication development, such as eye contact, joint attention, turn-taking, and contingent talk. These installations aim to harness the power of play to strengthen the building blocks of early language development, encouraging moments of connection between young children and their caregivers.



## 11

Dance United Yorkshire  
in Holme Wood

A physical presence  
– through dance  
– was embraced  
as a powerful tool  
for engagement,  
surpassing other  
forms of outreach.

The Resi/Dance project, a four-year initiative by Dance United Yorkshire, has left a profound cultural and creative legacy in Holme Wood, Bradford. Running from October 2019 to October 2023, it was co-designed with local residents and a range of partner organisations. This innovative programme focused on cultivating dance as a medium of self-expression, offering sessions for youth, children, women, and vulnerable groups.

Resi/Dance stands as a testament to the transformative power of creative engagement, especially in communities facing the compounded challenges of poverty and systemic deprivation. Holme Wood, like many areas, grapples with significant barriers to access, leaving its residents with fewer opportunities for enrichment and development. In this context, Resi/Dance provided a crucial creative outlet and became an anchor for the community, forging connections across diverse groups.

At its core, the programme demonstrated the significant impact of sustained creative activity. Participants found a vital non-verbal outlet in dance, using it not only to express themselves but also to manage stress and improve their emotional regulation. For many, the sessions offered a rare opportunity to build self-esteem and confidence in a safe, welcoming environment. The project's emphasis on long-term consistency fostered trust and established a strong sense of community. A physical presence – through dance – was embraced as a powerful tool for engagement, surpassing other forms of outreach.

The evaluation of Resi/Dance highlighted its cultural and social significance, revealing key outcomes. The participants experienced notable improvements in self-esteem, emotional regulation, and overall wellbeing. They also developed enhanced communication skills and formed lasting relationships, strengthening the fabric of the community. In addition to the personal benefits, the structure of the programme contributed to increased focus and academic engagement among participants, further reinforcing the role of creative expression in holistic development.

One of the project's most significant impacts was its ability to foster collective pride. The performances staged by Resi/Dance were not only milestones for individual participants but also celebrated the community's resilience and creativity. These events brought families and neighbours together, amplifying the sense of unity and shared achievement.

Ultimately, Resi/Dance highlights the enduring power of the arts to create meaningful change. Its success underscores the value of 'scaffolding care' – providing consistent, long-term creative engagement – as a pathway to empowerment, social cohesion, and individual transformation.





12

## The Opera North Richmond Hill Residency

“Ever since Richmond Hill Academy became an In Harmony Opera North school, music has brought everyone together.”

- Anna Mackenzie, Principal

Richmond Hill, located in Leeds, is a community marked by significant deprivation, ranking in the most deprived 1% nationally. In 2018, Richmond Hill Academy joined the In Harmony programme, a partnership with Opera North, which has since engaged over 1,000 local pupils and their families in daily creative activities. This collaboration represents a powerful example of how the arts can play a transformative role in communities facing systemic challenges. In this context, Opera North has worked closely with local leaders and stakeholders to develop a programme of activities designed to address the specific needs, interests, and aspirations of residents in Richmond Hill. The goal of the programme is not only to foster a love for music and creative expression but also to actively involve the community in shaping the creative process and the events themselves. By doing so, the programme aims to enhance the mental health and wellbeing of participants, while encouraging increased participation in music and creative activities.

The impact of the programme has been profound. One of the most notable outcomes has been the strengthening of community bonds, fostering a more connected and cohesive environment. This increased sense of unity has also raised aspirations within the community, as residents see their voices reflected in the artistic and cultural activities being developed. Furthermore, the programme has successfully increased participation in cultural events, helping to raise the profile of the area as a vibrant hub of creativity.

Another significant aspect of this initiative has been its celebration of the cultural diversity within the community. By spotlighting and embracing this diversity, the programme has brought together a wide range of residents who may otherwise have felt disconnected from the cultural landscape of Leeds. The art of opera has been introduced to local residents, many of whom may have previously viewed it as inaccessible or distant. Opera North has worked to break down these barriers, engaging residents in a new way with this traditionally exclusive artform.

The project has also introduced a new model of community co-creation, where the artistic process is driven by the residents themselves. This model has led to a deeper, more meaningful relationship between Opera North and the local community and has fostered partnerships with other venues and services. The work done with the community has created new ways for Opera North's Chorus and Orchestra to engage with local groups, ensuring that the cultural offerings are truly reflective of the community's desires and needs.

Building on the success of these initiatives, the Richmond Hill Residency aims to expand its reach by collaborating with more community services and groups. Through workshops, performances, and events, the residency will continue to place residents at the heart of the creative process, ensuring that the cultural landscape of Richmond Hill remains vibrant, inclusive, and reflective of the community's strengths. The residency seeks to further establish Opera North's role as a key partner in the social and cultural development of the area, fostering long-term, positive change for residents and their families.

# 13

## Yorkshire Sculpture Park

Cross-departmental collaboration became key in sharing challenges, developing solutions, and embedding a family-friendly culture throughout YSP.

Yorkshire Sculpture Park (YSP), established in 1977 within 500 acres of 18th-century designed parkland, is an internationally acclaimed centre for modern and contemporary art. For over 40 years, YSP has aimed to ignite, nurture, and sustain interest in contemporary art and sculpture, particularly for those unfamiliar with art participation. Its mission is to provide open access to art, foster dialogue, and reconsider art's relevance in society.

Following a successful three-year action-research programme funded by The Paul Hamlyn Foundation, YSP introduced a permanent Family Programme. This initiative significantly expanded YSP's reach and impact, focusing on helping families discover contemporary sculpture, fostering creativity, and inspiring future generations. The programme aligns with YSP's extraordinary sculpture exhibitions and changing displays.

Central to the Family Programme is the promotion of intergenerational learning, treating families as active participants. Activities are designed to encourage playful engagement, including free gallery resources, family activity baskets, 'talking together' cards, and creative prompts that inspire observation and interaction with sculptures. These activities have significantly increased family dwell time and deepened understanding of contemporary art. Recognising the unique needs of younger audiences, YSP developed events tailored for under-5s, such as Tales From the Gallery, an indoor storytelling series to encourage winter visits, and Sculpture Baby, sensory sessions designed to nurture early creative exploration.

Despite these efforts, YSP encountered challenges in transitioning families from outdoor activities to indoor spaces. Many adults expressed hesitation about bringing energetic under-5s into the traditionally quiet gallery environment, concerned about meeting perceived behavioural expectations. In response, YSP emphasised the importance of internal communication to support family engagement across all teams. Staff were encouraged to actively participate in and observe activities, fostering empathy and a deeper understanding of family needs. Cross-departmental collaboration became key in sharing challenges, developing solutions, and embedding a family-friendly culture throughout YSP.

These efforts have significantly strengthened relationships between YSP staff and family audiences. Events became more inclusive, staff felt a stronger sense of investment, and families grew more confident in exploring contemporary art spaces with their children. Initiatives like the family newsletter and #YSPFamily social media engagement further enriched community connections.

Through its Family Programme, YSP has successfully created meaningful connections between families and contemporary art. By addressing barriers to participation, fostering playful learning, and integrating family engagement into its core operations, YSP continues to make art accessible and inspiring for the next generation of artists and art enthusiasts.



## 14

Dance Action  
Zone Leeds

Creative community interventions can create lasting change, promote health equity, and empower young people to thrive.

Dance Action Zone Leeds (DAZL) is an inclusive community dance organisation based in Leeds, UK, that has made a significant impact on the health and wellbeing of CYP in the region. Each week, the organisation engages between 1,800 and 2,300 young individuals in a range of dance programmes. Located in some of the most deprived areas of Leeds, DAZL uses dance as a tool to combat health inequalities and improve physical and mental health among local CYP. In collaboration with Leeds City Council and Public Health, DAZL is an integral part of the Childhood Obesity Strategy (2006-16), which focuses on reducing health disparities in the city.

