

**WOLVERHAMPTON**  
CITY OF  
**YOUTH**  
**CULTURE**

Impact Learning and Legacy  
**Programme Report 2023 to 2026**

**September 2026**

A consolidated account of programme **delivery, impact,**  
**evaluation learning and future priorities.**



Supported using public funding by  
**ARTS COUNCIL  
ENGLAND**



**Funded by  
UK Government**

## Executive summary

Wolverhampton City of Youth Culture was a three-year partnership programme that widened access to arts, culture and creativity for children and young people while strengthening the organisations and relationships that support them.

The University of Wolverhampton's Institute for Community Research and Development evaluated the programme through a Theory of Change and Contribution Analysis. Rather than claiming that WCOYC alone caused every change, the evaluation tested whether it made a credible contribution and considered the wider influences on young people's lives.

Its conclusion is clear: WCOYC made a meaningful and credible contribution to wider cultural participation, stronger confidence, skills and aspirations, greater youth influence and a more connected cultural infrastructure. Poverty, transport, safety, unequal access and pressures on schools and families nevertheless continued to affect participation and progression.

## Scale and reach

Across the programme, **18,000** people engaged through major events and festivals, **1,400** young people took part in creative activity, more than **60** schools were involved, and nine public artworks helped turn Wolverhampton into an open-air gallery. Year 3 Music Service events recorded **5,629** attendances, including **5,015** children, while Same Difference Youth Festival welcomed **2,299** people and involved **50** young co-creators.

### What changed

- Children and young people encountered professional performance, public art, creative technology and cultural venues, often for the first time.
- Participation built confidence, self-expression, teamwork, communication, leadership, creative skills and awareness of future pathways.
- Young people progressed into co-production, volunteering, peer research, paid consultation, further education, apprenticeships and employment.
- Partners reached new audiences, tested more inclusive practice and developed stronger connections across culture, education, youth services and the wider city.



### Learning and legacy

The strongest outcomes came where activity was free or supported, relationships were sustained, young people held real responsibility and a visible next step followed. WCOYC leaves established events, a citywide Visual Arts Trail, reusable resources, youth leadership and peer research models, and stronger partnerships. The priority is now to sustain and embed these achievements.

young people held real responsibility and a visible next step followed. WCOYC leaves established events, a citywide Visual Arts Trail, reusable resources, youth leadership and peer research models, and stronger partnerships. The priority is now to sustain and embed these achievements.

### Purpose of this document

This report brings together the delivery, impact, learning and emerging legacy of Wolverhampton City of Youth Culture. It shows what changed for young people, how organisations worked differently together, what the city learned and what is worth sustaining.

The evidence draws on partner reporting from LearnPlay Foundation, Gazebo Theatre's Creative Tasters, the Visual Arts Trail, Wolverhampton Cultural Education Partnership's Same Difference Youth Festival and Wolverhampton Music Service's Year 3 concert programme. It is reframed through the University of Wolverhampton's programme-wide evaluation, which brings together partner and participant interviews, workshop observations, peer researcher reflections, snapshot interviews, survey evidence, creative outputs and contribution analysis.

### The programme at a glance

Wolverhampton City of Youth Culture was a three-year place partnership programme that expanded creative opportunities for children and young people, built confidence and skills, opened routes into creative careers and strengthened the role of youth voice in the city's cultural development.

### How impact was evaluated

The University of Wolverhampton's Institute for Community Research and Development acted as the evaluation partner. At the beginning of the programme, partners developed a shared Theory of Change: a practical map connecting activity with intended short- and longer-term changes for young people and the city.

The evaluation then used Contribution Analysis. This is particularly appropriate for a complex place-based cultural programme because change is rarely linear and no single project operates in isolation. The method tested whether the available evidence supported WCOYC's intended outcomes, looked for gaps and barriers, and considered other factors that could explain change.

In Year 2, Ripple Effects Mapping brought together partner organisations, peer researchers and young people from the Cultural Youth Board to test the Theory of Change and identify intended and unexpected effects. Evidence was triangulated across organisational interviews, participant voices, observations, surveys, case studies, blogs, photographs and creative outputs.

Young people were part of the evaluation rather than simply its subjects. Peer researchers received training in interviewing, analysis, creative research methods, observation, listening, writing and public engagement. Their work generated evidence while also creating personal, professional and creative progression.



9

Public artworks helping turn Wolverhampton into an open-air gallery

18,000

people engaged through major events and festivals

100's

Creative experiences delivered across the city

1,400

young people took part in creative

60

more than 60 schools were involved

### The contribution story

The evaluation found credible evidence across three connected outcome areas: increased access and participation; development of skills, confidence and wellbeing; and progression into leadership, volunteering, education and employment. It also found a wider organisational effect: stronger cultural partnerships, greater shared learning and more consistent attention to youth voice.

This does not mean that WCOYC removed the structural inequalities affecting young people. Poverty, transport, safety, uneven school capacity, disability access and family perceptions of creative careers continued to shape who could participate and what happened afterwards. The programme's achievement was to widen opportunity, demonstrate workable approaches and establish conditions and pathways that can support longer-term change.

