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Institute for Community Research and Development

WOLVERHAMPTON
CITY OF
YOUTH
CULTURE

Evaluation team final project report

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Executive Summary

Wolverhampton City of Youth Culture (WCOYC) (2023-2026) was established to increase opportunities for children and young people to engage with arts, culture and creativity across the city, while strengthening the city’s cultural infrastructure and supporting young people to develop skills, confidence, aspirations and pathways into future opportunities. Engagement and evaluation activities were delivered through a core partnership comprising Wolverhampton Arts Centre (formerly Newhampton Arts Centre, project lead), Wolverhampton Music Service, LearnPlay Foundation, Gazebo Theatre, the Cultural Educational Partnership, City of Wolverhampton Council, and University of Wolverhampton (as evaluation partner). Over the three years, an extensive associated partnership developed including arts and cultural organisations, educational institutions, community organisations, transport and retail companies, City of Wolverhampton Council, local artists, and young people themselves. The three-year programme sought to address longstanding inequalities affecting access to arts and cultural participation within Wolverhampton.

This evaluation adopted a **Contribution Analysis** approach to assess the extent to which WCOYC contributed to intended outcomes. Rather than seeking to attribute change solely to WCOYC, the evaluation examined the programme’s Theory of Change (developed and agreed at an early stage of the programme by the core partners), gathered evidence across multiple stakeholders and activities, and considered alternative explanations and contextual factors that may have influenced outcomes.

Context

The programme was delivered within a challenging social and economic environment. Wolverhampton is one of the most deprived local authority areas in England, with high levels of child poverty, educational disadvantage, youth unemployment and health inequalities. Children and young people also face barriers relating to poverty, transport, safety, post-pandemic social anxiety, Special Educational Needs and Disabilities (SEND) and limited awareness of creative opportunities and career pathways. These structural factors shape participation and they remain important influences beyond the direct control of WCOYC.

Key Contributions of WCOYC

The evidence suggests that WCOYC made a substantial contribution to widening access to arts and culture for children and young people across Wolverhampton. The programme created and enhanced opportunities through large-scale music events, digital creativity programmes, visual arts workshops, festivals, volunteering, youth leadership initiatives, peer research and partnership-based activity. Across the programme, thousands of children and young people participated in experiences that many described as their first encounter with live music, cultural venues, professional artists or creative technologies.

The evaluation identified evidence of contributions across three principal outcome areas:

1. Increased Access and Participation

WCOYC significantly expanded opportunities for children and young people to engage in creative and cultural activity. Activities reached diverse audiences across schools, community settings and public spaces, helping to reduce barriers to participation and increasing awareness of arts and cultural opportunities. Many participants experienced cultural venues, artistic practices and creative activities for the first time.

2. Development of Skills, Confidence and Wellbeing

Evidence across partner case studies demonstrates that participation contributed to the development of creative, social and transferable skills. Young people reported increased confidence, self-expression, teamwork, leadership and communication skills. Artist-led workshops, youth leadership opportunities and peer research activities were particularly effective in creating supportive environments that encouraged experimentation, creativity and personal growth.

3. Progression Pathways and Cultural Leadership

The programme contributed to new pathways into volunteering, leadership, education and employment. A Cultural Youth Board was established for the project. This, along with volunteering opportunities, a peer researcher training programme and artist-led initiatives enabled some young people, and adults, to develop meaningful progression routes. Evidence includes progression into apprenticeships, employment opportunities, freelance creative work and further educational pathways. The Cultural Youth Board and peer researcher programme emerged as particularly successful models for building skills, confidence and professional opportunities.

Contributions to the Cultural Ecosystem

Beyond individual outcomes, WCOYC strengthened Wolverhampton’s cultural ecosystem through partnership development, shared learning and collaborative delivery. Organisations across the arts, transport, commercial, and education sectors reported stronger relationships, increased capacity to reach new audiences, greater opportunities for joint working and a stronger collective focus on children and young people’s cultural

participation. The programme also successfully embedded youth voice within governance and programme design through co-production and youth leadership structures.

Barriers and Ongoing Challenges

While outcomes were generally positive, the evaluation identified several barriers that limited participation and progression. These included:

- Transport and travel costs.
- Perceptions of safety in some parts of the city.
- Family-level financial constraints associated with poverty.
- School-level financial constraints to support music and arts resources for individual children.
- Variable school engagement.
- Limited public awareness of WCOYC as a city-wide initiative.
- Parental/carers concerns regarding creative careers.

These findings highlight that WCOYC operated within a wider system of influences and should be viewed as an important contributing factor rather than the sole driver of observed changes.

Overall Contribution Story

The evaluation concludes that WCOYC has made a credible and meaningful contribution towards increasing cultural participation, developing children and young people's skills and aspirations, strengthening youth voice, and building a more connected and collaborative cultural infrastructure across Wolverhampton. Through partnership working, youth-centred delivery and inclusive creative opportunities, the programme has helped establish many of the conditions necessary for long-term cultural engagement and creative progression. While wider structural inequalities continue to influence outcomes, the evidence suggests that WCOYC has acted as an important catalyst for change and has laid strong foundations for future cultural development in the city.

Short-Term Recommendations (1 to 2 Years)

1. **Strengthen public awareness and branding of WCOYC and successor programmes** through coordinated marketing, digital communications and a central information platform.
2. **Improve transport and access support** for children and young people through partnerships with schools, transport providers and community organisations.
3. **Undertake an accessibility review** of all activity to strengthen participation opportunities for children and young people with SEND.
4. **Develop a targeted school engagement strategy** to improve consistency of participation and strengthen relationships across education settings.
5. **Increase engagement with parents and carers** through communications that highlight wellbeing, transferable skills and career benefits associated with arts participation.
6. **Expand volunteering, mentoring and youth leadership opportunities** to create stronger progression routes for participants.
7. **Target underrepresented groups** through tailored provision for diverse intersectional groups of young people, such as boys, children and young people with SEND, younger children and communities experiencing multiple disadvantages.
8. **Improve signposting between partner activities** to support progression from initial engagement into sustained participation and leadership opportunities.
9. **Develop safety-informed approaches to participation**, including travel guidance, local community place-based delivery and connections with existing youth safety initiatives.

Long-Term Recommendations (3 to 10 Years)

1. **Establish a permanent Wolverhampton Youth Culture Partnership** to sustain collaboration, leverage funding opportunities and coordinate city-wide cultural activity for children and young people.
2. **Develop a five-year Youth Culture Legacy Strategy** focused on participation, inclusion, creative careers, youth leadership and place-based cultural development.
3. **Create a city-wide creative progression framework** linking cultural participation to volunteering, education, employment, apprenticeships and creative careers.

4. **Introduce a Cultural Passport scheme** enabling children and young people to record participation, gain recognition and access future opportunities across partner organisations.

5. **Embed a stronger focus on equity and inclusion**, particularly for children and young people with SEND, boys and young people experiencing multiple forms of disadvantage.

6. **Position creative and digital skills as core youth infrastructure** through sustained investment in creative technologies, digital arts and emerging industries.

7. **Expand youth leadership and co-production models** to ensure children and young people continue to shape cultural decision-making across the city.

8. **Sustain and embed the peer researcher model** through ongoing collaboration between cultural organisations and the University of Wolverhampton, creating future pathways for youth research, leadership and employment.

In summary, WCOYC has demonstrated the value of a partnership-based, youth-centred approach to cultural development. The programme has generated substantial benefits for individual young people, partner organisations and the wider cultural landscape of Wolverhampton. **The challenge moving forward is not whether the model has value, but how its achievements can be sustained, strengthened and embedded for future generations of children and young people.**

Part 1: Place-based Context

1.1 Wolverhampton and the West Midlands region: social inequalities and young people

The literature identifies the West Midlands as an area of significant and persistent social inequality, with direct and disproportionate implications for children and young people's wellbeing and service needs. Almost half of households in the region are located within the most deprived 20% of neighbourhoods in England, and—with the exception of Solihull—all local authorities within the West Midlands Combined Authority (WMCA) area rank among the 100 most deprived nationally. Wolverhampton, alongside Walsall and Sandwell, is within the 25 most deprived local authorities, signalling a high concentration of structural disadvantage affecting children and families (WMCA, 2026).

The city of Wolverhampton presents a particularly acute context for children and youth services. Approximately one quarter of the city's population is aged 0–19, indicating a comparatively youthful demographic profile alongside high levels of need. Within this cohort, 4.5% of children and young people have SEND, highlighting additional demands on inclusive, specialist and early intervention services. Nearly one third of children in Wolverhampton live in poverty, and almost 60% of those aged 0–15 reside in deprived neighbourhoods, placing them at increased risk of poorer developmental, educational and health outcomes (Wolverhampton Children's Trust, 2025). The city is among the 6% most deprived areas nationally, with evidence that deprivation is intensifying rather than diminishing over time (Wolverhampton Children's Trust, 2025).

Children and young people's vulnerability has been further exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic. The literature indicates that those already experiencing disadvantage—particularly children from ethnic minority backgrounds, children with SEND, and those living in low-income households—were disproportionately affected by pandemic-related disruptions. Extended periods of social isolation, educational disruption and family financial insecurity contributed to deteriorating mental health and emotional wellbeing among children and young people. Additional pressures were experienced by young people up to age 25, including increased caring responsibilities, reduced access to support services, and heightened anxiety about future education and employment pathways (Spicksley et al., 2022).

Economic disadvantage within households remains a key driver of demand for children and youth services. Unemployment rates across the WMCA exceed the national average, and Wolverhampton has experienced significant increases in residents claiming out-of-work benefits. Low household income and employment insecurity are associated with increased reliance on early help, safeguarding, youth support and mental health services. Youth unemployment, in particular, poses long-term risks to transitions into adulthood, with implications for youth services focused on engagement, skills development and aspiration-raising (WMCA, 2026).

Educational inequality further compounds these challenges. Around 30% of young people in the West Midlands achieve fewer than five GCSEs, limiting access to further education, training and quality employment. The region has the highest proportion of working-age adults with no formal qualifications in England, reinforcing intergenerational cycles of disadvantage. Wolverhampton is among the most deprived local authorities in relation to education and skills, with two thirds of neighbourhoods nationally experiencing lower levels of deprivation. This context increases pressure on schools, alternative provision, and targeted youth interventions aimed

at preventing exclusion and supporting attainment (Ministry of Housing and Communities, 2025).

Finally, the literature emphasises the strongly intersectional nature of disadvantage affecting children and young people. Poverty rates reach up to 50% among Black, Bangladeshi and Pakistani communities and among people with SEND, groups that are overrepresented among children requiring targeted or specialist services. These children are more likely to live in deprived areas and experience poorer physical and mental health outcomes, underscoring the need for culturally competent, inclusive and trauma-informed children and youth services (WMCA, 2026).

1.2 Arts and cultural sector context of Wolverhampton

Context and Strategic Importance

The West Midlands is widely recognised as possessing one of the UK's most diverse and vibrant cultural ecosystems. Research highlights that arts and culture deliver benefits at multiple levels, including enhancing individual psychological and physiological wellbeing, acting as a 'social glue' that strengthens cohesion for families, generations and wider communities, contributing to place-making, and supporting economic growth (Karkou et al., 2022: 6). Across the region, cultural organisations play an important role in regeneration and development, particularly in urban centres, while also supporting local identity, visitor economies, and community engagement in smaller towns and rural areas (Culture, Creative Industries and Tourism Advisory Group [CCTAG], 2018).

Within this wider regional context, Wolverhampton has a well-established cultural infrastructure and is home to several significant cultural institutions, including Wolverhampton Arts Centre, Wolverhampton Art Gallery, and Wolverhampton Civic Hall. These organisations contribute to the city's cultural offer and provide opportunities for artistic participation, learning, and cultural engagement.

Economic Contribution of the Cultural Sector

Evidence suggests that cultural and heritage assets make a substantial contribution to the local economy across Wolverhampton and the wider Black Country. For example, the Black Country Living Museum attracted approximately 292,000 visitors in 2015 and generated an estimated £4 million in economic impact. Similarly, investment in cultural infrastructure has been viewed as a catalyst for economic growth. CCTAG (2018) reported that the £7 million redevelopment of Wolverhampton Civic Halls was expected to increase the existing contribution of culture and entertainment, which was estimated to generate an additional £4.3 million in gross value added (GVA) for the local economy. These findings demonstrate the potential of cultural investment to support both economic development and visitor attraction objectives. (CCTAG, 2018).