DAZL's work is deeply rooted in community development, training local young people and adults as dance leaders. This approach ensures that the dance programmes, which include street dance, contemporary dance, competitive cheer squads, holiday programmes, and large-scale performances, are delivered within the community by those who understand its unique challenges. The community leadership model not only makes the programmes more accessible but also promotes sustainability by empowering local people to lead and shape the activities. Alongside its community-based work, DAZL runs a dynamic within- and after-school programme that reaches a wider audience across Leeds. These dance sessions are also led by trained local dance leaders, providing additional opportunities for young people to engage in physical activity while promoting creativity and artistic expression.

The primary aim of DAZL's initiatives is to improve the physical and mental health of CYP aged 3-19 years, particularly those in disadvantaged communities. Special emphasis is placed on engaging

girls and young people with disabilities up to the age of 25. Through its asset-based community dance approach, DAZL works to improve health outcomes and increase overall wellbeing, not just for the individuals involved but for their families and the wider community across Yorkshire. By offering inclusive dance opportunities, DAZL fosters a sense of belonging and empowerment among its participants.

Research into the programme's impact has shown that community-based dance interventions offer measurable psychosocial benefits. Young people who engage in DAZL's dance activities demonstrate improvements in mental health, resilience, and overall emotional wellbeing. These findings suggest that dance can play a key role in supporting youth mental health and building emotional resilience, which are essential for coping with the challenges young people face, particularly in disadvantaged areas.

The success of DAZL's programmes highlights the need for continued investment in dance as a vehicle for improving mental health and physical wellbeing. For many young people who might otherwise disengage from traditional health and activity programmes, dance offers a compelling alternative that is both accessible and engaging. DAZL's approach exemplifies how creative community interventions can create lasting change, promote health equity, and empower young people to thrive.



Youth work within creative settings enables young people to feel safe, thrive, and have their voices heard. The Roundhouse is one of the most iconic performance venues in the country – and the largest provider of non-formal creative opportunities for young people in the UK. It works directly with 10,000+ young people every year, across its state-of-the-art, affordable Creative Studios (11-25s), its award-winning, dedicated creative centre for freelancers and entrepreneurs Roundhouse Works (18-30s) within communities, and by offering online programmes.

In 2024, 48% of young people who engaged with the Roundhouse were from the global majority. It worked with 4,800 young people – in their schools or communities – who might otherwise face the most barriers with access.

The Roundhouse is a working commercial venue that runs over 200 live gigs and events each year. It has a mixed economy whereby every ticket bought for a gig helps fund its creative youth programmes. How the Roundhouse works with young people

1. Providing access to creativity

- Equitable access to high-quality creative opportunities – theatre, broadcast, animation, music, spoken word and audio – led by industry professionals across 25+ creative spaces available seven days per week.

2. Breaking down barriers

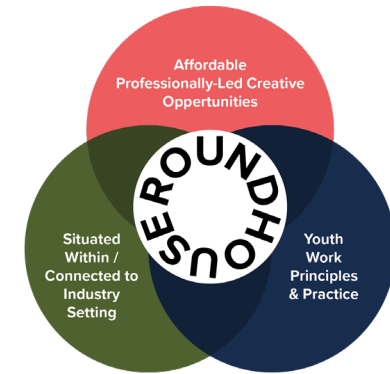
- Projects are low-cost and affordable, as little as £2. Financial support is available to remove other obstacles such as travel and childcare
- Creative Studios provide a truly safe space for young people to come together, share their work and build connections
- Dedicated, onsite, trusted youth work team – supporting individual needs of young people and connecting them to services in their boroughs

3. Providing access to industry

- Pipeline of diverse talent into music, film, broadcast, and audio. Alumni have won Oscars, performed on the Pyramid Stage at Glastonbury, and worked at the BBC, Disney+, and global documentaries
- Roundhouse Works is a first of its kind, affordable co-working space, helping young people develop their businesses and move into employment

- Abundance of paid opportunities across the iconic Roundhouse estate – from the main stage to behind the scenes

Why it works: The Roundhouse's unique model



For example, a young person was recently referred to the Roundhouse by the early intervention team at Camden Council. Using £25 studio credit for a year-long membership provided by the Roundhouse, the young person accessed rehearsal rooms to practise drumming for the first time in years.

Similarly, the Roundhouse's socially-engaged podcast, Transmission Roundhouse, is championing the voices of underrepresented young creatives. The January 2025 release saw the second season of Talia Augustidis' award-winning UnReality series drop – the producer having started her career at the Roundhouse.

Current government and funding policies prioritise sports programmes to engage young people in positive activities. Arts and creativity can be as equally transformative as sport. The Roundhouse demonstrates the significant impact of delivering youth work in one of the most iconic performance venues in the UK.

The Roundhouse's work is underpinned by the principles and practice of youth work to ensure that young people feel seen, understood, and safe. It wants to expand this service and work with partners on ways in which the youth and creative industries can be brought together to secure the future of smaller performance venues and benefit from the talents of young creatives.

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House of Imagination

"The natural world is a powerful generator of childhood curiosity and those early sparks of imagination are often at the heart of our life-long creativity."

- Andrew Grant

House of Imagination (HOI) is a research-driven organisation that plays a pivotal role in transforming the way creativity is integrated into education. Focusing on CYP's creative and critical thinking, HOI provides a unique platform where young minds collaborate with professional artists, enabling them to explore and develop their artistic potential. Through its innovative approach, HOI emphasises the importance of creative practices, not only as a tool for self-expression but as a crucial means of fostering a deeper connection with learning. It aims to create a space for children to shape their own lives through creative activities while also encouraging schools to evolve through professional development and school-based collaborations.

At the heart of HOI's mission is the belief that children need more opportunities to engage with creativity, experiment, and take risks in a supportive environment. Likewise, teachers require further assistance in integrating these creative skills into their classrooms. HOI's approach combines action research with direct engagement, providing evidence for change and creating a cultural ecosystem that supports not only the students, but the educators and creative professionals involved as well. The outcomes of these initiatives extend far beyond the classroom. Through their workshops, events, and partnerships, HOI seeks to enhance the lives of children, teachers, and creative professionals alike, aiming to cultivate creativity, boost self-confidence, and encourage resilience. The ultimate goal is to nurture young people who are capable of innovative, critical thinking and who have the courage to take creative risks.

#### Forest of Imagination

Among its most celebrated initiatives, [Forest of Imagination](#) stands as a powerful example of how creativity can address real-world issues. The project is held annually, and provides a platform for children, artists, and community members to engage with the theme of environmental sustainability. In 2024, at The Holburne Museum and Gardens, the theme 'Ring of Biodiversity' came to life through a series of creative interventions, such as soundscapes, lights, and interactive art installations. These works were designed to inspire action in response to the climate crisis. By involving school children, local communities, and artists, Forest of Imagination helped create a dynamic, collaborative experience that fostered creative expression and social responsibility. The project's impact extends beyond individual participation, offering a communal space for ideas to blossom and contribute to addressing urgent global challenges.

#### Schools Without Walls

Another exemplary project, School Without Walls, embodies a philosophy of creative, student-centered learning. A cohort of children were invited to spend seven weeks of the summer term as residents at the Theatre Royal Bath. During this time, they were immersed in a creative curriculum shaped by their interests and guided by professional artists, teachers, and theatre staff. This residency encouraged students to explore a wide range of subjects in an environment removed from traditional classroom settings.

This project broke away from the confines of conventional education by removing the structure of the classroom and embedding the students within a cultural institution. Allowing for a learning experience that is dynamic and unstructured, which fostered a sense of independence and creativity in the children. The norms of traditional education were challenged by encouraging collaboration, self-expression, and a deeper understanding of the world around them. The project's success lay in its ability to blend creative arts with core educational principles, showing how such integration can enhance a child's overall growth and learning experience.

HOI's work underscores the critical role that creativity and the arts can play in shaping a well-rounded, forward-thinking education. By providing children with the opportunity to engage with professional artists and participate in collaborative creative projects, HOI fosters an environment where imagination, critical thinking, and emotional resilience can flourish. The initiatives, such as Forest of Imagination and School Without Walls, exemplify how the arts can be a vehicle for not only artistic expression but also social change, personal growth, and global awareness.