### The emerging story

Taken together, the projects show a programme that did more than increase participation. Young people encountered creative activity in familiar and neutral spaces, learned new technical and artistic skills, shaped public events and artworks, volunteered and performed, and developed relationships that supported further education, employment and civic participation.

The strongest cross-programme themes are access, aspiration, confidence, belonging, progression and youth influence. LearnPlay introduced creative technology and career possibilities; Creative Tasters created practical routes into performance, production and volunteering; the Visual Arts Trail made young people's ideas visible in the everyday city; Same Difference gave young people a platform to co-create, perform, volunteer and welcome thousands of residents into an inclusive cultural event; and the Music Service enabled thousands of children to experience high-quality live music, often for the first time.

### What changed for the city and its partners

- Cultural, education, youth, health, heritage and community organisations connected through shared delivery.
- Partners reached new audiences through activity in West Park, youth settings, schools, colleges and public spaces.
- Young people's cultural priorities were connected to established civic youth voice structures, including the Youth Council and #YES board.
- Artists and organisations gained commissions, networks, professional development and opportunities to test more inclusive practice.
- Paid youth consultation and covered travel costs reduced financial barriers and widened who could participate in decision-making.
- SEND-inclusive approaches were tested and refined, generating hon

### What changed for young people

- Creative participation became more accessible, free and visible in neighbourhood, education, youth and public settings.
- Young people moved from taking part to shaping briefs, advising organisations, performing, volunteering and representing youth voice.
- Practical experience increased confidence, communication, teamwork, digital skills, public speaking and awareness of creative careers

### LearnPlay Foundation

LearnPlay provides a strong three-year story of creative digital engagement. Across the programme it engaged 909 young people against a target of 750, exceeding the annual target in each year. The activity supported digital confidence, creative career awareness and inclusive participation, including work designed to narrow the digital gap and engage young people with SEND.

The contribution is important because it connects creativity with employability. Young people were not simply using technology; they were introduced to tools, roles and pathways that could expand what they imagined was possible for them.



### Creative Tasters led by Gazebo Theatre

Creative Tasters provided practical, supported opportunities for young people to explore creative skills and roles. Partner evidence shows progression beyond one-off participation: young people returned to develop their skills, volunteered at festivals and events, contributed to an exhibition and asked for further creative training.

This strand demonstrates the value of low-barrier first experiences combined with trusted relationships and visible next steps. It created a bridge between participation, confidence and progression.



## Visual Arts Trail

The Visual Arts Trail was one of WCOYC's most visible and ambitious strands: a three-year programme of nine semi-permanent public artworks, installed in phases across Wolverhampton city centre. Three works were created each year through 36 free artist-led workshops. Young people's memories, identities, favourite places, cultures, interests and aspirations became the source material for artworks encountered in shopping centres, transport hubs, cultural venues, education settings, the city market and The Way Youth Zone.

The trail combined youth co-creation, artist development, public-realm commissioning and digital interpretation. It brought colour and character into everyday spaces while making young people's creativity visible beyond traditional arts venues. Local businesses were also commissioned to prepare, print and install the work, extending the project's contribution into Wolverhampton's creative economy.

### Scale and participation

**Public artworks** - 9 semi-permanent 2D artworks, installed as three annual commissions

**Artist-led workshops** - 36 free workshops across the three-year programme

**Recorded workshop engagement** - 74 engagements in 2025 and 147 in 2026

**Recorded unique participants** - 44 in 2025 and 61 in 2026

**Gender profile** - 54% female and 46% male across available records

**Walking tours** - 6 tours involving 45 participants

**Celebration activity** - 1 exhibition alongside public installations and digital content

*Earlier participation records were incomplete, so the available annual figures should not be treated as a full cumulative total for all three years.*

### Commissioning artists and engaging young people

For Years 2 and 3, the remaining commissions were recruited through a single open call promoted through Wolverhampton Arts Centre's networks and with support from Wolverhampton Art Gallery. Kathleen Fabre, Caris Jackson, Sam Wotton, Ewan Johnston, India Birtwistle and Charlotte Webb joined the artist team. Selection considered the strength of each artist's practice, their connection to Wolverhampton and their ability to work with young people and translate workshop material into ambitious public artwork.

Recruitment drew on schools, Wolverhampton Art Gallery, Wolverhampton Arts Centre, social media, artist networks, peer researchers and community partners. Many young people returned across different years, helping to build confidence and continuity. The Way Youth Zone became a particularly important recruitment and delivery partner, while work with Wolverhampton Virtual School widened participation among young people who could face barriers to cultural opportunities.

Workshops were scheduled mainly after school, at weekends and during school holidays. Young people experimented with collage, printmaking, metal embossing, acetate, drawing, painting, charcoal, fabric painting, model making, plaster casting, sculpture and large-scale design. Artists also spoke openly about creative careers, freelance practice and the transferable skills involved in cultural work.

The settings were part of the experience. Sessions took place in Wolverhampton Art Gallery's Making Space, Wolverhampton Arts Centre, City of Wolverhampton College's new creative studios and aboard IKON Gallery's Slow Boat on the city's canal network. For some participants, this was their first sustained experience of a gallery, specialist studio or artist-led creative environment.