Recognition as an Arts Council England Priority Place

The strategic importance of culture within Wolverhampton has also been recognised nationally. In 2021, Arts Council England designated Wolverhampton as one of 54 Priority Places across England. This programme aimed to increase cultural engagement and improve access to high-quality arts and cultural experiences in areas where participation and investment had historically been lower. The designation reflected recognition of the city's cultural potential and provided opportunities for greater collaboration between local cultural organisations and Arts Council England to widen participation in arts and culture across the city (City of Wolverhampton Council, 2021).

Creative Education and Cultural Heritage

A key element of Wolverhampton's cultural identity is the long-standing contribution of Wolverhampton School of Art. Established in 1851, the School of Art was one of the first purpose-built municipal art schools in England and has played a significant role in the city's creative and industrial development. Although no longer co-located, the School of Art and Wolverhampton Art Gallery have maintained a long-standing relationship that reflects the city's commitment to arts education and cultural development (University of Wolverhampton, 2023).

The School of Art has also contributed to Wolverhampton's reputation as a centre for creative excellence through the achievements of its graduates and its influence on artistic movements. Notable alumni include internationally recognised artists and designers such as Cornelia Parker, Claudette Johnson, Trevor Beattie and Marcus Fairs. The institution has also played an important role in supporting influential artistic movements, including the Black Art Movement, Art + Language, and Funk Ceramics. This heritage contributes to Wolverhampton's continuing cultural significance and creative identity (University of Wolverhampton, 2023).

Access to arts and culture for young people in the UK

A recent report (James & Wood, 2025) highlights growing concern that many young people are being excluded from opportunities to develop their creativity and engage with the arts. While children and young people pos-

sess significant creative potential, access to arts education and cultural experiences is often unequal, particularly for those from disadvantaged backgrounds, those with special educational needs and disabilities (SEND), and those living in areas with structural barriers such as poor transport links. The report argues that a decline in the value placed on arts and creativity within the education system has reduced opportunities for many young people to participate in creative learning, contributing to disengagement from education and limiting future opportunities.

The report makes a strong case for embedding arts and creativity throughout education and for strengthening links between schools and cultural organisations. It recommends increased investment in arts education, cultural enrichment programmes, and partnerships with artists, museums, theatres, and other cultural institutions. Such opportunities can enhance young people's sense of belonging, wellbeing, creativity, critical thinking, and educational attainment, while also exposing them to careers within the creative industries. Importantly, the report emphasises that greater access to the arts can help reduce inequalities by providing underrepresented young people with networks, resources, and experiences that may otherwise be inaccessible, ensuring that all young people can see themselves reflected in culture and have pathways into the arts sector (James & Wood, 2025).

Further considerations regarding access to the arts and cultural sector for young people in terms of intersectional access, the ongoing implications of the Covid-19 pandemic, and place-based safety can be found in the Appendix.

Implications for Evaluation

The literature indicates that Wolverhampton benefits from a strong cultural infrastructure, nationally recognised cultural assets, and a rich creative heritage. Existing evidence suggests that arts and culture contribute to economic growth, place-making, cultural participation, and civic identity. The city's designation as an Arts Council England Priority Place further demonstrates recognition of its potential for cultural development and audience engagement. However, despite this positive infrastructure, residents (particularly young people), experience barriers to access and cultural opportunities, as well as risks around sustainability and ongoing equalities of access. Consequently, evaluations of cultural programmes and investments in Wolverhampton should consider outcomes across multiple domains, including economic impact, participation and access, community wellbeing, local identity, and the strengthening of the city's cultural ecosystem.

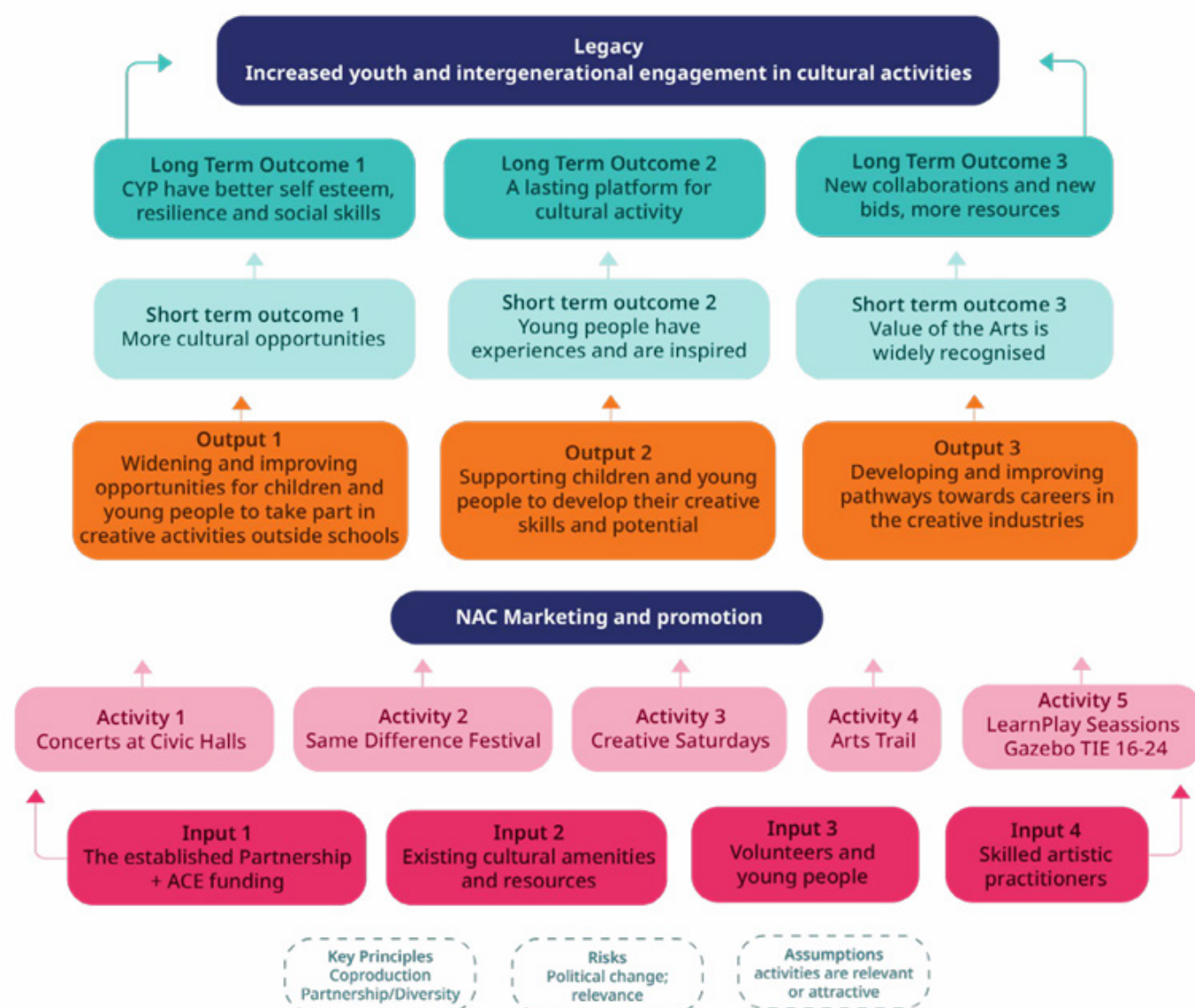
Part 2: Mapping WCOYC's Theory of Change

Contribution Analysis is an evaluation approach used to assess how a programme—such as an arts-based project—has influenced the outcomes it aims to achieve. Rather than trying to prove direct attribution, it builds a credible contribution story by mapping how project activities, as outlined in a Theory of Change, are expected to lead to observed changes (Mayne, 2012). This involves identifying the causal links between creative interventions and outcomes, gathering evidence that supports or challenges these links, and considering alternative explanations. Contribution Analysis is especially valuable in the analysis of participatory arts interventions where change is complex and non-linear, and where qualitative, creative, and narrative-based methods (such as participant stories, visual matrices, artistic outputs, and Photovoice) provide rich insight into how and why change occurs (Delahais & Toulemonde, 2012).

2.1 Journey of WCOYC's Theory of Change

In the early stages of the project, the evaluation team developed a ToC for the project building on discussions gathered from all partners in the initial partnership meetings at the beginning of Year 1 as well as a workshop delivered by the ICRD team to the partners called 'Developing a ToC' in February 2024. The ToC provides a roadmap to support all partners in working towards a shared vision, informed by the project's overarching aim and guiding questions. Additionally, short and long-term outcomes at individual and city level are included, and the activities that will support the outcomes.

Year 1 – Creation of the Theory of Change (ToC)



During Year 2 of the project, in May 2025, the evaluation team carried out a Ripple Effects Mapping (REM) workshop with three participant groups: the WCOYC partner organisations, the peer researcher team, and a wider group of young people drawn from the Youth Board connected to the project. REM is a collaborative methodological approach that supports the assessment of intended and unintended impacts of a programme to measure overall impact and sustainability of partnerships (Taylor et al., 2020). Importantly, REM encapsulates the voices of a wide range of community and programme-level stakeholders: providing opportunities to share, listen, and learn from one another (Chazdon et al., 2017). REM produces high quality evaluation data and is generative and motivating, potentially stimulating further collective action, in this case driving forward the place-based work for Wolverhampton to be a city for youth culture for the future. The process enabled the evaluation team to 'test' the ToC principles and to identify with the participant groups where there was concrete evidence, as well as gaps, barriers and from this to identify future actions/priorities. The evidence, gaps and barriers shared by the participant groups in the workshop, as well as additional evidence from the large body of data collected to date, are mapped below to the ToC's core outputs.

Part 3. Mapping the contributions: evidence, gaps and barriers

Output 1

Widening and improving opportunities for children and young people to take part in creative opportunities outside schools

Evidence

- Opening up volunteering opportunities for young people (e.g. Youth Board; Same Difference Festival)
- Learning new art forms, being given creative freedom (e.g. through arts trail workshops).
- Gaining new experiences (e.g. going on a canal barge for the first time for arts trail workshop; seeing a live orchestra for the first time).
- Increasing children and young people's exposure to art forms, arts activities, and arts spaces in the city (e.g. partner organisations have seen an increase in attendees –
- v The music partner's programme of events engaged 9,939 young people and involved 80 of the city's 106 schools.
- v Same Difference Festival strand reached 6,000 young people, 100 performers and 150 volunteers to-date (Y1 and Y2).
- v Arts trail workshops have opened up first-time experiences for young people - engaging approximately 125 young people per cycle across eight partner services.
- v LearnPlay's programme engaged approximately 900 young people within core age ranges and around 2,000 including mixed-age groups.
- v Engaging with new groups of children and young people as a result of partnership building through project (e.g. Wolverhampton Music Education Service's music making project with refugee and newly arrived children; Learn Play delivering sessions for first time in The Way Youth Zone).
- v Associate partnership building with arts and place-based organisations through the arts trail supports recognition of the importance of the arts and cultural sector as pathways for CYP across the city (e.g. Beatsabar, The Urban Rooms).

Gaps, barriers and alternative explanations

- Some groups of CYP missed out, e.g. Early Years children; only set year groups for music concerts).
- At different stages of the project there has been differing engagement from particular groups of CYP - does more need to be done to tailor opportunities to particular intersectional groups of CYP?
- Is there sufficient accessibility for CYP with disabilities, e.g. in arts trail workshops?
- How much were the partners doing already in their provision – has it changed over the Years 1 to 3?
- Barriers to schools' participation: e.g. tackling coach companies that overcharge.
- CYP, parents/carers, general public may not be able to know what's happening because of a lack of promotional materials - City of Youth Culture as a 'thing'.
- Safety as a barrier – some young people not wanting to join activities in the evening; not wanting to walk across certain areas of town.
- Wolverhampton specific barriers to ability to take up opportunities outside of school: child poverty (e.g. some parents may not be able to afford transport to take CYP to activities; or to provide any additional resources needed.)

Evidence

- Skills development for young people involved in the Youth Board (e.g. training; transferable skills).