HOI demonstrates the immense value of fostering creativity in education, showing that it is not just an enrichment activity but a fundamental part of preparing young people for the complexities of the future.

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## Saltaire: People, Heritage and Place

"Working with the students and staff from the university was a wonderful experience for the children in terms of future aspirations".

The [Saltaire: People, Heritage and Place](#) project explored concepts of identity, journeys, and place. Set in the UNESCO World Heritage Site of Saltaire within the Bradford district, the project initially expanded Virtual Bradford – an open-access digital twin model of the city, developed by the University of Bradford and the Bradford Metropolitan District Council, as a core foundation of Bradford's digital strategy. The visual aesthetics of digital content focusing on familiar buildings within Saltaire was then used as inspiration to explore concepts of place, identity, and belonging with local primary learners and teachers.

Led by an art educator, workshops harnessed the children's creativity and digital literacy; following on from walking tours, where learners sketched local heritage, tablets were used by the learners to capture imagery which they later used in workshops to create digital art, alongside more traditional creative methods. The project brought two primary schools together in joint activities, where the concept of 'journeys' helped to focus both on aspects of common ground, such as school location, together with the diverse backgrounds that have brought learners to our region.

The artworks produced by learners, along with immersive content showcasing Saltaire, were exhibited in local schools, and in the iconic [Salts Mill](#), as part of the Saltaire Arts Trail. A multi-platform digital heritage trail was also developed as a legacy resource to help contextualise learning and outreach that is suitable for different age groups. A partner activity was delivered with a local secondary school, working with a group of students from a school for children with Social, Emotional and Mental Health (SEMH) needs, where they visited local heritage to observe, draw, and photograph, and created artworks that explored their identities and their journeys.

As well as enjoying the art activities, getting out and about exploring the local area, the school pupils found working with other schools and the University of great value, sharing their knowledge and stories and a sense of pride in place and celebration of diverse routes and journeys.

Teachers commented that they had gained continued professional development, particularly in digital skills and creativity using different art media and methods, as well as working across schools. Reflecting on the engagement of their pupils, they commented that the project had helped deliver a knowledge and understanding of digital art, with such opportunities not often provided within school. The project has led to tangible changes, including the confidence and inspiration to add digital art into the curriculum. One of the headteachers commented on ties to human and physical geography, as well as local history and the learning of art skills, and especially how the project had linked up with the education sector's guidance on equality, where access to the project and resources were available to all pupils, regardless of economic barriers.

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## Dying to Talk

"Embarking on the work with Dying to Talk was a risk in its own right due to the severity of SEMH needs present in the school, much of which is linked to trauma and loss, but **I agreed to the work because I believed it would offer therapeutic outcomes.** This it did, allowing deeply troubled children to explore not only death in its literal sense, but the impact death has upon individuals and families in a way that was both fun and engaging".

- Headteacher

Creative approaches can also be immensely valuable when encountering more sensitive topics. In the [Dying to Talk](#) project, resources were co-created with and for young people, around the topics of death, dying, bereavement, and loss. While not an easy topic, the long-term consequences and impacts on later life resulting from lack of bereavement support are well-documented, with evidence that impacts of grief often persist into adulthood, including depression, risk-taking behaviour, unemployment, poor educational attainment and criminal activity. Furthermore, experiences of grief are not equal, with mortality rates intersecting with socioeconomic factors and health inequalities. The simple act of talking about death can greatly improve the consequences of childhood bereavement.

The Dying to Talk project aimed to provide a non-medicalised approach and resources to help build resilience in young people around the topics of death, dying, bereavement and loss, enabling greater confidence in dealing with the topic. The parent project, Continuing Bonds: Exploring the meaning and legacy of death through past and contemporary practice, demonstrated that use of the past can be valuable in opening dialog around death and bereavement, presenting fascinating, yet distanced and removed examples of dealing with death, which prompt discussion. This became a gateway for conversations that naturally and seemingly inevitably lead to discussion about personal experiences, expectations, fears, and hopes around the topic.

The Dying to Talk project took these findings to school learners, recruiting project ambassadors (aged 16-19) from local schools, who co-created resources which enabled creative ways in to discussing death and bereavement, while also challenging biases and stereotypes around the project. Resources were delivered in Festivals of the Dead with secondary learners (aged 11-19). The project was transformative for those involved, building confidence, friendships, and resilience. In one partnership, Festivals of the Dead were run with all year groups in a trauma-informed SEMH school.

Inspired by the success of these projects, the Lost and Found: Bereavement, Archaeology and Creativity project has recently received funding, taking this learning into primary schools, with a focus on celebrating life, creative methods, and enabling vital conversations earlier, and producing a toolkit and model of working for schools to enhance teacher confidence in dealing with the topic. The project will intersect with City of Culture activities in its delivery, demonstrating the transformative power of creativity for CYP.





# Bradford 2025 UK City of Culture

The innovative approaches presented in the previous section feature fantastic organisations and programmes of work that are having a huge impact on many lives across the North of England, and the UK more widely. It is worthwhile exploring these issues through the prism of Bradford and West Yorkshire in light of Bradford becoming the UK City of Culture for 2025. We focus on Bradford and West Yorkshire as an exemplar of what good could and should look like – whilst celebrating all of the wonderful work happening across all the other areas.

Bradford 2025 UK City of Culture is an honoured title that aims to celebrate the people of Bradford, including local artists, creative organisations, and the diverse communities that make up Bradford. Bradford 2025 will unfold across 141 square miles of West Yorkshire, showcasing performances, exhibitions, and events inspired by the district's diverse landscape – from the city's historic centre to its stunning countryside. It is the largest City of Culture in terms of both geography and in population. The programme honours Bradford's rich heritage, from its industrial past to its status as the world's first UNESCO City of Film, while celebrating the vibrant communities and artists who call it home.

At its core, Bradford 2025 is a celebration of the people of Bradford, created for, with, and by them. With more than a quarter of its population under 20, Bradford is one of the UK's youngest cities, and

young people are central to the programme. Their voices, ambitions, and creativity will shape everything from new artistic commissions to education, skills, and training initiatives.

The year-long programme will highlight Bradford's dynamic and varied contemporary arts and culture scene, spanning theatre, dance, film, music, and even food. It will also reinforce Bradford's reputation as a welcoming hub for artists, producers, and creative entrepreneurs, with international collaborations, talent development programmes, and increased cultural investment benefitting the entire district. Another key element of the programme is to reinforce the link between nature and culture – possible due to Bradford's uniquely rich landscape. Research and evaluation activities, such as those exploring the impacts on wellbeing, civic pride, and social and economic value, are being supported via major partnerships across the district and beyond.

The impact of Bradford 2025 will extend far beyond the year itself. The UK City of Culture designation has already attracted significant investment, positioning Bradford for long-term regeneration and growth that will benefit future generations. However, it will also act as a catalyst for development, regeneration, and change – reshaping Bradford for the benefit of generations to come.

"These experiences are so important for young people as they get to see that it is possible to be a professional sound artist outside of the "fame game" and they can be heard on their own terms which enhances feelings of belonging, agency and fulfilment. Once the students had learned the techniques, **it was wonderful to support them to express their humanity via the technology.**"

- Artist

## Bradford Digital Creatives

Bradford Digital Creatives is a pilot project empowering young people to share stories about themselves, their pasts, and their futures through a range of digital artforms, working with professional artists from Bradford and beyond. It is a collaborative project delivered by Born in Bradford and the National Science and Media Museum as part of the Bradford 2025 UK City of Culture programme. It is funded and supported by Bradford 2025, Born in Bradford, Bradford Council, and Arts Council England.

During the two-year pilot, students from six secondary schools in Bradford, where a high proportion of pupils typically do not engage with arts and culture, will work with professional digital artists to co-create artwork, culminating in a public showcase as part of Bradford 2025 UK City of Culture.

The project aims to expand cultural participation and aspirations and contribute to the development of a hub of digital talent within the city which will prepare young Bradfordians for the future jobs market. Feedback and data from the project will also inform internationally significant research into the impact of creativity on young people's lives as part of the world's largest study of adolescent health and wellbeing by Born in Bradford. It is the first time information regarding creativity has been collected on such a large scale, and its analysis will explore the impact of the project, including young people's aspirations, skills, mental health, and later life outcomes.