# THE ARTWORKS...

## Cosmic Routes

By Charlotte Webb with The Way Youth Zone

Location: Mander Centre



# Rhythms of Wolverhampton Youth

By Rachel Winsper with Beatsabar & Wolverhampton Arts Centre

Location: Wolverhampton Bus Station



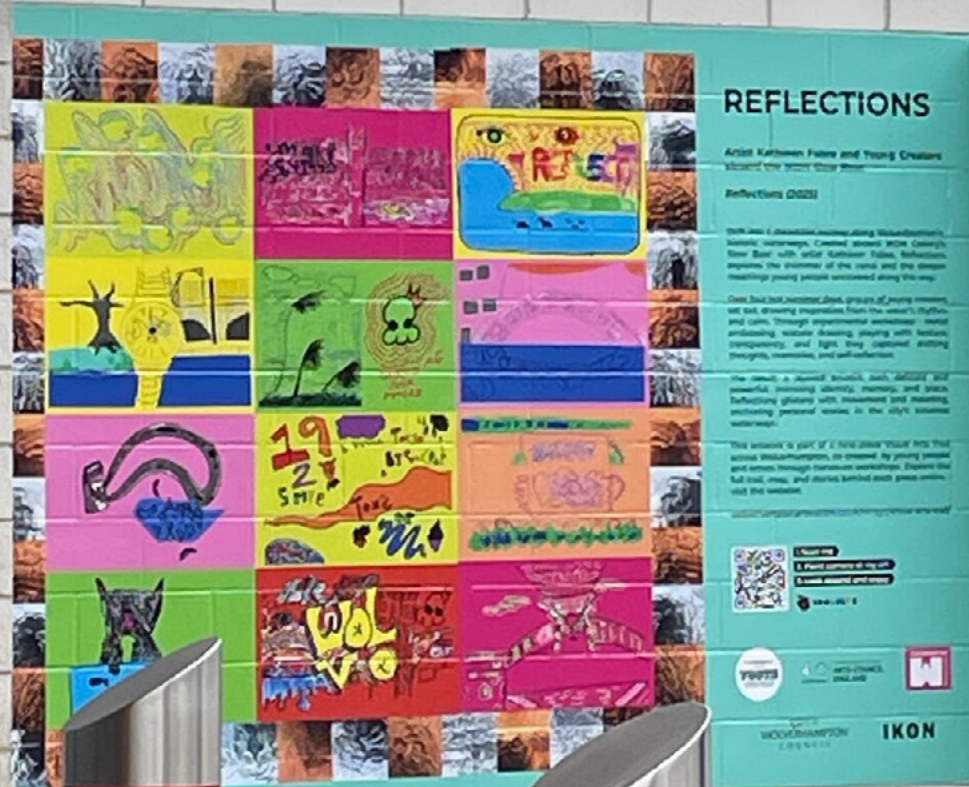


## Neon Dreams

By Kathleen Fabre with Urban Rooms 01902

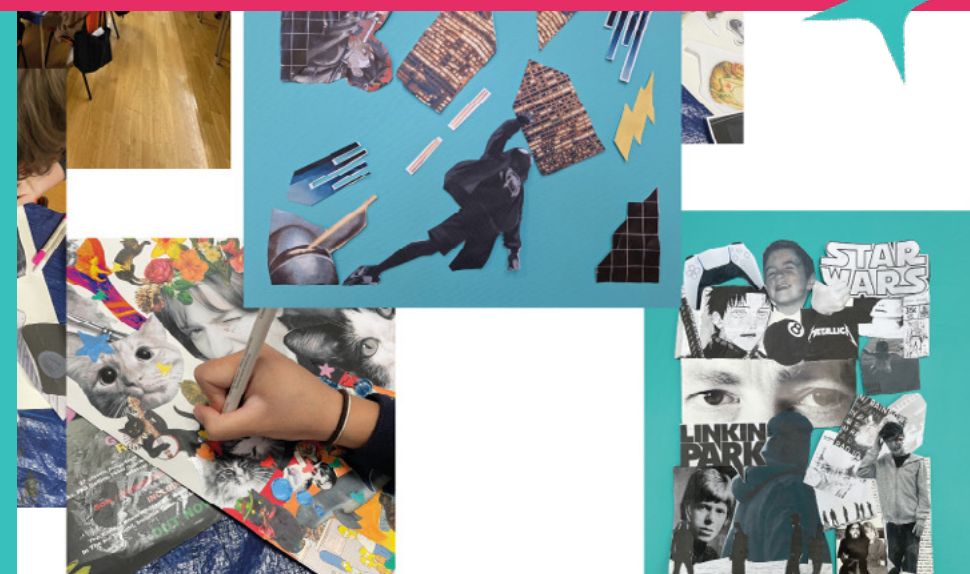
Location: Wolverhampton Market

**Location: Wolverhampton Railway Station**



**By Caris Jackson with Wolverhampton Art Gallery participants**

**Location: Wolverhampton Art Gallery**





## Hands of the City

By Artist India Birtwisle & Young Creators of Wolverhampton Arts Cen

Location: The Way Youth Zone



## A Glance Back Down the Hoss Road

By Sam Wootton with Wolverhampton Arts Centre participants

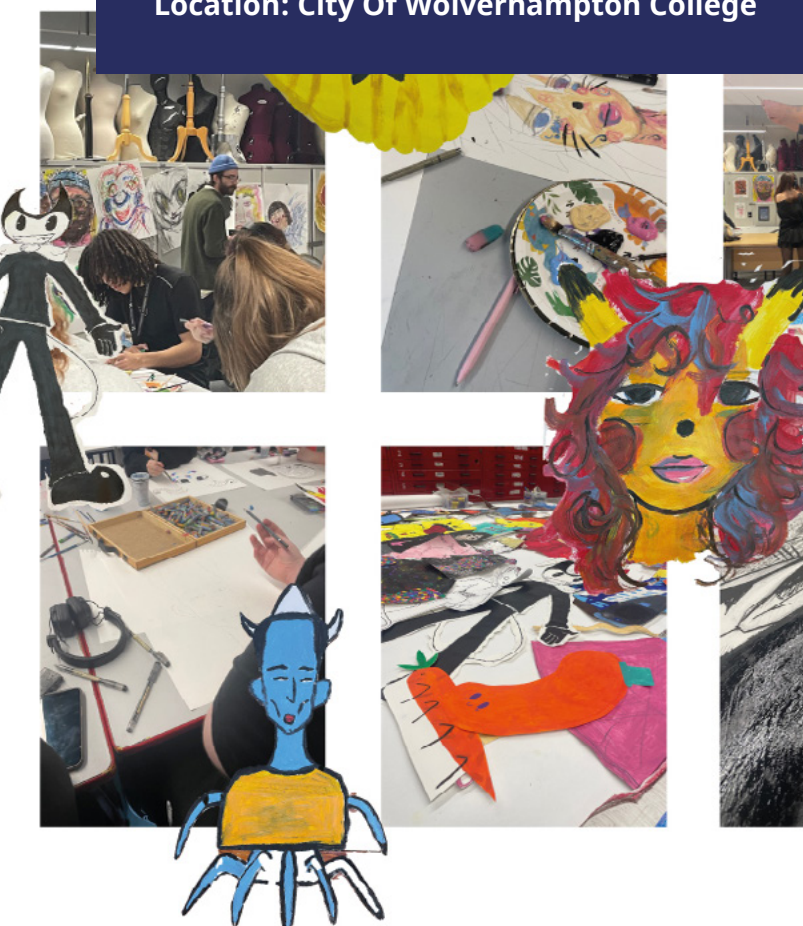
Location: University of Wolverhampton Millennium City Building



## Begin As You Mean To Go On

Artist Ewan Johnston and Students of City of Wolverhampton College

Location: City Of Wolverhampton College



### The nine artworks

The works explored youth identity, music, fashion, emotional wellbeing, folklore, industry, architecture, waterways, community and belonging. Begin As You Mean To Go On used an employer-brief model with Level 2 Art and Design students, who experienced the realities of a live commission when an intended city-centre location changed and the design had to be adapted for a new site. Hands of the City became the largest work in the trail at 7.5 metres by 16 metres. The Way Youth Zone part-funded its installation, transforming the building's external identity and creating a new landmark visible from Wolverhampton's ring road.

### Production installation and augmented reality

After the workshops, artists combined young people's contributions with their own practice to develop the final compositions. Wolverhampton suppliers Depict Creative and Printdot supported artwork preparation, specialist printing and installation. The team adapted designs for very different surfaces, including market containers, curved glass at the bus station and textured walls in the Wulfrun Shopping Centre. Installations were coordinated around school holidays, bank holidays, city events and partner schedules; Collage Us, for example, was unveiled alongside a Wolverhampton Art Gallery late event.