Output 2

Supporting children and young people to develop their creative skills and potential

- Developing children and young people's leadership skills (e.g. through Youth Board).
- Developing children and young people's teamwork skills (e.g. through CYP performances at music events; Gazebo Theatre workshops – working across different roles towards a shared outcome).
- Supporting creative skills and potential for groups of CYP who were previously less engaged (e.g. participation of boys in arts trail workshops increased; girls participation in Learn Play digital workshops increased – through this indirect benefit was challenging gender stereotypes).
- Skills development and opportunities for peer researchers (e.g. researcher training in interview techniques; analysis; creative research methods; power of listening; blog writing; personal engagement with members of the public, collecting firsthand experiences of engaging in the art world).
- CYP's softer skills developed through visiting multiple venues across the city (e.g. socialising with new groups of young people; building confidence to converse with adults in workshops such as artists and peer researchers; pride and self-esteem increased through seeing their work celebrated in public).
- Students involved in project have benefitted from learning about arts careers and projects (e.g. engaging firsthand with local artists).

Gaps, barriers, and alternative explanations

- Are the events designed sufficiently to develop skills of young people with disabilities?
- Barriers caused by society wide issues

Barriers caused by Wolverhampton specific issues (e.g. child poverty and youth unemployment both above national average in Wolverhampton; high levels of disadvantage and NEET status).

Output 3

Developing and improving pathways to careers in the creative industries

Evidence

- Created employment for local freelance creatives (e.g. through Arts Trail workshops; digital content creation).
- Developed new creative pathways and skills for peer researchers (e.g. Peer Researcher to Visual Arts Producer; creative collaborative publishing – blogs, reports, zines; presenting to Arts Council and at Research Festival).
- Opened up bespoke opportunities pathways for a small group of young people (e.g. Youth Board participant gaining BBC apprenticeship; local composer's work showcased for first time in Orchestras for All event).
- Partnership building with non-arts organisations through the arts trail supports recognition of the importance of the arts and cultural sector as pathways for CYP across the city – part of culture building (e.g. bus and train companies; local shopping centres).

Gaps, barriers, and alternative explanations

- Could more arts forms be represented and through this widening exposure/awareness of different types of creative careers?
- Could the project do more to increase volunteering opportunities for CYP moving forward and taking leadership of creative/arts fairs to showcase their work?

Part 4. Experiences, changes and pathways opened by WCOYC

4.1 Partner case study: Wolverhampton Music Service

4.1.1 Peer researcher interview with Senior Strategic Lead (Head of Music Service) – April 2025

“Where I grew up in Northern Ireland, music culturally was in our DNA... learning a musical instrument was free and so my parents didn’t have to pay.”

The interview opened with the participant’s sharing of their own music journey and the strong personal motivation that underpins the work they do now: ensuring that children and young people in Wolverhampton are afforded the same breadth of cultural opportunity the participant themselves benefited from.

Barriers to Young People’s Engagement in Music and Culture

The participant identified a combination of **societal, systemic, and local barriers** affecting young people’s access to music and cultural experiences.

At a societal level, changes in how young people spend leisure time—particularly increased digital consumption and home-based entertainment—have reduced informal participation in collective music-making:

“Young people can stack up lots of reasons to keep them in the home.”

Financial barriers were described as the most significant and consistently cited constraint on engagement. Despite subsidies, rising costs for families have reduced access to sustained music education:

“Every single parent survey... their biggest reason for non-engagement or limited engagement is cost.”

“Inflation has been 36% in the last 8 years and music services funding has gone up 1%.”

Educational policy was also highlighted as a limiting factor. Curriculum compression, accountability pressures, and the prioritisation of core subjects have reduced space for music and the arts in schools.

“The drip, drip narrative... was that to be successful you focus on getting a job, work hard... music and the arts don’t tend to be stable.”

Within Wolverhampton, these barriers are intensified by high levels of child poverty and youth unemployment, reinforcing the need for universal and school-based cultural provision.

Involvement in the WCOYC Programme

Participation in WCOYC provided both a **platform and a partnership structure** to realise long-held ambitions for large-scale, inclusive music experiences for children across the city:

“I already had ideas, but WCOYC gave us the platform... it would have taken us a lot longer by ourselves.”

Central to this involvement was the concept of **universal entitlement**—ensuring that every child in Wolverhampton has the opportunity to experience live orchestral music and collective singing in major cultural venues:

“If young people didn’t see an orchestra while at school, the chances are they would never see one.”

Flagship activities such as *Singing in the Halls* and *Orchestra in the Halls* were designed specifically for WCOYC and collaboratively delivered through the consortium, allowing scale, consistency, and refinement over a three-year period.

Impact and Outcomes

The Music Education programme achieved significant reach, with thousands of children participating annually:

- Approximately **3,700 Year 4 pupils** engaged through singing activity
- **3,000–4,000 Year 7 pupils** attending orchestral concerts

The participant reported both qualitative and quantitative indicators of impact, including increased enthusiasm for music and measurable increases in uptake of instrumental learning following events:

“Anecdotally we know that many more children took up learning an instrument last year than ever before... because they had seen an orchestra for the first time.”

The Wolverhampton Symphony Orchestra’s school concert programme was nominated for a **Royal Philharmonic Inspiration Award**, providing external validation of quality and reach. Events were intentionally designed to be locally relevant, showcasing Wolverhampton musicians and performers to strengthen young people’s sense of place and possibility:

“We wanted the young people to see that this could be you!”

Learning and Organisational Development

WCOYC delivery generated learning beyond participant outcomes, strengthening systems, processes, and workforce experience within the Music Service:

“It’s led to gains in processes, systems and organisation.”

Teachers and staff benefited from new roles and responsibilities associated with large-scale cultural production, which contributed to professional motivation and development:

“It’s a whole new dynamic to their job... these are key points in the year which is exciting as an educator.”

The complexity of delivery—spanning schools, venues, transport, safeguarding, production, and logistics—highlighted the value of long-term planning, trusted partnerships, and stable funding cycles.

Looking Forward: Legacy and Sustainability

Looking ahead, the participant expressed a strong ambition to sustain and scale the model beyond Wolverhampton and beyond the current funding cycle. The longer-term vision is that repeated, high-quality cultural experiences embedded within schooling will not only increase participation but shift perceptions, expectations, and creative confidence among future generations. Overall, the **key organisational insights** were summarised as:

- Universal, school-based cultural provision mitigates inequalities created by cost and family circumstance
- One-off experiences can act as powerful catalysts when combined with follow-on pathways
- Large-scale partnership models build trust, efficiency, and sector-wide learning
- Visibility of local role models strengthens relevance and aspiration
- Sustained funding and multi-year commitment are critical for refinement and impact

4.1.2 Behind the scenes at ‘Singing in the Halls’ – a peer researcher reflection

Singing in The Halls has been running since 2023 following a £48 million renovation of The Civic in a new partnership with the University of Wolverhampton, focusing on community engagement and student development.

Singing in the Halls is an annual massed singing event in Wolverhampton held in May each year that brings together thousands of children (key stage 2) primary and special schools to have the opportunity to watch music performances and join in with singing and various actions/dance to the music at the iconic University of Wolverhampton at The Halls.

The event is organised by the Wolverhampton Music Service; the initiative aims to build confidence and celebrate the city’s diversity through creative expression.

Event Background and Purpose

- Scale and Reach: The event typically features around 2,500 to 3,000 pupils from over 50 schools across the city.
- Musical Support: Students are accompanied by a 14+ piece live band from the Wolverhampton Music Service, led by vocal expert Paul Wilcox.
- Inspiration: The programme often features former Wolverhampton pupils who have found professional success, such as West End performer Jessica Lim, to show young people that a career in music is achievable.

able. Paul Wilcox himself states at the event that he recalls attending an event at the venue when he was 10 years old, never imagining he would be on the stage 30 years later; to reaffirm it is possible.

Beneficiaries of the Event

(i) Impact on audiences

Quantitative data from the most recent Singing in the Halls event (which took place in February 2026) shows the impact that the event has on audience members. The event appears to have successfully broadened access to live music experiences:

- **44%** of respondents reported that they had **never previously heard a live band** perform.
- **81%** would recommend the concert to other schools or participants.
- **74%** said they would now consider attending another live music concert in the future.
- **57%** reported feeling inspired to take part in future singing activities, with a further **28%** responding “Maybe”.
- **75%** stated that the experience encouraged them to explore other creative and cultural activities, with a further **22%** responding “Maybe”.

These findings suggest that the programme is not only providing a high-quality musical experience but also encouraging ongoing engagement with arts and culture among young people. Analysis of

(ii) First-hand Access to Live Music

Qualitative data across the three years highlight the importance of providing children with access to high-quality live music, particularly for pupils who may not otherwise experience concerts or performance venues. Several teachers described the event as a highlight of the school year and an important enhancement to school music provision.

(iii) Active Participation and Engagement

Participants across the three years particularly enjoyed:

- Singing alongside other schools.
- Interactive warm-up activities.
- Dancing and movement opportunities.
- Audience participation led by Paul Wilcox and the musicians.
- Use of British Sign Language (BSL) and inclusive elements.

Comments frequently referenced the energy, atmosphere, lighting effects, and opportunities to join in, suggesting that the event successfully created an immersive and participatory experience.

(iv) Inclusivity and Accessibility

Several schools across the three years praised the support provided for pupils with additional needs. Specific examples included the provision of ear defenders for autistic children, flexible seating arrangements, and the incorporation of sign language into performances. Staff frequently described the event as welcoming, inclusive, and accessible.

(v) High Quality Organisation

Qualitative data across the three years showed that teachers were impressed with the professionalism of event organisation, including arrival procedures, seating arrangements, resources provided in advance, audience management, and departure arrangements. Schools noted that staff and performers helped ensure a positive experience for all attendees

‘Behind the Scenes’

The event you could say is the celebration / finale of all the hard work that goes on behind the scenes before, during and after the occasion. The peer researchers reflected on how much thought is given to the process of putting on such an event?

This includes:-

- Finances.
- Headteachers agreement to promote engagement of teachers and pupils with Music Services, the music teachers undertaking the preparatory tutorials and, releasing teachers / support staff on the days of the event; Complying with risk assessments / Safeguarding.
- Parental consent.

- Paul Wilcox puts on a series of videos on YouTube several months beforehand introducing tutorials for music teachers and the pupils to use in the classroom but the latter to use with their friends, or individually to learn the songs and the actions to the music in their free time. Importantly, the strength of music both vocally and instrumentally as an expression of communication, collaboration and art is explored as well as lots of vocal coaching and tips.

<https://youtu.be/lmP5urIpyqg?si=8p1QwHg-FSwB7NXe> (WATCH HERE)

- Transportation – negotiating the cost of coaches and the logistics of organising the timings to safely get the children to and from the event.
- Security at the venue - Security is employed by The Halls and while it is thorough, the staff are child sensitive. Ushers are very welcoming and helpful.
- Consideration of varying children's needs in terms of accessibility, BSL interpreters on stage and on large screen, neuro divergence and physical needs.
- In addition to the staff outlined, are the musicians themselves and less obvious are Costume designers, choreographers, sound, light, production engineers which are professions also to aspire to in the arts. Notably, Paul Wilcox highlighted the importance of these crucial components to the success of the event more in 2025 compared to 2024.
- Following the event data is sought in relation to how much the children enjoyed it, what they thought of it, whether they want to engage in future events, whether they would like to take up a musical instrument / consider a career in music / arts etc.

It is a credit to all staff involved as to how they make getting to/from the event, and for the children to be seated and exited in such a smooth fashion, while not detracting from the overall experience! Finally, the children are enriched for the experience which pervades all Wolverhampton communities.

4.1.3 Contribution Analysis: Learning from the 'Singing in the Halls' Case

The evaluation demonstrates that *Singing in the Halls* was highly successful in delivering an enjoyable, inclusive, and inspirational live music experience. The programme achieved very high satisfaction ratings and appears to contribute meaningfully to cultural engagement, musical participation, and interest in future arts activities. The feedback suggests that the event is particularly valuable in providing first-hand exposure to live music for children who might otherwise have limited access to such experiences. Minor refinements to repertoire selection and venue logistics could further strengthen an already highly regarded programme.