To date, 1268 Year 8 and 9 students at five schools have enjoyed hands-on experiences in data visualisation, audio storytelling, games design, animation, image manipulation, and artificial intelligence with renowned artists [Impact Gamers](#), [Caro C](#), [Arfaan Amini](#), [Playfool](#), and [Make Amplify](#).

The project also aims to improve connectivity and collaboration across sectors by providing opportunities to develop teachers' digital skills and confidence in the classroom, complementing the arts and culture curriculum in schools, and developing sustainable and mutually beneficial relationships between cultural and educational communities in Bradford.

**“The digital artworks created through these collaborations will bring young voices to the forefront, allowing them to showcase their own stories in new ways, gain new skills and access new cultural and creative experiences, which is what Bradford 2025 is all about. The growing connections between schools, artists and cultural organisations, facilitated by projects like this, will inspire our young people to see the creative industries as an exciting and viable career path.”**

- Creative Director, Bradford

**“We wanted to give our students a chance to experience new technology and engage in practical based sessions to enhance their understanding. The professionals who have come into school have been superb and offered a perfect scaffold to allow our students to access these new experiences. Students have been enthused by the sessions and have been truly proud of the work they have produced. We're looking forward to more sessions in 2025!”**

- Teacher

## Bradford Poetry Slam

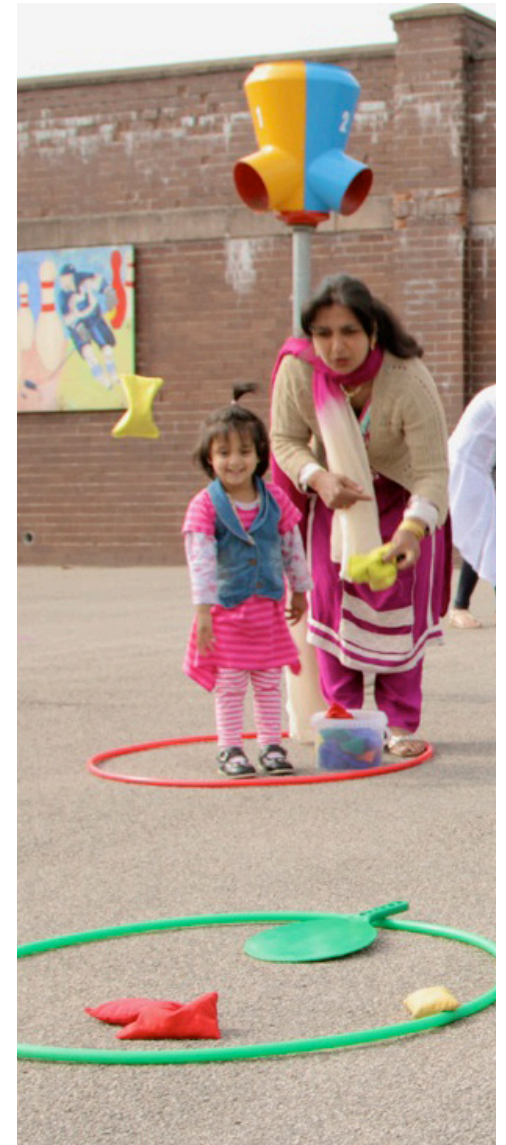
The Bradford Poetry Slam has recruited 25 Bradford District schools to participate in an inter-school poetry slam competition delivered by Bradford-based company, Authors Abroad. Each participating school will receive a full-day workshop in their setting for up to 90 learners in Years 5 and 6 or Years 7 and 8, led by two professional poets. They will get students talking about poetry, perform for them, and give writing tips and techniques.

Students then work in small groups to create their very own performance poems around the broad theme of play and playfulness, which they perform at the end of the day. The poets and teachers pick a winning team to represent the school in one of two grand finals (one for Primary and one for Secondary) at Bradford 2025's new touring venue, The Beacon. Each participating school will also receive a selection of 25 free poetry books for their school library. Workshops have taken place in six Bradford schools to date with the remaining workshops scheduled between January and April 2025. The grand finals will take place on 11th and 12th June 2025, where Bradford's first ever Slam Poetry Champions will be crowned.

This programme hopes to build confidence in core literacy and oracy skills in learners, particularly in schools across the district with lower progress scores in these areas. By engaging with poetry in an 'off-the-page' way, this approach enables learners who find traditional classroom learning or accessing written material more challenging, to develop these core skills and find a more accessible route into poetry and creative writing. By introducing a non-traditional artform as a tool for amplifying young people's voices, it empowers them to speak about their identity, experiences, and perspective.

**"The children really did love it, and I have one of their poems framed on my desk".**

- Headteacher



## Bradford Made

[Bradford Made](#) is a flagship online education programme developed as part of Bradford 2025 UK City of Culture. This programme embeds Bradford's rich heritage, diverse communities, and cultural narratives into the heart of learning experiences for CYP. It fosters creative, place-based learning opportunities for learners through storytelling, activity packs, and educational resources, co-created with local communities, educators, and cultural and heritage organisations.

Bradford Made is deeply rooted in Bradford's unique identity as one of the most diverse and youngest cities in the UK. Emerged from the [Monuments and Heritage Review](#), which called for greater representation and inclusivity in how the city's history is shared, the programme responds by celebrating unheard stories from across the district. Working collaboratively with local cultural institutions, artists, and educators, Bradford Made amplifies these narratives to inspire pride, curiosity, and critical thinking in learners, ensuring that the city's heritage reflects and resonates with all its communities.

Bradford Made is delivering a multifaceted programme with four interconnected strands:

- **Local Stories for Learners:** This strand is funded by the National Lottery Heritage Fund. It collates and gives a platform to less heard stories and voices and connects them to learners and educators. These narratives form the basis of 15 bespoke online activity packs tailored to different age groups and learning needs, including SEN(D), home-educated learners, and alternative provisions.
- **City of Culture Programme:** This work is co-created with partners, such as Historic England and Get Out More and it takes inspiration from some of flagship cultural projects within the City of Culture programme. Example activities include map-making or creative writing inspired by key historical moments or heritage places and stories of Bradford.

- **Partner Contributions:** A centralised hub integrating resources from local heritage and cultural organisations or groups to create a comprehensive toolkit for educators across the district.
- **Lifelong Learning:** Through short-form content, interviews with local, national and international creative people, this strand showcases creative career pathways and fosters real-world connections to the arts and cultural industries.

Bradford Made wants to help ensure a platform of education and cultural inequality, celebrated through the rich cultural experiences within the district. It inspires CYP to connect with their heritage, while fostering a sense of belonging and pride. It also equips educators with tools to embed local place-based learning into their teaching practice.

Even though it is still in its development stages, great steps have been made to date. For example, robust scoping activities have been conducted to identify the current offer and needs of the project. Additionally, [Bradford Glow](#), set of online activity packs exploring colour, place, and identity – was launched, with over 16,000 learners across the district so far. Learning from Bradford Glow is being used to inform the development of the wider programme of Bradford Made.

Bradford Made showcases how creativity and education can transform lives. By celebrating local stories and heritage into the curriculum, this programme will create a generation of learners who are proud of their roots and inspired to shape the future of their city. Part of the City of Culture legacy, Bradford Made will leave an indelible mark, assuring creativity and cultural learning remain cornerstones in the education provided in Bradford.

"Woodland Tribe's play-build philosophy is all about **letting children take control of their own play space**. It is hard to describe the sight and sound of 50+ children, equipped with hammers and saws clambering over and furiously adding to a huge structure that they themselves have built. The resulting aesthetic is rickety, shonky and full of dynamism, and clearly built by children to please no-one else but themselves".