The physical trail was extended through an augmented-reality platform developed with 3D Native. QR codes beside each artwork connect visitors to original music, artists' voiceovers, process photography, digital animation and an interactive map. Young people influenced these digital concepts as well as the physical works. College students asked for the Begin As You Mean To Go On experience to evoke a videogame, including videogame-style music, ensuring that youth voice shaped the interpretation as well as the commission.

Explore the trial here:



## Decades in the Making

By Charlotte Webb with Wolverhampton Arts Centre

Location: Wulfan Shopping Centre





### Outcomes for young people artists and the city

Young people developed new artistic techniques, confidence in expressing ideas, experience of collaboration and a stronger sense of ownership of their city. Participants became more comfortable in galleries and creative spaces; some began travelling independently to workshops, returned across several years and asked what opportunities would follow. Seeing their ideas enlarged and installed in public created a tangible sense of pride, with participants bringing families back to find and share the completed work.

Commissioned artists expanded their portfolios, developed community practice and gained experience of large-scale public work. The programme also created an internal progression story: Rachel Winsper moved from peer researcher to workshop artist and then Visual Arts Trail Producer, taking responsibility for commissioning, budgets, partnerships, stakeholder liaison, logistics and delivery. Her progression reflects the wider programme aim of creating routes into cultural leadership as well as participation.

Six guided walks extended engagement after installation. Tours introduced young people and families to the completed route, supported sixth-form discussion about creative careers, and enabled alternative-provision groups and younger children to experience public art in an informal setting. The works became destinations and conversation points within everyday journeys rather than objects confined to a gallery.