4.1.4 'Orchestras for All' – peer researcher blog post (OVERLEAF)

4.1.5 Contribution Analysis: Learning from the 'Orchestras for All' Case (P.18)

This case provides strong contribution evidence that WCOYC is activating key mechanisms within its programme theory of change by removing access barriers and normalising high-quality cultural experiences at scale. The interview illustrates how WCOYC investment and partnership working enabled universal, school-based encounters with live orchestral music—an early-stage outcome intended to ensure that *all* children, regardless of background or ability to pay, are exposed to cultural experiences they might not otherwise access. Evidence that large numbers of pupils subsequently expressed interest in learning instruments supports the plausibility of the programme's causal pathway from exposure to increased aspiration and engagement. The participant's emphasis on repeat delivery over three consecutive years demonstrates how WCOYC contributes not only to one-off experiences but to consistency, trust, and system readiness, allowing activity to be refined

and embedded within schools. At the same time, the interview usefully surfaces contextual constraints—such as cost-of-living pressures, curriculum compression, and wider deprivation—that shape outcomes and sit beyond the programme's direct control. Taken together, this strengthens the contribution narrative by showing that observed changes are consistent with WCOYC's design and intent, while acknowledging that the programme operates as a **significant enabling factor within a wider education, funding, and policy system**, rather than as a sole driver of long-term change.



An Orchestral Adventure Through Time

Authors:

**Doina Surchicin, Taneesha Lewis,
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On the 11th of February 2025, the peer researchers of the 'Wolverhampton City of Youth Culture' project attended 'An Orchestral Adventure Through Time', an incredible concert that explored music spanning over 300 years. The event took place at The Halls in Wolverhampton City Centre, with two sessions across the day. Led by presenter Rachel Leach, with Peter Morris conducting the Wolverhampton Symphony Orchestra and Catriona Roberts leading the Wolverhampton Youth Orchestra, the event introduced students to key musical concepts such as tonality, harmony, dynamics and rhythm.

The sounds of excitement and chatter filled the venue as different schools from across Wolverhampton came to attend the event. When it was time to begin, the conductor calmly and wordlessly commanded attention, and the room fell silent. The host then carried out a short yet detailed introduction as to what the event entailed - a journey through almost 400 years of classical music, which the audience of young people all cheered for.

Throughout the concert, students experienced a diverse selection of pieces, from the Baroque era with Te Deum (1692) to modern compositions like Baba Yetu (2005). Each piece highlighted different aspects of orchestral music, from Beethoven's powerful Symphony No. 5 to the dramatic intensity of Mars, the Bringer of War.

Between each performance, the host led short segments that included either interactive music activities with the crowd or entertaining mini educational lessons based on music history and music theory. Comedic elements and call-and-response exercises in these segments kept the whole event engaging and fun.

A special moment was the introduction of Grace Evangeline Mason, a young composer from Wolverhampton, who shared her journey from orchestra member to composer. Grace shared the inspiration behind her piece “The Imagined Forest” before the orchestra played an excerpt of the piece itself. Her attendance acted as an inspiring example of what someone in Wolverhampton can achieve; it was also a brilliant example for the young girls in the audience, showing them this is a path they could also take if they wish.

This event was an exciting way for young people to discover orchestral music, its history, and its impact. Keep reading to dive deeper into some of the students’ and teachers’ feedback from the event and what made it so special!

Reactions to the event

One Year 7 teacher shared his excitement about the event, describing how students were engaged throughout the day. He noted how the morning group tended to be a little quieter, while the afternoon session was livelier – a true reflection on how students behave at school! He was so impressed by the high-quality resource materials provided and suggested that if schools received them at the start of the academic year, they could be woven into the curriculum for even greater impact. Beyond the music itself, he appreciated the opportunity to bring so many of his students along to such a prestigious event. Overall, he described the event as a “brilliant opportunity” that left a lasting impression on both him and his students.

So what did the students think? Speaking with the students after the event, their enthusiasm was clear:

“I loved the Star Wars music!”

“It was fantastic, I really loved the different music that was played.”

“I really enjoyed the aesthetic of the whole event—it was really nice.”

“I used to play the guitar, and it made me think of that.”

“It would be good to hear music that we listen to now as classical music.”

For many young people, this was their first real encounter with live classical music but by the end of the event many students said they would now consider attending a classical music performance, something they never would have thought about before. If experiences like this can inspire a new generation to engage with live music, then that is a truly incredible outcome.

This Orchestral Adventure Through Time concert, organised by Wolverhampton Music Service, provided these young people a refreshing break from a typical school day. It highlighted how alongside education, real-life experiences are equally important for their overall development. This experience will surely inspire many of these young people to explore music on a deeper level, as long as support and opportunities continue to be available to them to pursue this interest.

4.2.1 Peer researcher interview with Senior Operational Lead

“It was more of a chance rather than a plan – but a lovely one.”

Since joining the organisation, the participant moved from Office Manager into Operations Lead and internal HR support, taking on increasing responsibility for programme design and delivery: a progression route that illustrates LearnPlay’s emphasis on internal development, adaptability, and skills transfer across operational and creative roles.

Barriers to Young People’s Engagement in Arts and Culture

The participant identified multiple, intersecting barriers affecting young people’s engagement in arts, culture, and creative digital experiences, particularly within the Wolverhampton context.

At a societal level, barriers include:

- Limited arts engagement within family and home environments
- Financial hardship restricting access to activities
- Ongoing post-COVID anxiety, reduced confidence, and social withdrawal

“They fear it, because they don’t know how to act around others anymore.”

Locally, Wolverhampton-specific challenges further compound these issues:

- High levels of disadvantage and young people not in education, employment or training
- Concerns about personal safety, particularly when travelling independently into the city centre

“A lot of the young people we spoke to don’t feel safe accessing the city by themselves.”

In response, Learn Play has adopted a youth-led, trauma-aware, and highly flexible approach, adapting delivery based on continuous feedback and the emotional and behavioural needs of participants.

“We talk to people... we listen to what they want to see, what else they want to do.”

Involvement in the WCOYC Programme

LearnPlay’s involvement in WCOYC was motivated by existing trusted partnerships and a shared belief in the value of collaboration to extend reach and deepen impact.

“We knew what each of us could bring to make the project successful.”

As part of WCOYC, LearnPlay delivered creative digital experiences, including virtual reality, 3D printing, and hands-on technology sessions, often adapting content to suit specific school contexts and learner needs.

“We give them hands-on experience... and facilitators who work in the field.”

These sessions were designed to link digital creativity with real-world career pathways, helping young people see technology as both accessible and relevant to their futures.

Impact and Outcomes

Through WCOYC-supported activity, Learn Play engaged over 600 young people, with particularly strong uptake from schools serving young people who are often described as ‘hard to reach’.

The participant highlighted both the scale of demand and the organisation’s commitment to access, even beyond funded provision:

“We’ve even done sessions that weren’t funded just to give the kids a chance.”

The success of the programme revealed a significant unmet need for creative digital opportunities in the city, particularly for young people who may not otherwise encounter such experiences through school or family networks.

Learning and Programme Development

A key learning from WCOYC delivery challenged assumptions around gender and digital engagement. Contrary to prevailing stereotypes, girls responded extremely positively when opportunities were made explicitly inclusive and accessible.

“Girls are very interested – they just don’t usually get the same opportunities.”

Girls-only sessions proved particularly effective, reinforcing the importance of intentional design in addressing participation inequalities. This learning has informed the organisation’s future programming and reinforced its commitment to inclusive digital creativity.

Looking Forward: Legacy and Access

The participant reflected strongly on the long-term value of WCOYC partnerships, noting strengthened organisational relationships and an enhanced local offer as lasting benefits:

“We got to enhance what we already offered in Wolverhampton by being part of the project.”

Looking ahead, they expressed a clear aspiration for sustained, long-term access to arts and digital culture for Wolverhampton’s young people, emphasising the importance of habit-forming engagement:

“If it’s there all the time, it becomes a habit... and one day, they’ll pass that on to their children.”

An additional reflection focused on the growing centrality of digital skills post-pandemic, and the responsibility of organisations to support young people in navigating this landscape safely and confidently:

“Digital is here to stay... we need to make sure young people can swim, not sink.”

Key Organisational Insights:

- Non-linear career pathways can strengthen cultural organisations by combining operational and creative expertise
- Trauma-aware, responsive delivery is essential for sustained engagement post-COVID
- Digital creativity is no longer optional and must be treated as core cultural infrastructure
- Inclusive design, particularly around gender and access, significantly improves outcomes
- Long-term, visible provision is key to shifting generational patterns of cultural participation

4.2.2 Contribution Analysis: Learning from This Case

This interview provides strong contribution evidence that WCOYC is operating as intended within its programme-level theory of change by increasing equitable access to high-quality, relevant cultural experiences and translating that access into increased engagement, confidence, and skills development. The account demonstrates how WCOYC enables trusted local organisations to extend provision to young people who would otherwise face multiple barriers—including financial hardship, low confidence, safety concerns, and limited family exposure to culture—thereby addressing the programme’s early-stage assumptions about access and reach. The participant’s reflections suggest that hands-on, youth-led, trauma-aware digital activity functions as a critical engagement mechanism, particularly for young people who are disengaged from formal education or traditional arts offers. Evidence of high participation, strong school demand, and successful engagement of “hard-to-reach” groups supports the plausibility of WCOYC’s causal pathway from exposure to sustained interest.

Learning around gender-inclusive digital delivery further strengthens the explanation of *how* and *why* outcomes occurred, showing that intentional design choices influence who benefits. At the same time, the interview surfaces contextual factors—such as generational disadvantage, post-pandemic mental health impacts, and safety concerns—that sit beyond the programme’s direct control and help explain variability in progression. Overall, this case reinforces WCOYC’s role as a **contributing catalyst** within a wider system, helping to normalise cultural and digital participation, strengthen local delivery ecosystems, and lay the foundations for longer-term shifts in cultural confidence and habitual engagement rather than acting as a single determining cause of change.

4.3 Partner case study: Gazebo Theatre

4.3.1 Peer researcher interview with Senior Gazebo Theatre Practitioner – May 2025

Barriers to Young People’s Engagement in the Arts

“Even if people don’t go into careers in the arts, I think the arts are really vital... those transferable skills are vital.”

This philosophy underpins Gazebo’s people-centred approach, with creativity used not only as an artistic outcome but as a tool for confidence-building, employability, personal development and transferable life skills, regardless of whether young people pursue creative careers.

The participant identified structural, societal, and local barriers affecting young people’s access to arts and cultural opportunities in Wolverhampton.

Key challenges include:

- Reduced arts provision in schools due to funding pressures
- Low confidence, anxiety, and reluctance to enter unfamiliar spaces, intensified by the social impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic
- Financial barriers such as travel, food, parking, and unpaid opportunities
- Limited parental confidence in arts careers
- Lack of awareness of non-performance roles within the sector

“Arts in schools frustrates me... if you aren’t even giving the youngest people opportunities to engage in valid arts delivery, what’s the impact of that in 5, 10, 15 years?”

The participant noted that financial incentives significantly improve engagement, particularly for young people experiencing economic disadvantage:

“They got paid £150 a day, and that was probably the highest engagement we have ever had.”

They also highlighted Wolverhampton’s deprivation context as amplifying these challenges:

“It is an area of deprivation... I do think it’s worse than in some other areas.”

Involvement in the WCOYC Programme

Gazebo’s involvement in WCOYC was driven by alignment with its values, a desire to reach new audiences, and an opportunity to apply learning from previous programmes in a new partnership context:

“The concept of the City of Youth Culture is really exciting.”

The organisation contributed through Creative Tasters, festival programming, and skills-based pathways focused on backstage and technical roles, including prop-making, lighting, and design:

“We very much looked at the sort of things that maybe they wouldn’t have traditionally done... prop making, set design, theatrical makeup.”

The programme was tailored to the 16–24 age group, with safeguarding structures already in place, though the participant expressed a strong view that earlier engagement (14–16) would strengthen progression routes:

“I wish it was 14–24... 14–16 would be a nice springboard into other things.”

Impact and Outcomes

Gazebo captures impact using a combination of soft assessments, one-to-one evaluations, organisational markers, and qualitative feedback.

Reported outcomes include:

- 100% positive feedback
- 100% increase in confidence
- 72% progression into employment or training

The participant shared a powerful example of individual transformation:

“We had one young person last year who was so quiet you couldn’t hear any voice at all... She came onboard and did all our lighting operation for the winter production.”

Impact extends beyond individuals to families and communities, with increased exposure to arts events and venues:

“Family members come along and see performances – it widens their world.”