## Bradford 2025's 'Play Programme'

'Play' is a year-round, district-wide, multi-partner programme of open-ended playful interventions that celebrates and champions the importance of play today whilst rooted in Bradford's heritage. The City of Bradford has an extraordinary history of play. Bradford developed one of the first play strategies in the UK and has an extraordinary track record in play development. In addition, the Margaret Macmillan Adventure Playground Association (MAPA) was founded in the West Bowling area of Bradford. It has since become a registered charity and for many years, the site was a thriving centre for cultural arts, especially for the large community of local Caribbean families. Similarly, Eccleshill's Big Swing Adventure Playground has been an integral part of the community for nearly twenty years.

From this, Play Bradford and their Play Partnerships have been established with the aim of embedding play into children's lives. Play Bradford and Bradford Community Play Partnership are a key partner in delivering 'Play' in 2025. The Play Programme includes:

- **The Great Adventure Build:** is a unique construction project of temporary play spaces which are co-created with children with the help of Woodland Tribe. Specific sessions for school groups and children with SEN(D) will also be provided.



- **Playable Artists Commission** involves working with an artist, architect, or designer to build a playable sculptural commission with and for MAPA. This will be built using archival materials and drawing on the heritage of the Margaret Macmillan Adventure Playground and its importance with the local West Indian communities.
- **Replay** by the Herd is a recycled playground originally commissioned by the Southbank Centre. Part installation, part adventure playground, it's a space built entirely out of waste materials repurposed for fun. Children and their grown-ups are invited to play side-by-side in a space full of things you can move, change, combine, wear, and reimagine. Replay is a 60-minute uninterrupted celebration of free play.
- **A SEND schools project (as yet untitled)** has been developed with the SEND Headteachers Network. This is an in-depth project that connects learners in a SEN(D) setting with learners in a mainstream school across two school terms (Summer Term 2024-25 and Autumn Term 2025-26). Working with one pair of primary and one pair of secondary schools, this collaborative programme focuses on fostering meaningful connections through play and shared learning experiences. Each paired group will work with an artist-in-residence to explore creative play on a programme co-created with participants to develop shared experiences and finding commonalities.
- **Grue:** Working with Arcade, we are developing a magical cardboard installation built with communities installed in Damart Mills in Bingley. Children and families move through the installation exploring the magical world in small groups.
- **Intergenerational Linking PLAY:** In partnership with [The Linking Network](#), KS1 students are paired with older people in care homes (from 20 primary schools and care settings) to explore, plan, and facilitate play sessions.

Primary school pupils and older people from care homes within walking distance of each other will be connected as paired 'links'. They will creatively explore what play is, firstly as two separate groups, and then together through a series of six facilitated workshops, culminating in a celebratory shared experience of play. These workshops will be a special part of an ongoing relationship between the older and younger people, and the theme of play will bring joy and creativity into these links.

Play is one of the UN Rights of the Child and the Play Programme intends to strengthen the work of key partners, Play Bradford and BCPP, to highlight the importance of Play, and support Play Sufficiency and embed play into our daily lives. The programme will celebrate the universality of play as a tool to teach children about risk, learn about themselves, and learn about the world around them, and thus they can utilise these skills to build relationships, commonalities, and reconnect.

"Absolutely loved the eccentricity of all this – Brilliant shapes, colours, lighting and story. Congratulations".



# Exemplars of a cultural milieu transformation

How can we build an education system that works for all CYP? The evidence laid out through this report (and report series) shows clearly that a cultural paradigm shift is required, and these transformations need to be grounded in 'place' and driven by local communities. In Bradford, the City of Culture 2025 means there has never been a better time to transform how local education and health systems collaborate to improve the life chances of CYP. In the cultural context of Bradford2025, it is useful to explore how the **Education Alliance for Life Chances (EALC)** is creating a culture change in how schools and public sector organisations interact to better support children and families. Importantly, the work of EALC is connected (supporting and being supported) with similar initiatives across West Yorkshire, Humber and North Yorkshire, and the North of England (via the Child of The North community).

### The opportunity for partnership

EALC represents a groundbreaking opportunity for Bradford to reimagine the way that education and health can work together. Born out of the DfE funded 'Opportunity Area' Programme, EALC uses a collective impact approach to unite key stakeholders from across schools and public sector organisations. The partnership is committed to driving system change. The EALC partnership with Born in Bradford's Centre for Applied Education Research (CAER), allows policy and practice across Bradford to be informed by cutting-edge academic research and real-world data. CAER enables the public service organisations within EALC to draw on the expertise contained within the UK's university system.

EALC is now established as a charity under the leadership of Anne-Marie Canning MBE and continues to grow in influence. The EALC Partnership Board transitions to a co-chair model in March 2025, led by Duncan Jacques (CEO of Exceed Academies Trust) and Mathew Mathai (Consultant Paediatrician at Bradford Teaching Hospitals Foundation Trust). This leadership embodies the collaboration between education and health championed by EALC.

Informed by research conducted by Born in Bradford's CAER, EALC will work with partners across the North of England to make the argument for the power of connected data and place-based solutions in public services across health and education.

### The challenge: Fragmented systems and poor outcomes

Current systems for supporting young people are fragmented in Bradford (as throughout the UK), leading to poor health and educational outcomes. Low-income families often navigate a maze of disconnected services and find it difficult to access the right support. These challenges have intensified in recent years due to increased demand, reduced funding, and the lasting effects

of the COVID-19 pandemic (particularly in mental health and school attendance).

Such health-related barriers to learning significantly impact attainment, with consequences that can last a lifetime. The Bradford district is home to over 90,000 CYP. These CYP are served jointly by 200+ primary and secondary schools and a network of public sector bodies, including Bradford Metropolitan Borough Council, Bradford Children and Families Trust, and the Bradford District Care Trust. However, limited coordination and communication among these institutions has hindered effective collaboration on the cross-cutting issues that affect CYP. This means that schools and public sector organisations often struggle to align their efforts, and critical support arrives too late or not at all.

### A case study in transforming service delivery

The EALC Partnership Board has united system leaders to promote whole system working in Bradford. This has led to initiatives such as:

- **Act Locally:** Addressing community identified priorities through whole-system collaboration with educational settings at place level.
- **School health hubs:** Establishing integrated health and education support systems within schools. The School Health Hubs will ensure children receive timely and appropriate care by expanding the principles of 'Glasses in Classes' to provide holistic health services in educational settings.
- **Early identification of autism and ADHD:** Moving assessments into school settings to improve early support and shifting from diagnostic led to needs led support by creating a more flexible, responsive approach to children's health and learning needs.
- **Dental services in schools:** Bringing dental care directly to educational settings to improve access and prevent long-term health issues.



These initiatives demonstrate that service delivery can be transformed, particularly in our most deprived areas through partnership, coordination, and research-driven solutions.

**Glasses in Classes** as a trigger for collaboration  
One of the triggers for collaborative action in Bradford was the 'Glasses in Classes' project. This provided robust evidence of the direct link between poor eyesight and poor educational attainment. It showed that even reading, an activity thought of as purely educational, was significantly influenced by health factors.

However, ophthalmological deficits are just one of many health issues affecting children's education. Neurodevelopmental conditions (e.g., autism and ADHD), dental decay, mental ill-health, and chronic conditions continue to hinder educational progress, particularly in disadvantaged areas. The new government is committed to the principle of public service connection as shown by health and education integration being a key focus of their Opportunity Mission. We must test and learn such approaches through the North of England if we wish to drive cultural change at pace.

### Partnership across place exemplified within West Yorkshire

The success of initiatives like EALC will require wider partnership working and national support. For example, health and social care commissioning occurs at a West Yorkshire level through the 'Integrated Care Board'. Thus, it is important that the work in Bradford is connected with similar initiatives in other parts of West Yorkshire – such as Leeds.

Carr Manor Community School in Leeds is a shining example of the principles pursued by EALC being put into practice in Leeds. Carr Manor have built a net zero building that acts as a community hub and embeds sustainability into learning. This new hub serves as a dynamic, multi-purpose space for the community, benefiting not just the pupils at Carr Manor but also the families and residents in the local area. The vision is for the space to be used for a wide range of activities – from educational programmes and community events to social gatherings and support services for those in need. The staff at Carr Manor have a clear vision for the hub to foster connection, learning, play, and growth.