### Partnership contribution

The trail depended on a wide partnership spanning Wolverhampton Art Gallery, IKON Gallery, Urban Rooms 01902, Wolverhampton Arts Centre, The Way Youth Zone, Wolverhampton Virtual School, Wolverhampton Cultural Education Partnership, City of Wolverhampton College, the University of Wolverhampton, Mander Centre, Wulfrun Shopping Centre, Wolverhampton Market, Wolverhampton Bus Station and Wolverhampton Railway Station. Location partners offered prominent walls and surfaces, while cultural and education partners connected young people to professional environments, artists and progression routes.

### Challenges and learning

- The phased installation supported steady growth but diluted the impact of a single citywide launch. Completing installations within a shorter period could create stronger public and press momentum.
- Earlier works began to show wear, demonstrating the need for a maintenance, condition-monitoring and repair budget from the outset.
- Artist fees covered workshops and co-creation but did not include enough separate development time to refine complex material into final public commissions.
- A change of host location required one artwork to be redesigned. The eventual college site was appropriate and positive, but the experience reinforced the need to secure locations and expectations early.
- The model successfully combined youth contribution with artists' individual styles. Future commissions could begin with a clearer youth-led brief before appointing artists, strengthening influence while retaining professional creative direction.
- Limited marketing capacity reduced wider awareness. Dedicated communication channels, behind-the-scenes content and earlier completion would support stronger audience development and more follow-on activity.

### Legacy and future potential

All nine artworks remain across the city centre alongside the AR platform, microsite and walking route. Together they form an open-air gallery and a reusable learning resource for schools, youth groups, families, residents and visitors. The trail has strengthened working relationships between artists, cultural organisations, education partners, local businesses, transport

providers and council services, while demonstrating how public art can transform familiar spaces and connect communities.

The model offers a practical blueprint for future youth-led public art: combine accessible artist-led workshops, real commissioning experience, visible public locations, digital interpretation, walking routes and planned progression. With maintenance and future investment, the approach could support new neighbourhood commissions and extend into areas such as Bilston and Whitmore Reans, ensuring that youth creativity continues to shape Wolverhampton's public realm.



Wolverhampton Music Service Year 3

The Year 3 music programme brought children and school communities into The Halls Wolverhampton for two large-scale live music experiences: the Orchestral Concerts and Singing in the Halls. Together, the events recorded 5,629 attendances, including 5,015 children. The school figures below are event attendances rather than a combined unique-school total because some schools may have participated in both programmes.



Year 3 Music Service Events

**5,629** TOTAL ATTENDANCES  
Inc 5,015 children

ORCHESTRAL CONCERTS  
**3,000**  
2,704 children - 242 school staff - 54 guests

SINGING IN THE HALLS  
**2,629**  
2,311 children - 284 school staff - 34 guests

**97 SCHOOL ATTENDANCES**  
36 at Orchestral Concerts - 61 at singing in the halls  
both event categories included 5 special schools



## Access to live music

**The programme gave children the chance to hear orchestral and live popular music in a major city venue. Feedback repeatedly described this as a first experience of a live band, orchestra or music venue. Schools saw the concerts as an important extension of their music provision and a memorable annual opportunity that many pupils would not otherwise access.**

*"The staff were amazing. One gentleman got our autistic child some ear defenders and helped to keep him occupied when the noise got too much."*

**Parent or school feedback**

*"It was very inclusive, for example the use of sign language. Children and staff thoroughly enjoyed it."*

**School feedback**





### Participation and musical learning

The events were designed as participatory experiences rather than passive concerts. Children sang as a large choir, joined movement and warm-up activities, learned signing and responded directly to musicians and presenters. The range of orchestral instruments, Dhol performance, live singers and popular repertoire helped children connect musical traditions with music they recognised.

Preparation resources and listening guides extended the experience into schools and created a practical legacy for classroom music. Feedback particularly praised the organisation, the performers' interaction with children and the atmosphere created through singing, dancing, lighting and collective participation.

### Inclusion and sensory access

Both programmes included special schools and the feedback provides concrete examples of inclusive practice. British Sign Language was embedded into Singing in the Halls; staff provided ear defenders and individual support for an autistic child experiencing sensory overload; and careful arrival and departure arrangements helped pupils who could become dysregulated in crowds.

The feedback also identifies improvements for future delivery. Some children found the volume or lighting overwhelming, including a concern about bright lights for a pupil with epilepsy. Some balcony seats restricted views of the stage, lyrics or signing, and one school reported difficulties because only one lift was operating. These comments reinforce the need for advance sensory information, lighting warnings, quiet or lower-volume options, accessible seating plans and contingency arrangements for lifts.

*"The staff were amazing. One gentleman got our autistic child some ear defenders and helped to keep him occupied when the noise got too much."*

**Parent or school feedback**

*"It was very inclusive, for example the use of sign language. Children and staff thoroughly enjoyed it."*

**School feedback**

### What children valued and what they would change

Young people responded most strongly to the live singers and musicians, the performance of Defying Gravity, Dhol playing, audience interaction, colourful production, singing together and the chance to stand and dance. Their suggestions were equally useful: more current and familiar songs, a wider range of genres, longer concerts, more opportunities to sing, clearer introductions to instruments, improved sightlines and more considered sound and lighting levels.