Learning and Organisational Development

Participation in WCOYC enabled Gazebo to:

- Refine programme length and structure
- Improve outcomes by working with slightly larger groups
- Adapt content directly in response to young people’s feedback
- Strengthen collaboration with regional partners

Learning has been iterative and embedded into year two delivery:

“It is to ensure it’s relevant – that we’re preparing young people in the right way.”

Capacity constraints remain a challenge, particularly around evening and weekend delivery, but the organisation remains committed to responsiveness and innovation.

Looking Forward: Legacy and Sustainability

The participant strongly expressed a desire for WCOYC to continue and for its identity to become more visible and better understood by young people, schools, and communities:

“I’d like it to continue... I’d like its stamp to be felt.”

“All the arms of it are really strong, but the overarching identity and branding could really be pushed and amplified.”

Benefits from the partnership include expanded professional networks, improved placement opportunities for young people, and shared learning across organisations. Future ambitions include:

- Earlier engagement with children and young people
- Stronger branding and communications
- A proposed “cultural learning passport” to support sustained arts engagement across life stages

Key Organisational Insights:

- Creative engagement is most effective when financial, emotional and practical barriers are addressed together
- Non-performance roles provide accessible entry points into the arts workforce
- Long-term impact depends on early access, clear progression routes, and visible identity
- Strong partnerships can generate value beyond funding, through trust, networks and shared purpose

4.3.2 Contribution Analysis: Learning from This Case

This interview provides credible contribution evidence that WCOYC is strengthening access, confidence, and progression pathways for young people through a combination of partnership working, tailored provision, and iterative learning. The participant’s account suggests that WCOYC contributes to observed outcomes by enabling organisations to refine and scale practice that is already effective—such as skills-based tasters, financial incentives, and bespoke support—rather than introducing wholly new activity. The data indicates that where young people experience multiple touchpoints (training, mentoring, paid opportunities, and progression routes), confidence and engagement increase, supporting the programme’s theory of change. Importantly, the interview also highlights limiting factors that sit outside the project’s direct control—such as school funding constraints, parental perceptions, transport costs, and post-pandemic workforce gaps—which help explain why progression is uneven despite strong delivery.

This strengthens the causal narrative by showing that outcomes are plausible and consistent with the pro-

gramme’s design, while also underlining that WCOYC operates as a **contributing mechanism within a complex system**, rather than as a sole driver of change. Learning from this case reinforces the importance of early engagement, financial accessibility, strong identity and branding, and sustained partnership infrastructure in maximising WCOYC’s contribution to long-term cultural participation and creative workforce development.

4.4 Partner case study: Cultural Education Partnership

4.4.1 Peer researcher interview with Coordinator of the Same Difference Festival and Head of the Cultural Education Partnership – May 2025

Organisational Context

The Cultural Education Partnership (CEP) comprises around 40 member organisations and practitioners, working collaboratively to promote diversity, inclusion, and co-produced cultural activity across Wolverhampton. The partnership provides administrative support, coordination, and co-production opportunities, with a strong emphasis on young people shaping decision-making and outcomes.

Young people are actively embedded within governance and delivery structures, including a cultural youth board of around nine members, alongside wider consultation with younger participants:

“There is a cultural youth board which is led by young people... they are part of developing the programme and proposals are sent to all younger members so that they can all contribute and make their own changes.”

In addition, 25 young volunteers were involved in delivering the 2024 Same Difference Festival, demonstrating the organisation’s commitment to participation beyond consultation and into delivery.

Barriers to Young People’s Engagement in Arts and Culture

A significant theme in the interview was the challenge of engaging young people through schools, which remain a primary access route but are often difficult to work with:

“Promoting to younger people has been difficult overall... many schools are not receptive when we contact them.”

The participant described a reliance on informal networks within schools, noting that access often depends on existing relationships rather than systematic pathways:

“A lot has come down to ‘who you know’ – if you don’t know the staff it can be hard for them to promote material or events.”

Despite attempting to contact all secondary and primary schools in Wolverhampton, no notable difference was observed between school types, suggesting a city-wide systemic issue rather than isolated cases.

Parental anxiety was identified as another key barrier, particularly concerns around the viability of arts careers:

“Many parents are concerned that arts and cultural pathways could lead their child down a path where they might not be able to find sustainable careers or incomes.”

The participant also highlighted a notable gender imbalance, with around 90% of those involved in CEP co-production and youth leadership being female. While some events, such as the Same Difference Festival, attracted a more mixed audience, addressing male participation was identified as a priority area for learning and future development.

Involvement in the WCOYC Programme

CEP’s involvement in WCOYC aligned strongly with its existing ethos around collaboration, co-production, and youth leadership. The programme provided a platform to strengthen partnerships, amplify young people’s voices, and align cultural activity under a shared city-wide framework.

A key benefit of the collaboration was the opportunity to work more closely with other organisations and explore joint funding approaches. However, the participant expressed concern about sustainability beyond the WCOYC funding period, noting that the CEP’s current delivery is largely dependent on this investment:

“This is Wolverhampton CEP’s only source of funding so I am unsure if it will exist after this project funding ends.”

Impact and Learning

Despite these challenges, the participant reflected positively on the impact of working with young people through WCOYC-linked activity. They described clear developmental benefits for participants, particularly in

terms of confidence, enjoyment, and future thinking:

“It’s great to see young people enjoying and engaging with the arts... it really helps them develop as people and think about their own interests and potential careers too.”

The interview also highlighted the importance of encouraging independence and self-direction, supporting young people not only to participate but to lead, shape agendas, and take ownership of cultural activity.

Looking Forward: Legacy and Sustainability

Looking to the future, the participant expressed a strong desire for the collaboration and relationships built through WCOYC to continue in some form, even if the current structure ends. There was a clear ambition to maintain momentum through partnership working, joint funding bids, and shared advocacy for cultural education across the city. At the same time, the interview surfaced a degree of uncertainty about long-term sustainability, reinforcing the importance of planning for legacy beyond the funded period.

Key Organisational Insights:

- Youth-led governance and co-production strengthen relevance and ownership
- Schools remain a crucial but inconsistent access point for young people
- Parental perceptions significantly influence engagement and career aspirations
- Gender disparities require intentional, targeted responses
- Partnership working creates opportunities for shared funding and resilience, but sustainability remains fragile

4.4.2 Same Difference Youth Festival: snapshot interviews in the park with performers and the public

Parents and very young child (Aug 2024):

“I’m from Wolverhampton and was just walking past and was curious and like the fact it’s outside and we’ve got the good weather. I’m not fully aware of what’s going on in Wolverhampton arts wise. But would come back again next year if available”

Mother and young son (Aug 2024)

“We’re from Wolverhampton....I heard about the event through my oldest daughter...I came because my younger son enjoys music and wants to play music but he’s been on the waiting list for two years to be chosen to play an instrument in school...it’s like pulling a random name from a hat...”

I’ve attended many arts and cultural events around Wolverhampton, especially musical events but we need more events in Wolverhampton....I’ve really enjoyed the live music today but think there should be more food options in future years – I’m gluten free.”

Art teacher and younger son (Aug 2024):

“I’ve travelled from Kidderminster...I heard about the event from a Facebook ad...I go to lots of events around Wolverhampton when I am available...I’ve really enjoyed the live bands (my son is in one of the bands) and the security here is very good, very good safeguarding...As an art teacher I strongly support the arts and their value for wide groups of people.”

Woman and son (Aug 2024):

“I’m from Wolverhampton....I heard about this event from a friend who sent me a link online.... It’s my first ever event in Wolverhampton like this, I’ve never experienced anything arts and culture wise....I’ve really enjoyed the food, music and the fact that it was free to the public.”

Performer (Aug 2025):

“This is my very first time attending and performing at the festival. I’m absolutely loving it, it’s such a great community, it’s been a warm and welcoming experience!”

In terms of accessibility and inclusion, I feel the event worked well overall but suggest that more toilets would be helpful and there should be more food options available. As a performer, the festival has run smoothly for me, although the stage was quite tight for dancers and a bigger stage would improve things in future years....

I’m not familiar with Wolverhampton City of Youth Culture but would be interested in signing up for information.”

4.4.3 Same Difference Youth Festival: impacts and a peer researcher’s reflections for the future

The Same Difference Youth Festival, hosted by Wolverhampton CEP, is a creative festival that showcases local young talent, from singers to bands to dancers, aged 11 to 18, who take the stage to perform. Alongside this, the festival hosts a range of creative and cultural activities for attendees to try, which have previously included painting, Bhangra dance, Dhol drumming, stone decorating, and pom pom making. There are information stalls from services relevant to young people, such as Wolverhampton City of Youth Culture, Yo! Wolves, and School Nurses.

Whilst targeted as a youth festival for 11- to 18-year-olds, Same Difference sees adults attending with babies and younger children alongside the targeted demographic. Many attendees make the most of the day by bringing blankets and foldable chairs to get comfortable and enjoy the talent, have a base to come back to after enjoying the activities, or to eat food.

In addition to the main festival, Wolverhampton Arts Centre hosts an inclusive version of Same Difference led by Big Top Music. This festival offers bookable and walk-in sensory, music, and arts and crafts sessions for young people with learning disabilities/additional needs and their families and carers.

The impact

Young Wolverhampton creatives have been given a platform to showcase their talents, passion, and hard work in front of a crowd that not only turned up to watch but actively supports and celebrates them as they perform through cheers and applause. The interactions between the performers themselves and also between the crowd and performers create a sense of community spirit during the festival. Not only this, but the young performers who might be practicing or creating in isolation or smaller groups have the chance to integrate and connect with a wider community.

It can often be difficult for young people to access creative opportunities for reasons such as the financial costs of some activities, pressures from caregivers to focus on academics, or there simply not being many opportunities available. Having a free, easy-to-access creative festival specifically for young people is a special place for the youth of Wolverhampton and their families to explore creative, culture, and arts freely.

Same Difference Youth Festival is a space that allows young people to experience arts and culture, connect with the community, create memories, and be inspired to pursue creative endeavors for fun or as a career.

Future thinking

Whilst the main festival offers a wide range of opportunities for young people, including performance, performance spectator, and creative activity participation, the inclusive festival currently only offers interactive music and sensory activities. There is potential to expand the opportunities available here to a similar level to the main part of the festival, provided enough funding and resources are available. This could include offering relaxed performances of music, singing, or dance, performing opportunities for young creatives with SEND, a food stand, and local service stalls.

4.4.3 Contribution Analysis: Learning from This Case

This case provides credible contribution evidence that WCOYC is strengthening the *conditions* required for increased youth-led cultural engagement in Wolverhampton, particularly through partnership infrastructure, co-ordination, and amplification of young people’s voices. The interview demonstrates how WCOYC contributes to early- and mid-stage outcomes in the programme theory of change by resourcing collaboration across organisations, enabling CEP to convene partners, support co-production, and embed young people in governance

through mechanisms such as the cultural youth board. Evidence that young people are actively shaping programmes, leading meetings, and volunteering at major festivals supports the plausibility of WCOYC’s assumption that meaningful participation builds confidence, agency, and connection to culture. At the same time, the interview surfaces systemic constraints—such as school gatekeeping, parental anxiety about arts careers, gender imbalances, and fragile funding structures—that limit progression and sit largely outside the programme’s direct control.

This strengthens the contribution narrative by demonstrating why outcomes may vary despite strong delivery and highlights WCOYC’s role as a *catalytic enabler* rather than a sole driver of change. Learning from this case reinforces the importance of sustained funding, shared advocacy with schools and parents, and long-term partnership models to translate youth-led engagement into durable cultural participation and leadership pathways beyond the life of the programme.

4.5 Partner case study: Wolverhampton Arts Centre

4.5.1 Peer researcher interview with WCOYC Project Manager – April 2025

Partnership and Added Value

WCOYC is a **partnership-driven initiative** funded through Arts Council England. The project brings together multiple organisations to deliver cultural activities for young people across Wolverhampton. Wolverhampton Arts Centre (WAC), formerly Newhampton Arts Centre (NAC), is a multi-use cultural venue that has played a central coordinating role in the **WCOYC** programme. WAC acts as the **lead partner and governing body** for WCOYC, overseeing finances, contracts, and partnership relationships. The participant explained that a key strength of WCOYC is its collaborative model, encouraging organisations to work together rather than compete. This strengthens:

- Sector relationships
- Resource sharing
- Collective impact across the city

Barriers to Youth Engagement

The case study identified several key barriers affecting young people’s participation in arts and culture:

(i) Financial Constraints

Rising living costs limit access to cultural activities:

“There could be a cost barrier... families might not have... disposable income.”