**Public service delivery can be transformed... through partnership, coordination, and research-driven solutions.**

The hub is situated on the school site but is away from the main school building so that it can support families who have had poor experiences in school and can engage with children who are struggling in the context of the main school building. The space contains a café, animals, and an allotment so it can provide ways of teaching children core skills that add to, and complement, the curriculum.

Carr Manor is deeply committed to ensuring that every child and young person in their care feels a profound sense of belonging and inclusion. This sense of belonging is not merely an abstract ideal; it is a vital element in creating the kind of inclusive, thriving school community that nurtures each child's potential, inspires academic success, and promotes mental and emotional wellbeing.

The school's community hub has inspired the students by involving them in its design and construction and equipping them with 'green skills', preparing them for future careers. The hub offers on-site healthcare services for children and families, ensuring access to vital preventative health support. The hub provides a safe, inclusive space, keeping children off the streets with activities, mentoring, and support. It can be seen how this initiative supports not only the government's Opportunity Mission (breaking the link between a child's background and outcome) but equips students with the skills they will need to kickstart economic growth, help the NHS shift from treatment to prevention, create safer streets, and help make Britain a clean energy superpower. In short, Carr Manor provides a vision for how the Government can deliver its five missions at pace and place the UK's future on a solid foundation. Carr Manor's hub exemplifies how schools can drive local and national transformation by integrating sustainability, education, and community support.

Carr Manor recognise that addressing the emotional and psychological barriers to attendance, such as anxiety, mental health challenges, and feelings of exclusion, requires a whole-system approach. The school must be part of the solution, but it requires help from other public services. Carr Manor need their colleagues in health, social care and policing

to help ensure that children and their families receive the comprehensive support they need. This is particularly important for children with SEN(D), who often face additional hurdles in accessing the education system.

The staff at Carr Manor have long understood the critical role that schools play in shaping not only the academic dimensions but the moral and emotional foundations of children's lives. Carr Manor understands that a holistic approach to education is key to ensuring that children feel they belong, and this is central to their academic success and personal development. The ethos of the school is built on the evidence showing inclusive school environments – where every pupil feels respected and understood – see higher attendance rates and reduced instances of disengagement. Conversely, when children feel alienated, excluded, or misunderstood, absenteeism rises, and the risk of long-term disengagement increases.

Belonging, however, is not simply about being physically present. It is about being emotionally and socially connected. Schools, as places of learning and growth, must focus on creating communities of care – where every child feels they matter. Carr Manor is an example of how a school can act as an anchor institution building strong relationships between staff and pupils, offering emotional support, and creating opportunities for every child to participate fully in the life of the school.

**The challenges that public services are facing require a united approach.**

**"Many schools face challenges beyond the classroom, particularly health-related barriers to learning. These deep and complex issues cannot be solved by schools or any one sector alone. What's needed is a whole-systems approach - one that is tailored to the unique needs of each community. Act Locally brings schools and local practitioners together in a collaborative partnership, focusing on a single issue, in a specific place, at one time."**

- Kathryn Loftus, Director of the Education Alliance for Life Chances

#### A national model for change

There is an urgent need for health and education integration. The challenges that public services are facing require a united approach. We need to look to scale the proven initiatives existing within the UK (such as EALC and Carr Manor) and test-and-learn whole-system working to provide a national precedent.

CAER has demonstrated the power of connecting universities with public service colleagues via partnerships such as EALC. The work of CAER has led to the creation of the Child Health Outcome Research At Leeds (CHORAL) centre. CHORAL is connecting and coordinating child health and wellbeing research across the University of Leeds and the Leeds Teaching Hospital Foundation Trust. In response, Baroness Anne Longfield has worked with the Director of Children's Services within Leeds (Julie Longworth) to create the 'Leeds Evidence Innovation Partnership' (LEIP) modelled among the lines of EALC.

The work of Carr Manor and LEIP builds on a strong base of experience and leadership in partnership working across Leeds. These partnerships include school to school working (the Area Inclusion Partnership) and the Leeds Learning Alliance. We now need to rocket boost these partnerships and create a new culture across health and education.

The time for change is now. EALC (with CAER), LEIP (with CHORAL), Act Locally, and Carr Manor are providing a blueprint for a new way of working. The resulting culture is one where collaboration, evidence, and community needs are placed at the heart of public services. We must seize this opportunity to create a legacy of improved health and education outcomes for generations to come – the City of Culture in 2025 must act as a catalyst for change across Yorkshire, the North of England, and the UK.





# Cultural shifts required to build a country for children and young people

This Child of The North ‘education’ report series sought to describe an academic consensus on how the UK could build a society that works for all children by fostering a culture of inclusion, equity, and belonging. The challenges faced by CYP today are inextricably linked, and it is crucial that we come together across all sectors – healthcare, education, government, and beyond – to promote a fair and just society where no child is left behind. We can help ensure that every child and young person, regardless of their geography, socioeconomic status, or ethnicity, has the same opportunities to succeed by prioritising diversity, accessibility, and social inclusion. All CYP deserve equal treatment and the chance to flourish in an environment that celebrates their unique identities and potential. Only through collective action and a true commitment to equality can we build a society that includes everyone and empowers all to thrive. The 12 reports have laid out the evidence on how we create an inclusive education system. We now summarise the cultural shifts needed to address these twelve existential challenges to the UK’s future.

1

### Addressing the autism assessment and support crisis

- The UK's autism assessment crisis has highlighted the significant challenges faced by autistic CYP and their families. To address this crisis, a cultural shift is needed to better promote an inclusive society, where autistic CYP are understood, respected and supported. A change is needed within the language we use when talking about autism. The current language adopted in national and international legislation is unhelpful, and often harmful, to autistic CYP. Instead of focusing on deficit-focused language, narratives should recognise the strengths, talents and the diverse experiences of autistic CYP.

Furthermore, cultural shifts must focus on building autism-friendly environments through co-production with autistic CYP. Drawing upon the lived experiences of autistic CYP to better promote accessibility and accommodations can drastically enhance educational access for autistic CYP, benefiting both their prospects and well-being. Additionally, many autistic CYP are currently facing extensive waitlists for diagnosis or may not be diagnosed due to significant ethnic or gender inequalities. Thus, a formal diagnosis acts as a huge barrier for autistic CYP, as many 'fall through the gaps' and cannot access support. Addressing this is a key cultural change, as fostering autism-friendly environments should not be restricted to just those with formal diagnoses.

To accomplish these cultural shifts, awareness and training to facilitate greater understanding of autism and how to individualise support is essential. Training can promote inclusion in any context, and can help educators, healthcare professionals and wider society in supporting autistic CYP. It is vital that training is truly reflective of autistic individuals' lived experience, as this will further help the breakdown of stereotypes and stigma surrounding autism.

2

### Addressing poverty with and through education settings

- Poverty in the UK remains a persistent and deepening crisis, disproportionately affecting CYP. The Child of The North report on addressing child poverty highlighted the need for cultural shifts to combat poverty effectively, moving beyond abstract concepts to address its tangible,

human impact. One critical change is the language used when discussing child poverty. Stigmatising terminology perpetuates harmful narratives about families in need, framing poverty as a personal failure rather than a systemic issue. A focus on dignity and respect in public discourse is essential to challenge these narratives and foster empathy. Central to this shift is prioritising lived experience over narrow, ill-fitted measures. Observation-based judgments, rooted in direct engagement with affected communities can provide a richer understanding of the barriers CYP face. Listening to those most impacted ensures solutions are relevant, compassionate, and effective.

Furthermore, poverty eradication must become a shared priority across government, organisations, and localities. Cross-sector agreements are vital to embed this commitment within all societal structures. These cultural shifts require society to view child poverty as an urgent and collective challenge. We can create a more just and equitable environment for CYP by changing how we discuss, measure, and approach the issue – ensuring that the urge to tackle poverty is translated into impact.