The report includes 111 post-event survey responses from the Orchestral Concerts alongside extensive feedback on Singing in the Halls. This direct feedback provides a strong basis for refining future repertoire, access planning and the balance between education, participation and entertainment.

### Music programme legacy

- The events established a valued citywide experience that schools described as a highlight of their calendar.
- Preparation resources, listening guides and video materials remain available for schools after the performances.
- Children experienced professional musicianship and saw young musicians performing alongside adults.
- Feedback gives a practical improvement agenda covering repertoire, concert length, sensory access, visibility and venue logistics.



## Same Difference Youth Festival 2026

Same Difference was a free, one-day inclusive arts festival for young people, families and carers, held in West Park on 1 August 2026. Co-created by young people from Wolverhampton, it brought performance, music, dance, circus, theatre, creative workshops, advice and guidance into a highly visible public setting.

### Performance against target

## Same Difference Youth Festival Targets and achievements

ARTISTS AND ARTS  
ORGANISATIONS

40

Target: 20  
Twice the target

YOUNG PEOPLE  
INVOLVED IN  
CO-CREATION

50

Target: 15  
More than three times  
the target

FESTIVAL  
ATTENDEES

2,229

Target: 500  
Approached the 2,500  
site capacity

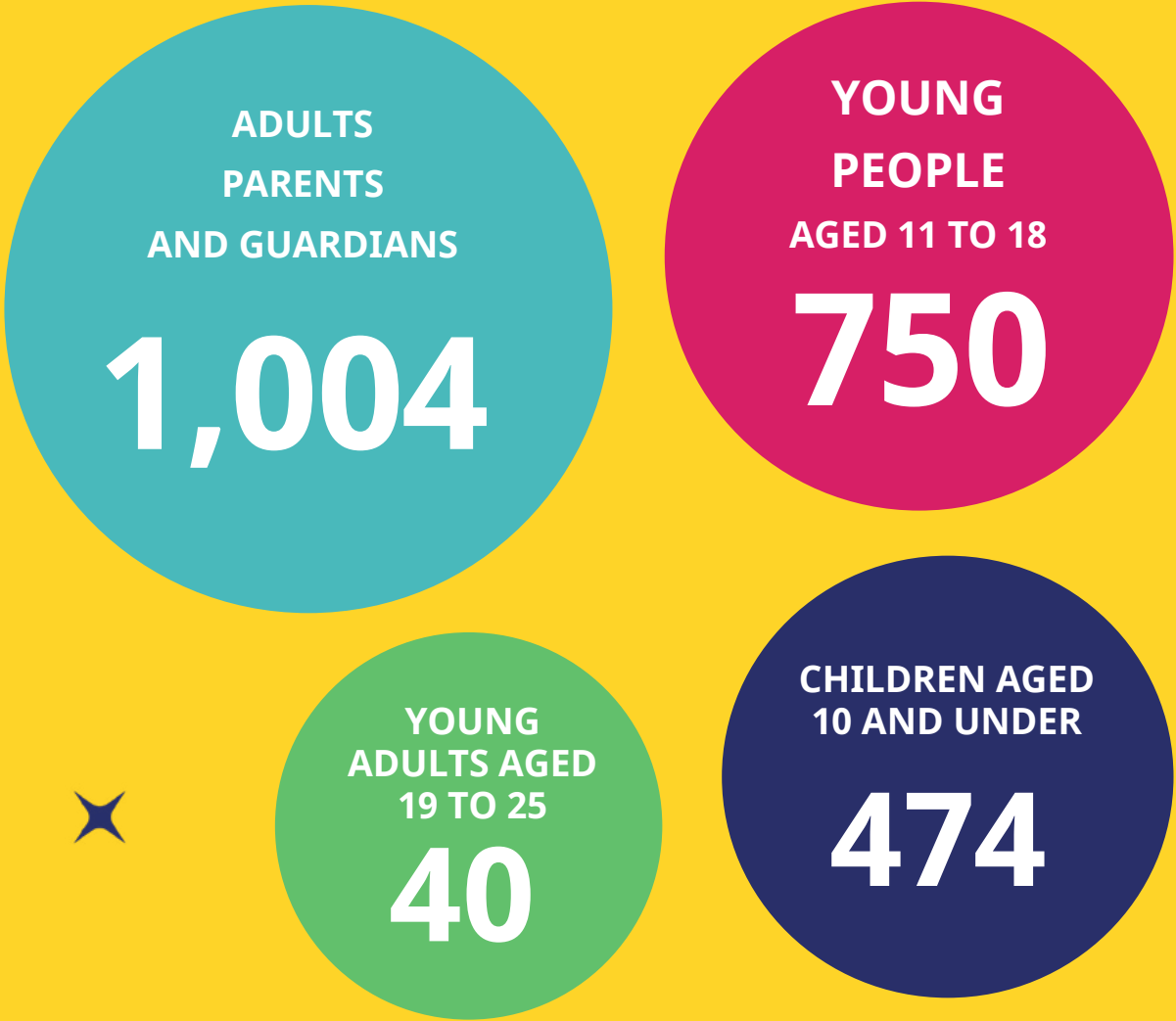
YOUNG  
VOLUNTEERS

27

Target: Not stated  
Delivery, welcome, creative  
and performance roles



Who attended



The 2026 festival attracted 2,299 people on one site in one day, compared with 1,709 attendances across two sites and two days in 2025. This is a substantial increase, while the different formats should be recognised when comparing the two years.