(ii) Geographic and Safety Concerns

Travel and parental perceptions can restrict participation:

“The journey to get to the venue might be problematic.”

(iii) Confidence and Post-COVID Impacts

Social anxiety and isolation affect engagement:

“Young people might not have the confidence to go out and mix...combined with the impacts of COVID

which has led to some young people keeping themselves isolated.”

(iv) Cultural Expectations

Some families prioritise academic success over creative engagement:

“We’ve found that some parents, especially if parents are from a cultural background that are very driven with their young people, might not want children to be spending time in cultural or creative activities here because they want them to be focused on academic work...so that there’s lots of different layers of things”

Such barriers are interconnected and reflect broader structural inequalities in access to the arts.

Impact and Outcomes

The programme has already demonstrated **significant reach and impact**, particularly through large-scale cultural experiences:

“5000 children experienced the orchestra events... those children probably wouldn’t have had that opportunity...and then the impact on the child’s perception of what a music venue is, what goes on in an orchestra, seeing younger people playing instruments and then thinking ‘you know I might fancy doing that”

The participant summarised that these experiences have:

- Increased exposure to arts and culture
- Built confidence and aspiration
- Changed perceptions of creative opportunities

Legacy and Future Development

The programme is already generating longer-term outcomes:

v Youth Voice and Leadership

A Cultural Youth Board has been established:

“We’ve developed a Cultural Youth Board which is ever evolving.”

v New Opportunities and Projects

WCOYC is creating further initiatives and employment pathways:

“It’s enabling other things to come out of it which leverage other opportunities, for example, the artist-led workshops for the visual arts trail and exhibitions are being developed with local

professional artists who then deliver workshops to young people....so it's giving opportunities for freelancers and but also creating pieces of work that will be exhibited in the city, which then helps the city's perception of having something positive happening."

Key Insights

This case highlights:

- Persistent regional inequalities in cultural opportunity
- The importance of addressing multiple barriers to access
- The effectiveness of partnership-led delivery models
- The value of embedding youth voice in programme design
- The need to build sustainability beyond funding cycles

4.5.2 Visual Arts Trail – peer researcher snapshots of workshop observations

Piece 2: Rhythms of Wolverhampton Youth (August 2024)

Designer Rachel Winsper and Young Creators at Beatsabar & Wolverhampton Arts Centre

The printmaking workshops, delivered as part of the City of Youth Culture Project at Wolverhampton Arts Centre, were highly successful in engaging young participants in a creative, collaborative process. For these workshops a new partnership was developed in Year 1 of the project with a local music organisation, Beatsabar, who became one of several associate partners for the project. Across both groups, participants demonstrated strong levels of focus, enthusiasm, and creativity, with many expressing pride in their work and interest in pursuing similar activities in the future.

The workshop structure effectively combined sound and visual arts, using a collaboratively created musical beat as a stimulus for abstract mark-making and print design. Participants progressed through a structured process of creating marks, selecting and refining designs, carving lino blocks, and producing repeat prints. This approach supported skill development in both creative techniques and safe tool use, while allowing space for experimentation and social interaction.

Engagement was consistently high. Participants became deeply absorbed in the activity, often losing track of time, and showed resilience and trust in the creative process even when outcomes were initially uncertain. The gallery setting enhanced the experience, particularly for those with limited prior exposure to arts venues, contributing to a sense of excitement and value.

Both groups displayed positive social dynamics, including collaboration, peer support, and shared problem-solving (e.g. helping with aprons, discussing design combinations). While Group 1 was quieter and more focused, Group 2 exhibited more verbal interaction and energy; however, both maintained strong engagement with the tasks. Minor behavioural challenges occurred but were effectively managed without disrupting overall participation.

The workshops also provided meaningful enrichment opportunities. Many participants noted they would otherwise spend their time passively (e.g. watching TV or gaming), highlighting the importance of accessible creative provision. The integration of music, opportunities to get hands-on and "messy," and informal elements such as shared breaks contributed to a relaxed and inclusive atmosphere.

Overall, the workshops fostered creativity, confidence, teamwork, and a sense of achievement. They introduced participants to new artistic processes and environments, broadened aspirations, and delivered a positive, memorable cultural experience.

A peer researcher organisational interview with partner Beatsabar CIC

Beatsabar CIC is a Wolverhampton-based creative organisation that has evolved from a small recording studio into a **community-focused arts hub**, primarily supporting young people through music and creative activities. The organisation's development has been driven by a strong commitment to creativity and lived experience, with the participant noting:

"Music has always been my passion."

Over time, Beatsabar has become increasingly professionalised, transitioning into a Community Interest Company and securing funding to expand its work. Following COVID-19, the organisation shifted its focus significantly towards **youth and community provision**, now delivering approximately 70% of its work in this area, including support for disengaged young people and those outside education or employment.

Barriers to Youth Engagement

The interview highlights several ongoing barriers affecting young people's participation in arts and cultural activities:

- **Motivational and behavioural barriers**, including limited perseverance and understanding of creative processes:

"They don't persevere long enough... if they don't get results straight away."

- **Financial and access barriers**, which restrict participation for some young people
- **Capacity constraints**, with demand exceeding available space and resources:

"We have 20 children every single day... but I'm turning people away as well."

These findings suggest both **high demand** and ongoing structural challenges in meeting the needs of local young people.

Involvement in WCOYC

Beatsabar's participation in the WCOYC programme built on its existing reputation and strong engagement with local young people:

"They needed us to be able to tell our young people about what they were doing."

The organisation delivered **innovative, cross-disciplinary workshops**, combining music and visual arts. These activities provided new creative experiences for participants, including producing artwork inspired by music and contributing to publicly exhibited outputs.

Impact and Outcomes

The programme generated clear **emotional and social benefits** for young people, with success primarily measured through engagement, enjoyment, and self-expression:

"Seeing the smiles on the kids' faces... it was something we'd never done before."

Young people gained:

- Opportunities for **creative expression and ownership**
- Exposure to **new artistic practices**
- A sense of **achievement and enjoyment**

Partnership Experience

Participation in WCOYC brought important organisational benefits, including:

- **Financial support**, contributing to organisational sustainability
- Opportunities to build **new partnerships**, including with universities and arts organisations

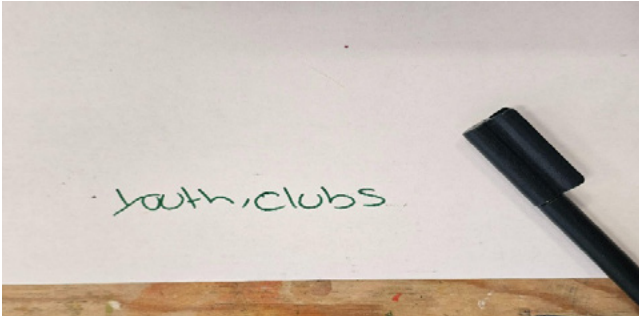
However, the interview also identifies some **challenges in delivery**, particularly around communication and co-ordination within the wider partnership:

"Some things that were said didn't happen..."

Piece 3: Neon Dreams (Sept 2024)

Artist Kathleen Fabre and Young Creators at the Urban Rooms 01902

A pre-workshop was held at the Urban Rooms (which became another associate partner for the project in Year 1) to prepare for the full mixed media workshop. The workshop functioned primarily as a creative planning and discussion session rather than a hands-on making activity, but still provided valuable insights into participant interests, needs, and engagement. Despite low attendance, the session fostered a lively and open environment, supported by music and an informal setup that encouraged conversation and spontaneous participation.



Participants, including a returning 10-year-old and several Year 11 students who briefly joined, engaged in meaningful discussions around the theme of “what they would like to see in Wolverhampton.” Ideas generated reflected a strong desire for more youth-focused spaces and opportunities. Suggestions included youth clubs, safe social environments, and dedicated spaces for discussion and debate around issues such as mental health, school pressures, and future aspirations. Creative suggestions also extended to improving the city’s cultural identity and tourism, such as introducing landmarks or transforming public spaces into performance venues.



The session highlighted a clear gap in accessible creative opportunities for young people, particularly for those in exam years who reported limited time and provision for creative activities within school. Participants expressed a strong appetite for varied creative and career-related opportunities, spanning fields such as fashion, music, sport, and digital industries.

Although no physical artworks were produced, the session successfully supported creative thinking, self-expression, and idea-sharing in a relaxed and inclusive setting. The workshop leader played an important role in encouraging participation and creating a supportive atmosphere.

Key challenges identified included low attendance and limited awareness of the sessions. Participants emphasised the need for improved promotion and outreach to increase engagement and ensure that more young people can access these opportunities.

Following this, the mixed media workshop held at Urban Rooms, Wolverhampton, offered a highly engaging and socially dynamic creative experience. The session was characterised by a vibrant atmosphere, with music, bold visual materials (including neon paints), and informal interactions contributing to an energetic and welcoming environment.

Participants of varying ages engaged in both individual and collaborative art-making, working on small canvases and contributing to a larger collective piece. The workshop successfully fostered creativity alongside conversation, with participants comfortably discussing personal interests, relationships, career aspirations, and wider topics while remaining focused on their artwork. This relaxed setting encouraged authentic engagement and supported a strong sense of community.

The session demonstrated clear strengths in building confidence and ownership. Older participants were gradually supported to take creative leadership in assembling the final artwork, initially showing hesitation but growing in confidence as they made decisions collaboratively. Across the group, participants expressed enjoyment of the creative process and pride in their contributions.

The workshop also highlighted important access and engagement considerations. Awareness of activities was largely informal and inconsistent, often relying on personal networks or social media, with participants expressing a desire for a more centralised source of information. Preferences for communication platforms varied, with Instagram seen as more trustworthy than TikTok. Transport was noted as a potential barrier, particularly for younger people reliant on public transport.

The presence of a parent and child attending together illustrated the workshop’s accessibility and appeal across age groups, as well as its potential to support intergenerational engagement. Participants also expressed interest in further creative opportunities, including clubs and local arts events.

Overall, the workshop provided an inclusive, informal, and stimulating environment that effectively supported creative expression, social interaction, and confidence-building. It fostered a sense of belonging and highlighted both the demand for and barriers to accessing ongoing creative opportunities.

A peer researcher interview with artist Kathleen Fabre

Background and Artistic Practice

Kathleen is a multidisciplinary, freelance artist whose career pathway into the arts was **non-linear and shaped by personal challenges**. After a difficult early life and working outside the sector, she entered higher education later than typical and rediscovered her identity as an artist through a Fine Art degree:

“It wasn’t until my late 20s that I actually was able to go to uni... it was... that I realised, oh my God, I’m an artist.”

Her practice is concept-led and spans multiple media, driven by an interest in space, light, and public engagement. Alongside her artistic work, she delivers arts education as a key source of income within a freelance career.

Connection to Wolverhampton

Kathleen has strong professional and emotional ties to Wolverhampton, where she studied and has continued to work extensively:

“Everything I did was in Wolverhampton... I’ve worked freelance with Wolverhampton Art Gallery ever since.”

She highlights the importance of such urban centres in providing opportunities, particularly compared to areas with limited cultural infrastructure:

“If I compare it to somewhere like Stafford, we’ve got no opportunities for young people... Wolverhampton has got a lot of opportunities.”

Barriers to Youth Engagement

The interview identifies several key barriers affecting young people’s access to arts activities:

v **Practical barriers**, particularly transport and cost:

“Some kids won’t have the money to come into the city centre.”

v **Awareness and communication barriers**, with difficulty finding out about available opportunities:

“There’s a lot going on... and you don’t always know what’s going on.”

Despite these challenges, she notes that opportunities in Wolverhampton have **increased over time**, particularly through community-based initiatives

Role in WCOYC and Workshop Delivery

Kathleen delivered two contrasting sets of workshops as part of the Visual Arts Trail:

v **Open-access, street-based workshops**, engaging passers-by in spontaneous creative activity.

v **Structured, booked sessions**, including workshops delivered on a canal boat.

Her facilitation approach emphasised **flexibility, participant-led creativity, and experimentation with new materials and techniques**, avoiding rigid structures:

“I didn’t want to have a set... theme... I tried to guide it... without suffocating it.”

She prioritised introducing **new skills and creative experiences**, rather than replicating familiar activities:

“Anyone can just draw on paper... where’s the magic in that?”