3

### Improving mental health and wellbeing with and through educational settings

- A key cultural shift is required to embed mental health awareness in education and community contexts. Schools, families, and youth organisations should be equipped to identify early signs of distress and provide supportive environments where CYP feel safe to share their concerns. Support which focuses on preventing the development of ill mental-health or promotes early intervention shows promise, and cultural shifts in the role of schools may facilitate this way of working. The alarming increases year on year of CYP being referred to Children and Young People's Mental Health Services highlights the dire need for change. However, cultural shifts may help inform the 'solution to this crisis'. Given the poor financial situation of the UK, and the lack of benefits a 'cash injection' into mental health services may bring, the redivision of resources must take place to protect our next generation of CYP. Finally, a focus on lived experience is vital. Listening to CYP and their families ensures that support systems reflect their realities and needs. Co-producing solutions empowers CYP and ensures that resources invested into support are utilised in the most effective way.

4

### Building the foundations of a new Sure Start

- The 'Sure Start' report highlighted the transformative potential of schools to act as central support systems for CYP, and families. To fully realise this vision, cultural shifts are essential to embed inclusivity, collaboration, and community-focused values into practice.

First, there must be a shift in understanding the role of schools. Schools should not be seen solely as places for academic learning but as holistic environments addressing the social, emotional, and practical needs of CYP and their families. This requires challenging traditional perceptions and fostering a shared societal view of schools as community anchors. Furthermore, the language used to describe community hubs is equally important. Adopting inclusive and empowering language ensures that these hubs are perceived as accessible, non-stigmatising spaces that welcome all members of the community.

Collaboration across sectors also demands cultural change. Schools, local authorities, and community organisations must break down silos and embrace a shared responsibility for supporting CYP. Building trust and mutual respect between stakeholders is key to creating effective partnerships. Lastly, schools as hubs must centre around the lived experiences of CYP and families. Engaging communities in the co-design of services ensures solutions reflect their unique needs and priorities. This participatory approach fosters ownership and strengthens community ties. These cultural shifts – rethinking school roles, adopting inclusive language, enhancing collaboration, and amplifying lived experiences – are crucial to transforming schools into vibrant, supportive hubs that improve outcomes for all CYP.

5

### Supporting physical activity and healthy nutrition

- Physical activity and nutrition often go hand in hand, thus explaining how inactive and sedentary lifestyles, combined with inadequate diets, are leading to poor physical and mental health, as well as increasing obesity rates for CYP across the UK. A holistic and collaborative approach, encompassing health, education and wider community groups is essential to tackle these issues due to their multifaceted nature. The current culture in the UK does not facilitate a healthy lifestyle, encompassing both physical activity and balanced nutrition. Urgent change is needed to ensure CYP have the best start in life which will enable a prosperous and healthy adulthood.

Schools, now more than ever, are having to play a pivotal role in the health of their pupils, but the education system, curricula and assessment currently do not reflect the diversity of needs presented in education settings. High levels of unrecognised SEN(D), including health barriers, such as motor skills, are leading to a lack of opportunity and unmet need for many children within schools. Physical activity and healthy nutrition need to be embedded within all aspects of school life to improve health, wellbeing, and ultimately, educational outcomes for CYP. A lack of safe public and private spaces and the changing nature of play that prioritises screen time and the online world, have led to low levels of physical activity and poorer nutrition in CYP. The reduction of crime rates and investment in infrastructure (especially in economically deprived areas) would provide CYP with the safe spaces they need to play, and access to affordable healthy nutrition. In turn, improving the health of the next generation will support greater engagement within the education system, as well as within the community, all of which will improve prospects for CYP after they leave school.

6

### **Addressing the special educational needs and disabilities (SEND) assessment and support crisis**

- The SEN(D) assessment and support crisis is a direct result of a broken and underfunded system. Many CYP with SEN(D) do not receive the support they require due to a multitude of factors, including (but not limited to) poor understanding of SEN(D) issues, delayed identification of CYP with SEN(D), and a postcode lottery in the provision of support. Consequently, these pupils are more likely to struggle academically, be excluded from school, and face barriers to future education, training, and employment.

A cultural shift placing CYP at the heart of decision-making is necessary for a flourishing next generation. Strong partnerships between policymakers, educational and health professionals, social care, families, and CYP with SEN(D) are urgently needed. Information sharing between different services is vital to ensure this cultural shift occurs. Furthermore, early identification through assessment of both academic and non-academic abilities must be a priority. Accessible

7

### **Upskilling our children and young people for digital futures**

- The shift to online learning during COVID-19 and the emergence of Artificial Intelligence technologies have demonstrated the pressing need to upskill our CYP in different ways. However, there are increasing digital divides and inequalities faced by CYP with limited access and opportunities for many children within disadvantaged areas. There is a large 'digital divide', mainly experienced by the least financially fortunate, that is often ignored and unrecognised despite it having huge ramifications for a future economically viable workforce. We cannot assume that everyone, specifically all CYP, has access to digital resources and we must recognise that many CYP are being limited and held back by this 'digital divide'.

To bridge this divide, relationships between industry, educational institutions and cultural organisations are needed so resources can be developed for CYP with limited access to the digital world. A constant state of communication is necessary to close the digital divide and ensure all CYP are supported and provided with equal opportunities regardless of class. Finally, there needs to be a reimagining of professional development to equip teachers with the skills that they need to teach new generations of learners. Colleagues at Good Things Foundation and the University of Liverpool established an evidence-based Minimum Digital Living Standard Framework in 2024. Here, we reiterate Recommendation 1 of the 'Upskilling our children and young people for digital futures' report – the Minimum Digital Living Standards Framework must be adopted nationally, so that CYP have the digital access that they need in schools, at home, and beyond.

8

**Improving children's oral health** - The prevalence of dental decay in CYP is alarming with wide inequalities evident. The day-to-day impact of this disease on the lives of CYP is negatively affecting their development,

resources and training courses, designed with insights from CYP with SEN(D), their families, and professionals, are also needed to ensure the best possible outcomes for CYP with SEN(D). To achieve this shift, the system must build on the strengths of CYP's with SEN(D), receive government support, and additional funding. In such a system, CYP with SEN(D) will be able to thrive.

9

### **Supporting children in the preschool years**

- Enhancing the development and well-being of preschool-aged children demands a cultural shift that places early childhood at the centre of societal priorities. Central to this shift is the redefinition of early childhood education and this being seen as equally important as primary and secondary education. Public attitudes must evolve to view early learning as a universal entitlement, supported by robust evidence of its positive impact on cognitive, emotional, and social development. Greater public awareness is needed to highlight the long-term societal benefits of investing in high-quality early education, particularly for children from disadvantaged backgrounds.

Equity must underpin this cultural evolution. Breaking down systemic barriers that impede access to quality programmes for marginalised families is imperative. Society can ensure that every child, regardless of their socioeconomic circumstances, has the opportunity to thrive by fostering inclusivity. The role of parenting must also be reframed as a shared societal responsibility whereby communities, workplaces, and public institutions should provide comprehensive support systems that promote positive parenting practices and reduce stigma around seeking assistance. Finally, greater collaboration

quality of life, interactions with peers, and wider aspects of education such as school readiness and attendance. Tackling the root cause of this crisis is essential with an urgent need to address the social determinants of dental disease. Children living in disadvantage not only experience the most severe extent of the disease, but a lack of material resources within families exacerbate its impact. Diets high in sugar, dental fear, lack of affordable toothbrushing products and long waiting times for treatment are just some of the factors that face families living in poverty on a daily basis. While evidence-based oral health programmes delivered via health visiting teams, nurseries, schools and dental services are being co-designed, their implementation needs to be accelerated through further investment. Within the government's commitment to ensure this is the healthiest generation of children ever, the role of oral health is being recognised but this needs to be reflected in improved partnership working and linked datasets across early years, education, health, and social care to redress the persistent inequalities and ensure a thriving next generation of CYP.

across public services, including education, health, and social care, is essential. Society must transition from fragmented efforts to a coordinated and integrated approach that holistically addresses the needs of young children and their families.