A festival shaped by young people

Young people developed the creative themes and brief for providers. Under the theme The Pulse of the City, they asked artists and organisations to respond to Wolverhampton’s rhythm, movement, sound, stories, musical heritage, cultures, youth identities and sense of belonging, while also considering sustainable workshop ideas. Providers then developed their activity in response to these priorities.

Co-creation drew on the Cultural Youth Board, ArtForum and RAG Arts youth groups, Family on Board and wider council youth participation structures. This connected festival planning with broader youth voice mechanisms rather than treating consultation as a one-off exercise.



*“Being a part of the planning for the Same Difference festival was really fun and I loved to see how much the festival has grown since last year.”*  
**Sakhamtat, Cultural Youth Board member and festival volunteer**

*“Being able to support and be platformed as the next generation of creatives truly meant more than words could describe and has allowed me to create what I am sure will be long-lasting connections with like-minded young people.”*  
**Ash, young co-host**



## A festival shaped by young people

Young people developed the creative themes and brief for providers. Under the theme The Pulse of the City, they asked artists and organisations to respond to Wolverhampton's rhythm, movement, sound, stories, musical heritage, cultures, youth identities and sense of belonging, while also considering sustainable workshop ideas. Providers then developed their activity in response to these priorities.

Co-creation drew on the Cultural Youth Board, ArtForum and RAG Arts youth groups, Family on Board and wider council youth participation structures. This connected festival planning with broader youth voice mechanisms rather than treating consultation as a one-off exercise.

*"Working with and announcing the Sky Pixies was an amazing experience and really helped with my confidence and public speaking."*

**Brett, Same Difference SEND volunteer**

## Inclusive practice and SEND learning

Across three years, the festival tested different ways of creating an inclusive SEND offer. In 2026 all public activity was brought together in West Park, with Wolverhampton Arts Centre retained as a safe space, muster point and rehearsal venue. Colourscape and the Eye Music team brought specialist SEND experience; RAW delivered British Sign Language activity; and a more accessible circus tent provided a flat performance area for wheelchair users.

Bringing everyone together on one site strengthened many young people's sense of inclusion. However, the evaluation also records trade-offs. Sound bleed remained an issue and the earlier separate provision at Wolverhampton Arts Centre offered facilities for people with higher support needs, including a mobile hoist changing facility and hardstanding rather than grass. This is valuable learning for future events: inclusion requires both shared experience and differentiated support, with access planned around a range of needs.

## Progression leadership and creative careers

Same Difference created routes for young people to progress from consultation and participation into visible responsibility. Young people served as co-hosts, supported front-of-house and workshop delivery, produced social media content, reviewed theatre productions, represented the Cultural Youth Board at the WMCA Youth Summit and built practical skills in communication, leadership and event delivery.

The Cultural Youth Board developed from a WMCA pilot into a paid consultation group for young people aged 13 to 25. Payment, travel expenses and food reduced economic barriers to participation and enabled a broader group of young people to contribute. Members took defined roles including Chair, Vice Chair, marketing and digital lead, secretary, partnership roles and inclusion and diversity responsibilities.

*"This festival has grown so much over the years. It is a place that allows me to express myself creatively and allows young people to access creative arts without a cost."*

**Vyv, Cultural Youth Board member and co-host**

*"Both have volunteered at the event, and my eldest has also performed. This led on to building her confidence to join the music society when she moved to university."*

**Parent of Cultural Youth Board member and young volunteer**

Individual stories demonstrate progression. A young apprentice involved in the 2025 festival went on to help manage the door and front-of-house team in 2026. Matidaishe first encountered the festival by chance in West Park, later joined the #YES board, became involved in the Cultural Youth Board, was elected Wolverhampton's young Police and Crime Commissioner and was nominated for Young Citizen of the Year 2026.

## Partnership reach and organisational benefit

The festival brought together a wide network: Wolverhampton Music Service, local artists and cultural organisations, The Way Youth Zone, Wolverhampton Grand Theatre, Gazebo Theatre, Wolverhampton Art Gallery, National Trust teams, the RAF Museum Midlands, council participation services, NHS health promotion colleagues and touring partners Colourscape and Sky Pixies.

For established partners, the festival provided a platform for young performers, new audience reach and collaboration. For newer partners, it offered direct community engagement: National Trust activity reached approximately 350 young people who had not previously accessed its services. West Park functioned as a neutral and welcoming cultural space, helping organisations reach families outside conventional venues, although the park setting also generated substantial infrastructure costs.

*"It has been wonderful to see the festival grow year on year and build real momentum within the community... it has been a real reminder that we are stronger when we work together."*

**Ben Bedazzled, CEP member**



## Learning for future festivals

- Keep young people involved from brief-setting through delivery and evaluation, with clear feedback showing how their ideas influenced decisions.
- Retain paid youth leadership and meet travel and food costs so that participation is not limited by household income.
- Design SEND provision around both inclusion on the shared site and specialist facilities for people with higher support needs.
- Use neutral public spaces to reach new audiences, while budgeting realistically for infrastructure, access and weather resilience.
- Build progression roles into delivery, including apprenticeships, hosting, front-of-house, digital content and volunteer leadership.
- Capture consistent demographic, access and outcome data alongside attendance so growth can be assessed more fully.