Impact on Young People

The workshops generated a range of positive outcomes:

v **Increased confidence and self-expression**, supported by a focus on creative freedom:

“There’s no right and wrong in art... I emphasise that massively.”

v **Skills development**, through exposure to new materials and techniques

v **Wellbeing benefits**, with art providing relaxation, enjoyment, and emotional expression

v **Unexpected engagement**, particularly through informal outreach:

“They didn’t know what was going on... but they came and then got involved... by chance.”

A notable example of impact included a young participant who was connected to further opportunities and later performed at a local festival, demonstrating how engagement can lead to **progression pathways and wider participation**.

Value of Public Art and Legacy

Kathleen strongly emphasises the importance of **public-facing outcomes** in driving engagement and long-term impact:

“They’ll always have that memory... they’ll always know that they were a part of that.”

She highlights how visible, permanent artworks:

- v Provide a **sense of achievement and pride**
- v Encourage **ongoing engagement and aspiration**
- v Spark conversations and inspire others

More broadly, she views public art as a way of reaching wider audiences:

“Not everyone goes to an art gallery... but you can’t help but walk past [public art].”

Impact on the City

Kathleen sees the Visual Arts Trail as contributing to:

- v **City beautification and atmosphere**
- v **Inclusive access to culture in public spaces**
- v Increased **visitor engagement and footfall**

She notes that public art can have subtle but meaningful effects on wellbeing:

“It can just make you smile... even for a split second.”

Future Vision and Recommendations

Looking ahead, Kathleen advocates for:

- v Continued and expanded **arts provision for young people**
- v Maintaining a **diverse and inclusive offer across art forms**
- v Ensuring opportunities remain accessible and widely available

She emphasises the importance of arts engagement in supporting young people’s wellbeing and social connection:

“Art can give you a sense of purpose... it can help young people who might feel isolated to make friends.”

She also highlights the value of **celebration and recognition**, recommending events or tours to showcase young people’s work and reinforce their sense of achievement.

Key Insights

This case highlights:

- The importance of **flexible, artist-led and participant-centred approaches**
- The value of combining **informal outreach with structured provision**
- The role of **public art in increasing accessibility and visibility**
- The potential for arts programmes to generate **unexpected pathways and long-term engagement**
- The need to address ongoing **practical and informational barriers to access**

Piece 4: Reflections (2024)

Artist Kathleen Fabre and Young Creators aboard the IKON Slow Boat

Peer researcher blog: Young Creatives Making Art on the IKON Slow Boat



Year Two of the WCOYC arts trail started this June on the Canal Wharf in Wolverhampton. Two groups of young people from Wolverhampton attended two-part art workshops on a converted canal boat named the IKON Slow Boat. Upon arrival, the young people were warmly greeted by Birmingham’s IKON gallery team and the artist Kathleen and then invited onto the boat.

For the first cohort of young creatives, the IKON Slow Boat took them on a trip along the canals of Wolverhampton, where for two hours they could explore the theme of ‘Reflections’. The session offered young people a creative adventure and a chance to explore their city, take a trip on a canal boat and learn new art techniques. They gathered inspiration from the journey and from their conversations with others to create artworks which will become part of a Visual Arts Trail in Wolverhampton city centre. These workshops allowed young people to develop skills in both traditional and experimental art making, creating colourful acetate window displays and metal foil embossing.



The second group of young creatives had a different experience, with the IKON boat remaining stationary due to fault with the boat. However, this did not dampen the young people’s experiences! They were encouraged to use their current surroundings as inspiration for their art, which reflected in the final design choices. Some of the pieces included a block of flats which overlooked the canal, and reeds reflecting in the water.

All of the participants were very engaged with their foil pieces, concentrating deeply. The calm setting of the boat and outside ambience made the session feel relaxing, despite the intensity of the heat as it was such a hot day. This workshop held a unique opportunity of experiencing and connecting with nature in an untypical setting being a canal boat, compared to a park or a garden which is usually accessible to most. Despite the group not being able to travel, it was still a fun setting for the workshop and the young people involved really paid attention and connected with their surroundings as shown in their artworks.





As well as the young people clearly gaining a lot from the workshops, we peer researchers also did. We sat with the young people, chatting to them and shadowing their idea generation and creative processes. Afterwards we discussed the incredibly insightful and inspirational conversations we'd had between us with the young people, and it was clear that the art activities were aiding in their openness and reflective processes. One of us had a conversation with one young person who took the theme of 'Reflections' to be an inspiration for her artworks where she combined the scenes she saw to create her artworks, such as the ripples in the water, the fish swimming, the lily pads and the graffiti artwork. She, and another young person further expanded on that theme of 'Reflections' by reflecting upon their hopes and dreams for the future and how they want to embed creativity in that, hoping to build interdisciplinary careers, to combine their creative passions with their scientific interests and to go on to create in both a professional and a personal capacity.

After both sets of workshop sessions, once the young people had finished creating their pieces the professional artist spoke through the future plans and how their pieces will be developed using Augmented Reality to create motion pictures for the WCOYC arts trail. The young people were enthusiastic to share their ideas of how their artworks could be developed, of what could move and how. They were excited and proud to be a part of something bigger in their city and to, in the near future, see their artworks displayed publicly.

For us as peer researchers, we all agreed that the IKON Slow Boat had motivated us and we had gained benefits from the experience for our artistic practice and future creative career plans: with the session strengthening our creative skills, our ability to work with young people, our creative ideas and our ideas of future careers in the arts.



Authors: Natasha Cullen, Taneesha Lewis and Doina Surchicin

Piece 5: Collage US (2025)

Artist Caris Jackson and Young Creators of Wolverhampton Art Gallery



This Visual Arts Trail workshop at Wolverhampton Art Gallery on 20th August 2025 engaged nine young people aged 12+, the majority of whom were female. The session provided a well-resourced and youth-centred creative environment, offering a wide range of materials and digital tools (e.g. printer/scanner), enabling participants to experiment with different techniques and forms of expression.

The workshop encouraged participants to explore personal interests and identities, with artwork reflecting themes such as music, animals, nature, and inner thoughts. The use of layered materials and mixed media contributed to visually rich and expressive outputs, while optional visit to the *"Come as You Really Are"* exhibition further broadened participants' exposure to diverse artistic practices and sources of inspiration.

Engagement levels were consistently high throughout the session. Participants interacted positively with one another, sharing ideas, offering support, and discussing their creative intentions. The ability to choose music during the session also contributed to a relaxed and personalised creative atmosphere, supporting sustained focus and enjoyment.

The workshop generated several positive outcomes and learning:

- **Creative development:** participants experimented with new tools and approaches (e.g. digital image-making), while also expressing individual preferences in media and style
- **Emotional wellbeing:** young people expressed feelings of joy, pride, and satisfaction in their work
- **Social interaction:** peer discussion and collaboration supported idea-sharing and mutual encouragement
- **Collage is an accessible art form that** empowers young people to express themselves without requiring technical skills.
- **Creative workshops benefit from calm, supportive atmospheres** and diverse materials.
- **Linking workshops to exhibitions** (e.g. Come As You Really Are) inspires participants and broadens their awareness of artistic possibilities.
- **Personal participation gave peer researchers insights** into the creative process and highlighted how inspiring it is to see peers actively involved across multiple WCOYC events.
- **Sense of ownership and achievement:** participants were excited that their work would contribute to a public artwork and be exhibited within the city

Overall, the session demonstrates the value of combining hands-on creative activity with exposure to professional artistic work, supporting both skill development and inspiration. It also highlights the importance of participant choice and personalisation in fostering meaningful engagement in arts programmes.

Artist Sam Wootton and Young Creators of Wolverhampton Art Centre



This Visual Arts Trail workshop at Wolverhampton Arts Centre engaged seven young people aged 12+, including several returning participants who had attended earlier sessions the same day. Their familiarity with the space and materials supported immediate engagement and continuity in creative activity.

The session, themed around *fortresses and related imagery*, provided a relaxed and well-resourced environment in which participants explored their own creative ideas. Despite access to a range of materials, many chose to work with familiar media such as pencils, crayons, and paint, suggesting confidence in personal artistic preferences.

The workshop atmosphere was positive and supportive. The facilitator adopted an encouraging approach, offering regular feedback and gentle time prompts, which helped sustain focus and progression. Background music contributed to a calm and creative environment, and the small group size allowed for individual attention and freedom of movement.

Participants were visibly engaged and expressed satisfaction and pride in their work. Interactions between participants—particularly among siblings—highlighted the social dimension of the session, while post-session interactions (e.g. recognising and reconnecting with the researcher at other events) pointed to the importance of ongoing community relationships and trust-building.



The workshop contributed to **several positive outcomes**:

-Emotional wellbeing: participants left feeling “happy” and “proud” of their achievements

-Sustained engagement: interest in attending future arts activities was expressed

-Community connection: families demonstrated pride in young people’s contributions, reinforcing a sense of belonging and ownership

Looking ahead, the observations suggest value in celebrating participants’ contributions through public engagement activities (e.g. walking tours of completed artworks), helping to further strengthen community pride and visibility of young people’s creative work.

Artist Ewan Johnston and Students of City of Wolverhampton College



The Visual Arts Trail workshops delivered at the City of Wolverhampton College engaged groups of 16–18 students aged 16–17 across three sessions. The workshops focused on creating individual self-portraits to contribute to a large-scale collaborative mural for the City Learning Quarter, encouraging creative expression within a shared public artwork.

The artist adopted a flexible and non-prescriptive facilitation style, encouraging students to explore their own artistic approaches, including abstract interpretations rather than strictly realistic representations. This approach aimed to build confidence and reduce fear of judgement, particularly for this age group, who were observed to benefit more from encouragement than instruction.

Across the sessions, participants demonstrated increasing confidence and engagement, moving from an initially hesitant start to a more settled and self-directed approach as their ideas developed. Collaborative behaviours also emerged, particularly when students worked together to organise workspace and materials under constrained conditions.

However, delivery was affected by several practical and contextual challenges:

- Changes to scheduling and communication issues with the college
- Limited materials and workspace at key points
- An initially unclear understanding among some students about session logistics
- Time pressures towards the final session, leading to some rushed work

The college setting also influenced the workshop atmosphere. Compared to more informal arts environments, sessions were perceived as more structured, with staff occasionally intervening around behaviour and professionalism. This resulted in a less relaxed creative environment, although participants generally remained engaged and positive.

Despite these challenges, the workshops contributed to positive developmental outcomes. Students gained experience of working to a client brief and contributing to a public-facing artwork, supporting skills relevant to creative careers. The supportive and validating approach of the artist reinforced the value of creative practice:

- Encouraging confidence in artistic identity
- Promoting engagement in collaborative creative processes
- Reinforcing the idea that all forms of artistic expression are valid

Overall, the sessions highlight both the potential and challenges of delivering creative programmes within formal education settings, emphasising the importance of clear communication, adequate resourcing, and maintaining a balance between structure and creative freedom.



The Visual Arts Trail workshops at Wolverhampton Arts Centre engaged a total of 25 young people across multiple sessions, with participants aged 7–17. Attendance included both new and returning participants, with some young people attending multiple sessions, indicating **strong engagement and sustained interest**.

The workshops, themed “*Hands of the City*”, encouraged participants to reflect on community, identity, and everyday creative practices. Activities combined individual and collaborative approaches, including decorating hand templates and contributing to 3D sculptures. This structure supported both **personal expression and shared creative production**.

Facilitation played a key role in enabling creativity. The artist adopted a responsive and youth-led approach, encouraging participants to develop and extend their own ideas rather than directing outcomes. This adaptability also led to new activities (e.g. mark-making exercises) that built on participants’ emerging interests and enhanced their **creative thinking and experimentation**.

The workshops contributed to several positive outcomes for young people:

- **Increased confidence and self-expression:** Participants felt able to share ideas openly and explore personal forms of artistic expression, particularly compared to more structured school environments.

- **Strong sense of comfort and ownership:** Many participants demonstrated ease within the space, moving freely, focusing independently, and engaging with peers.
High enjoyment and motivation: One participant extended their attendance across multiple sessions and expressed a desire to attend daily, reflecting strong enthusiasm.

- **Peer support and collaboration:** Young people encouraged one another and built informal social connections through creative activity.

- **Sustained engagement in arts programmes:** Repeat attendance and booking onto future sessions suggest developing long-term participation pathways.