10

**Improving school attendance** - Improving school attendance requires a cultural shift that prioritises proactive, inclusive, and collaborative approaches. Early intervention is critical for identifying and supporting students at risk of persistent absenteeism, particularly those from disadvantaged backgrounds or living in areas of high deprivation. Schools must adopt systematic early screening methods to identify at-risk students and implement targeted support plans that involve regular monitoring and collaboration with social services, health providers and the voluntary sector. Mentoring programmes can play a vital role in building positive relationships and offering both academic and emotional support to re-engage students. Parents must also be collaboratively involved through realistic, individualised support plans that address academic and personal challenges, fostering a home-school partnership essential for sustained attendance.

A sense of belonging and inclusivity is another key factor. Schools need to create supportive environments where students feel valued and connected to their community. This can be achieved through peer support systems, extracurricular activities, and a strong emphasis on mental health. Inclusive frameworks should reward schools that prioritise relational approaches and culturally sensitive communication with families, ensuring that all students, regardless of background, feel integrated. Extracurricular programmes are particularly crucial for disadvantaged students, offering them opportunities to build self-worth and social connections while enhancing their engagement with the school community.

Finally, improving attendance requires robust cross-service collaboration. Schools must act as hubs for multi-agency support, bringing together education, healthcare, social services, and the voluntary sector to address the complex issues underlying absenteeism. Local authorities should lead these efforts by facilitating strategic partnerships and

11

**Addressing childhood vulnerability, crime and justice** - Addressing childhood vulnerability, crime, and justice requires a cultural shift that places children at the centre of service provision. A holistic, whole-system approach is essential, where public services collaborate to eradicate the root causes of offending behaviours. This approach recognises the overlap between victimisation and offending, focusing on early intervention, prevention, and multi-service support to address systemic factors influencing youth crime and exploitation. A key part of this shift is addressing the underlying vulnerabilities of children, such as adverse childhood experiences, rather than focusing solely on their behaviours. Children in care, for instance, are at higher risk of criminal exploitation, making it essential to provide adequate support and stable care environments. By improving life outcomes for vulnerable children, we can reduce their involvement in the criminal justice system.

Schools also play a crucial role in preventing the 'school-to-prison pipeline' by creating inclusive environments that limit exclusions and promote restorative practices. Training staff to recognise trauma, distress, and SEN(D) will help them offer tailored support to vulnerable pupils. Community-based programmes can further provide positive outlets for young people, fostering a sense of belonging and reducing criminal involvement. The justice system must also adopt a rehabilitative approach, focusing on diversion programmes, restorative justice, and out-of-court resolutions. Evidence shows these approaches reduce reoffending and provide better long-term outcomes for young people. We can create a comprehensive support network that helps children thrive and prevents their entanglement in the criminal justice system by implementing these strategies.

12

**Creating a culture of inclusive opportunity through arts and creativity** - A cultural shift is required to create inclusive schools and give the next generation the skills they require to grow the UK's economy—one that places creativity and the arts at the heart of education and gives the creative industries the workforce they require. Schools should not merely be places of 'reading, writing and maths' but spaces where young people can express themselves, explore diverse identities, and develop the critical thinking skills needed to thrive. Embedding creativity into the curriculum is essential. Every primary school should be a 'singing school,' where music, drama, and visual arts are as integral as literacy and numeracy. Secondary education must also embrace creative approaches, integrating arts into subjects like history and science to make learning more engaging and relevant. Ofsted should recognise the role of arts in creating inclusive schools where attainment and wellbeing thrive, ensuring these factors are valued in inspections.

Investment in arts education is crucial. A £150m arts premium fund could provide specialist training for teachers and ensure all students have access to quality creative learning. Schools should be supported to partner with cultural institutions to offer extracurricular enrichment, widening access to the UK's rich cultural resources, especially for disadvantaged communities. A place-based approach is essential, ensuring cultural opportunities reflect local identities. Schools should collaborate with local authorities, health services, and arts organisations to create holistic, community-driven learning experiences. Universities, as hubs of research and innovation, should support these efforts by evaluating best practices and developing sustainable models. We can create a fairer, more vibrant system where all children, regardless of background, can develop the skills and confidence to succeed by embedding creativity and arts in education.

# End word



Mark  
Mon-Williams



Lydia  
Gunning



Megan  
Wood

**Over the course of this series, we have had the privilege of working with experts who have provided cast iron evidence highlighting the challenges, disparities, and opportunities that shape the lives of children across the UK. Each report has focused on a critical challenge faced by many CYP, including poverty, poor mental health, the lack of support for SEN(D), and so many other manifestations of the inequities blighting the UK. Together, these reports have revealed a stark reality: structural inequalities, geographic disparities, and policy failures continue to hold back the potential of our youngest generation. These reports have reinforced one irrefutable truth: the future of the UK depends on our collective commitment to prioritise the needs, rights, and aspirations of our children.**

Throughout this series, we have emphasised that addressing these ‘wicked’ societal problems is not the responsibility of a single organisation or system. It is a shared responsibility—one that requires all of us to roll up our sleeves and work together to ‘shift the needle’ for our most vulnerable young people. This collaborative approach has been central to the production of these reports, as academics and practitioners have come together from across the N8+ Research Partnership and partner institutions to provide the latest evidence on the challenges faced by children and their families.

These reports have shone a spotlight on horrendous statistics, but they were never intended to paint a bleak picture or perpetuate the rhetoric that ‘it’s all grim up North’. Instead, our aim was to shine a light on innovative approaches and groundbreaking initiatives that are already transforming lives. We drew on the rich evidence base to make actionable recommendations, showing what government and society can do—even in the face of financial pressures—to give children the opportunities they deserve. We have repeatedly quoted Hans Rosling – “things are bad but better”. There is hope, and we need to encourage everyone throughout the UK to amplify

the good practice happening in every nook and cranny throughout the UK and ensure it is connected, coordinated, and properly supported (through evidence-based policies).

The principles adopted within this report series—putting children first, addressing inequity, adopting place-based approaches—are not simply aspirational. These principles are grounded in evidence of effectiveness and offer practical strategies that can change lives. We can ensure that opportunity is not a privilege for the few but a right for every child by fostering collaboration across sectors and drawing on the expertise of universities to guide evidence-based policymaking.

It is fitting that this final report focuses on culture, creativity, and opportunity. Culture is not just a reflection of who we are but a catalyst for who we can become. Creativity has the power to transform individuals and communities alike, fostering resilience, unlocking potential, and inspiring new ways of thinking. For children in the North of England, whose opportunities are too often limited by inequities, culture and creativity are essential tools for building a brighter future.

Cultural experiences are not a luxury; they are a necessity. Creativity and the arts offer unique pathways to connection, growth, and resilience whether we are tackling health disparities, improving education, or addressing poverty. Access to cultural assets and creative education can support mental health, build essential skills, and strengthen social cohesion, providing young people with the resources to navigate life’s challenges and embrace opportunities.

The earlier reports in this series have illuminated critical domains, from addressing poverty and improving health outcomes to tackling the autism crisis and reimagining education. They have shown that systemic change, collaborative working, and a shared vision for children’s futures are essential for lasting impact. This final report

calls for culture and creativity to be integrated into that vision – not as an afterthought but as a cornerstone of every developing strategy.

We have been humbled by the transformative power of collaboration throughout this report series. We have been inspired by the myriad examples of public services, schools, local authorities, families, and young people themselves, working together. We are more convinced than ever at the conclusion of this report series that partnership working is the key to unlocking change. The principles championed by everyone who has contributed to these reports – creating equity, adopting place-based approaches, and putting education at the heart of public service delivery – could create the culture needed to transform the UK’s future.

We thank everyone who has played their role in creating these reports for their enthusiasm, patience, and forgiveness. These reports will remain a lasting testament to the power of collective action and the generosity of so many people throughout the UK and beyond. We can now turn our attention to a 2025 ‘implementation’ campaign where we encourage everyone throughout the UK to turn the Child of The North vision into reality.

We hope that this final report will serve as both a celebration of what is possible and a call for action. The overarching message is clear: there is no greater investment than in our children. Together, we can build a country that works for all children and young people, regardless of their background, geography, or circumstances. The hundreds of contributors to these reports have provided the blueprint – now it is up to our government and the whole of our society to make the changes so desperately needed for every CYP throughout the UK.

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