The University's role combined independent evaluation with capacity-building. Its Theory of Change, contribution analysis and Ripple Effects Mapping gave partners a shared way to examine not only what was delivered, but how and why change happened, where evidence was strongest and where ambitions were constrained.

The peer researcher model was one of the programme's clearest examples of youth voice creating progression. Young people developed research, communication, analysis, observation, writing and presentation skills. They interviewed partners and artists, observed activity, gathered public and participant perspectives, produced blogs and reflections, and contributed to presentations and publications.

The evaluation records progression from peer research into further study, professional research, visual arts production and other employment and creative opportunities. Just as importantly, peer researchers brought lived experience and a different quality of listening to the evidence base. Their involvement made the evaluation more participatory and gave young people influence over how the programme's story was understood.

This model has significance beyond WCOYC. A continuing partnership between the University, cultural organisations and young people could build local research capacity, improve future evaluation and create a sustained route into research, leadership and employment.



# Programme outcomes

## Evidence across the programme

1

### Access and inclusion

Free and low-barrier activity; public and community settings; SEND-informed delivery; payment and expenses for youth consultation.

2

### Confidence and wellbeing

Performance, public speaking, volunteering, creative production, teamwork and visible celebration of achievement.

3

### Skills and employability

Digital skills, arts practice, event delivery, leadership, communication, content creation and exposure to creative careers.

4

### Cultural entitlement

Thousands of children experienced professional live music in a major venue, often for the first time, supported by classroom resources and inclusive participation.

5

### Youth voice and influence

Young people shaped briefs, artworks, festival themes, marketing, organisational identity and wider cultural strategy conversations.

6

### Belonging and pride

Young people saw their work in public spaces, performed for the city and contributed to events that celebrated Wolverhampton's identities.

7

### Partnership capacity

Organisations shared audiences, expertise, spaces and progression opportunities, while artists expanded networks and confidence.





## Programme learning

Several consistent lessons emerge. Young people need more than an invitation to attend: influence becomes credible when they are paid where appropriate, supported with practical costs, given defined responsibilities and shown how their contribution changed the work. Progression is strongest when projects provide repeated contact and visible next steps rather than isolated experiences.

Large-scale cultural experiences can create a shared sense of occasion and extend what schools can offer, particularly for children who have never entered a major venue or heard professional live music. Their success depends on preparation, participation and access: school resources, clear logistics, BSL and individual sensory support all made a difference, while feedback on volume, lighting, sightlines and lifts shows where planning needs to improve.

Public and neutral spaces can widen participation and help cultural organisations meet new audiences. They also require careful access planning, infrastructure budgets, maintenance, marketing and risk management. The programme's most credible learning comes from testing different approaches and recording the compromises, including the balance between integrated and specialist SEND provision.

Partnership working creates reach and variety, but the final legacy depends on shared ownership, realistic resourcing and governance that keeps youth voice connected to decision-making.

## Priorities identified by the evaluation

The University evaluation recommends building on demonstrated strengths while addressing recurring barriers. The priorities below translate its detailed findings into an agenda for partners and future investment.

### Next 12 to 24 months

- Coordinate youth-focused communications and create a clear central source of information.
- Reduce transport, cost and safety barriers through travel support, school coordination, neighbourhood delivery and clear guidance.
- Audit physical, sensory, neurodiversity and communication access, and tailor provision for underrepresented groups.
- Strengthen school and parent engagement, showing the wellbeing, skills, employability and career value of creative participation.
- Expand structured volunteering, mentoring and youth leadership, with shared signposting and longer-term tracking of progression.

### Longer-term direction

- Establish a permanent youth culture partnership and five-year legacy strategy with shared governance and collective fundraising.
- Build a progression framework connecting participation to volunteering, peer research, training, apprenticeships and employment.
- Explore a cultural passport to record participation, recognise achievement and open further opportunities.
- Position creative and digital skills as youth infrastructure, connecting schools, colleges, employers and cultural organisations.
- Embed youth leadership, co-production and peer research in commissioning, programme design, evaluation and city strategy.

## Legacy and what happens next

- Sustain a paid youth advisory structure that connects cultural organisations with the Youth Council, #YES and other city youth voice mechanisms.
- Protect progression routes from first engagement into volunteering, training, paid roles, further education and creative employment.
- Use the Visual Arts Trail as an ongoing civic platform, with a funded plan for maintenance, interpretation and future commissions.
- Retain Same Difference's inclusive, youth-led identity and partnership model while resolving future funding, access and infrastructure requirements.
- Continue cross-sector collaboration across culture, education, youth services, health, heritage, employers and community organisations.
- Embed consistent outcome and demographic data collection so future investment can be evidenced alongside stories and attendance.



**Thank you**



Supported using public funding by  
**ARTS COUNCIL  
ENGLAND**



**Funded by  
UK Government**