The workshop also highlighted the value of providing **open, flexible creative environments**, where young people can go beyond structured tasks and contribute their own ideas. Participants’ contributions were significant enough to influence the development of the final artistic outputs.

In terms of future development, the observations suggest an opportunity to expand provision—particularly for younger age groups—and to consider how workshops might continue to balance **project outcomes with space for independent creative exploration**.



The morning session on 21st March 2026 was attended by six young people, with several participants returning from previous workshops, indicating **ongoing engagement and retention**. Participants arrived with enthusiasm, particularly around fashion, and actively drew connections between historical youth culture in Wolverhampton and their own contemporary experiences. This reflective process appeared to support a **developing sense of identity and belonging within youth culture over time**.

The workshop environment encouraged **high levels of collaboration and interaction**. In particular, the materials table acted as a focal point for engagement, prompting movement, shared exploration, and informal dialogue between participants and facilitators. This spatial setup helped to **facilitate peer interaction and strengthen social connections**.

Informal discussions with participants suggested that the workshop—and their involvement in the wider WCOYC programme—has had a **positive influence on ongoing engagement with the arts**. Several young people reported increased interest in participating in additional WAC activities, including learning musical instruments, while others expressed a desire to continue their involvement in future projects.

Participants also demonstrated **growing confidence in self-expression**. Discussions about their creative choices (e.g. colours, imagery) enabled them to move beyond surface-level responses and share more personal perspectives in a supportive setting.

Finally, the session appeared to contribute to **aspirational outcomes**, with multiple participants expressing an interest in pursuing art-related careers.

4.5.3 Visual Arts Trail: impacts and legacy for the city of Wolverhampton – a peer researcher reflection

Through my role as a peer researcher within the Wolverhampton City of Youth Culture project, I have observed and participated in a wide range of Visual Arts Trail workshops across different sessions, locations and artistic approaches. Although I was not present at every workshop, I attended the majority, which allowed me to understand the overall journey and development of the Arts Trail over time. At the beginning, workshops were primarily focused on introducing young people to creative activities through structured, artist-led sessions. These included the use of templates, guided tasks and material exploration, helping participants build confidence and engage with art in an accessible way. As the programme progressed, there was a noticeable shift towards more open-ended, immersive and participant-led experiences, where young people were encouraged to take ownership of their work and think more creatively.

Across all workshops, there was a strong emphasis on creating not just artwork, but a full creative experience. Sessions often incorporated themes, cultural references, music and visual inspiration, allowing participants to engage with art in a deeper and more meaningful way. This reflects how the Arts Trail evolved from individual activities into something more connected, something where creativity was linked to identity, storytelling and environment. A key theme throughout the entire journey was the growth in confidence, independence and creative risk-taking among participants. Many young people who initially relied on prompts and guidance began to develop their own ideas, experiment with materials and express themselves more freely. This progression was especially visible among those who attended multiple sessions, showing clear development over time rather than within a single workshop.

One of the most significant indicators of impact was consistent re-engagement. Many participants returned to sessions regularly, often bringing friends along with them. This created a sense of community and continuity, where young people were not just attending one-off workshops but becoming part of an ongoing creative space. Their willingness to return, remain engaged for long periods, and continue working even during breaks demonstrates the genuine value they placed on these experiences. Another important aspect of the Arts Trail was the opportunity for participants — including myself — to actively contribute and leave a mark. Being able to take part in the creative process, rather than just observe, made the experience more meaningful and personal. It reinforced the idea that young people are not just participants, but active contributors to Wolverhampton.

ton's cultural landscape.

The impact of the Arts Trail extends beyond artistic development. It has supported social connection, self-expression and a sense of belonging, particularly for young people who may not otherwise engage with the arts. The workshops created inclusive and welcoming environments where participants felt comfortable exploring their creativity while interacting with others. There are still areas for future development. While engagement was consistently high, there is an opportunity to expand access further — particularly by reaching wider demographics and ensuring continued opportunities beyond short-term sessions. Overall, the Arts Trail has made a meaningful contribution to the wider Wolverhampton City of Youth Culture project by evolving into an engaging, inclusive and participant-led programme. It has not only developed creative skills, but also built confidence, connections and inspiration among young people. From my perspective, it has been both a valuable research experience and a personally impactful journey, demonstrating the long-term importance of accessible cultural opportunities.

4.5.4 Contribution Analysis: Learning from This Case: WAC and the Visual Arts Trail

The evidence from the WAC partner case study suggests that WAC's role in delivering WCOYC is making a credible contribution to the programme's intended outcomes, particularly around increasing access, participation, and cultural aspiration among young people. According to the programme-level Theory of Change, coordinated partnership working, targeted cultural programming, and youth-led opportunities are expected to reduce structural barriers and expand engagement. However, the data also highlights persistent contextual factors—such as cost-of-living pressures, social anxiety post-COVID, and cultural expectations around education—that continue to constrain outcomes and sit outside the programme's direct control. These findings suggest that while WCOYC is contributing meaningfully to short- and medium-term outcomes (e.g. exposure, confidence, participation), longer-term impacts (e.g. sustained engagement and equity of access) remain contingent on addressing these wider structural barriers. Overall, the participant's account strengthens the plausibility of the programme's Theory of Change while also indicating the conditions under which its intended outcomes are more or less likely to be achieved.

In terms of the Visual Arts Trail, across the artist-led workshops, the observation data indicates a consistent contribution to key programme-level outcomes, particularly around engagement, confidence, and sustained participation in the arts. Workshops across multiple settings (arts centres, galleries, and educational environments) demonstrated **high levels of active participation, enjoyment, and creative expression**, supported by flexible facilitation styles and access to diverse materials. Participants were observed to develop **confidence in sharing ideas, experimenting with artistic techniques, and engaging with peers**, with even initially hesitant individuals becoming more comfortable over time.

Importantly, the workshops contributed to **ongoing engagement pathways**, with evidence of repeat attendance, expressed interest in further activities, and intentions to pursue arts-related opportunities beyond the sessions. The data also highlights the significance of **supportive, youth-centred environments** in fostering emotional wellbeing, with participants frequently demonstrating feelings of enjoyment, pride, and ownership over their work.

Across cases, there is strong evidence that **hands-on, collaborative and flexible delivery approaches**—including opportunities for participant choice and informal interaction—were key mechanisms underpinning these outcomes. These appear particularly effective in building social connections, enabling self-expression, and supporting progression from initial engagement to deeper participation.

However, the observations also suggest that contextual factors such as **delivery setting (e.g. formal education environments), resource constraints, and logistical challenges** can influence the quality of the experience and level of comfort among participants.

Overall, the cross-case evidence from the arts trail data supports the conclusion that artist-led workshops within the WCOYC programme are making a meaningful contribution to short- to medium-term outcomes identified in the Theory of Change—particularly around **increased access, confidence, skills development, and sustained engagement in arts and culture**—while highlighting the importance of maintaining flexible, inclusive delivery models to maximise impact.

4.6 Partner case study: University of Wolverhampton

4.6.1 The peer researcher journey – a peer researcher reflection



In 2024, seven Community Peer Researchers were recruited to conduct community research for the Wolverhampton City of Youth Culture (WCOYC) project. These Community Peer Researchers joined the project from a variety of backgrounds, ages and experiences but were all local - living in and around Wolverhampton. Throughout the project, Community Peer Researchers were engaged in different ways: they attended WCOYC events, conducted observational research and semi-structured interviews, wrote blog posts and reports, and collected and analysed data. At the beginning of the project, Community Peer Researchers received a substantial package of training over four sessions, covering an introduction to research, qualitative data collection techniques, ethics and researcher safety, and methods of analysis. Training, and opportunities for discussion and reflection, continued throughout, allowing Community Peer Researchers to develop strong skills, conduct research, and engage meaningfully in varied activities.

Through their involvement, Community Peer Researchers learned new skills, participated in training, gained research experience, built peer-to-peer and professional networks, and engaged with communities, arts, and culture in Wolverhampton. These provided Community Peer Researchers with valuable training, skills, and experience they can take forward into future roles and opportunities. Such training and skills opportunities have also helped, and continue to help, open doors and create new opportunities for Community Peer Researchers.

Being a Community Peer Researcher has impacted all researchers involved. It has developed them personally, professionally and creatively. Community Peer Researchers were asked to share reflections on their involvement and their hopes for the future. Four researchers provided reflections, three of whom were at the beginning stages of their careers and in some form of

education during their engagement in WCOYC.

Personal

Community Peer Researchers expressed a variety of ways that their involvement in WCOYC has developed them personally, including building their confidence and being part of a project they enjoy and find inspiring.

All researchers reflected on the confidence they gained through their engagement in WCOYC and the opportunities to speak to people of all backgrounds and ages. For example, researchers developed skills in talking to, working with, interviewing and observing young people, some as young as 7 to the eldest attendees at 25. Community Peer Researchers worked closely with their communities, academic research teams, project managers and artists. They attended events and spoke to WCOYC partners and those working on the project's Operational Delivery. They led semi-structured interviews, gave presentations at events, and networked with key stakeholders. For many, WCOYC was the first opportunity they had to do activities like this and to engage with so many different people. Being trusted, given these opportunities, and succeeding in them gave Community

Peer Researchers confidence, self-belief and pride. This confidence not only benefits them in terms of WCOYC but also benefits all aspects of their lives.

Commonly, researchers reflected on how inspiring, motivating and enjoyable it has been to be involved in WCOYC. They highlighted the privilege they have felt in working with their communities and the opportunities they have had to build strong relationships with young people. They outlined that being involved in WCOYC felt like being part of something meaningful, impactful and bigger than themselves, a project which values and hears youth voices. This was especially important for the youngest Community Peer Researchers, who, by being involved, saw that their voice has value.

Overall, researchers found enjoyment and value in the variety of projects they were involved in. They found new passions, new areas they wished to pursue (personally and professionally) and new skills and experiences.

Professional

Being involved as a Community Peer Researcher has helped develop researchers professionally: strengthening skills, opening up new experiences, and offering networks that can help them pursue future opportunities.

In terms of research, Community Peer Researchers gained a variety of skills spanning multiple stages of research, analysis and evaluation. They have developed concrete examples of working on research activities, including ethics, participant engagement, conducting interviews, analysing data, and disseminating results through blogs, reports, and presentations.

Researchers also developed opportunities to work in professional environments and to attend events, workshops, and interviews. Through these environments, they developed an understanding of funding and the real impact of projects like WCOYC on young people’s opportunities. These opportunities allowed them to build strong connections with talented artists, project organisers, academics and community leaders.

All Community Peer Researchers identified how WCOYC has opened doors for them. One progressed within WCOYC, beginning as a Researcher, then running workshops as an artist, and most recently becoming the Producer for WCOYC Visual Arts Trail. The Community Peer Researcher role enhanced the participant’s confidence, skills, experience and networks to secure these future opportunities. Their involvement throughout provided unique insight into how to engage Young People, connect with communities, and provide relevant opportunities for those involved to develop.

The second researcher shared that WCOYC consolidated a passion for research, strengthening their motivation to pursue arts and culture research as a career. Their involvement in the project provided a strong example that helped them to access further research opportunities. The third researcher highlighted that their engagement in WCOYC helped them narrow down and decide on their future university pathway, one aligned with data and analysis, due to their involvement in related activities. The final researcher shared how WCOYC strengthened their motivation to work with communities and young people, deepening their passion for improving creative access for young people. This knowledge of what researchers plan to do following WCOYC, along with the passion and interest they have developed, is invaluable. WCOYC and being involved as a Community Peer Researcher has opened many doors which may have previously been inaccessible.

Creative

Community Peer Researchers emphasised the creative benefits they have gained from being involved in WCOYC. The project has given them the opportunity to actively participate and co-create artworks alongside young people. This has allowed researchers to develop stronger connections with young people participating in workshops, as creating alongside participants has broken down barriers in conversations and interviews. It has also allowed researchers to feel like a real part of the project and to remain creative when pursuing non-creative study or work outside of WCOYC. For one researcher, it has reignited their passion for the arts and motivations to create more. For another, they expressed how before WCOYC, they felt unsure about visual art as it was not something they ever engaged in. Attending visual arts workshops and working with young people helped them to enjoy visual art and reframe their narratives on creating to be more focused on process than outcome. This outlook was motivated by the participating young people and seeing their freedom in creating.

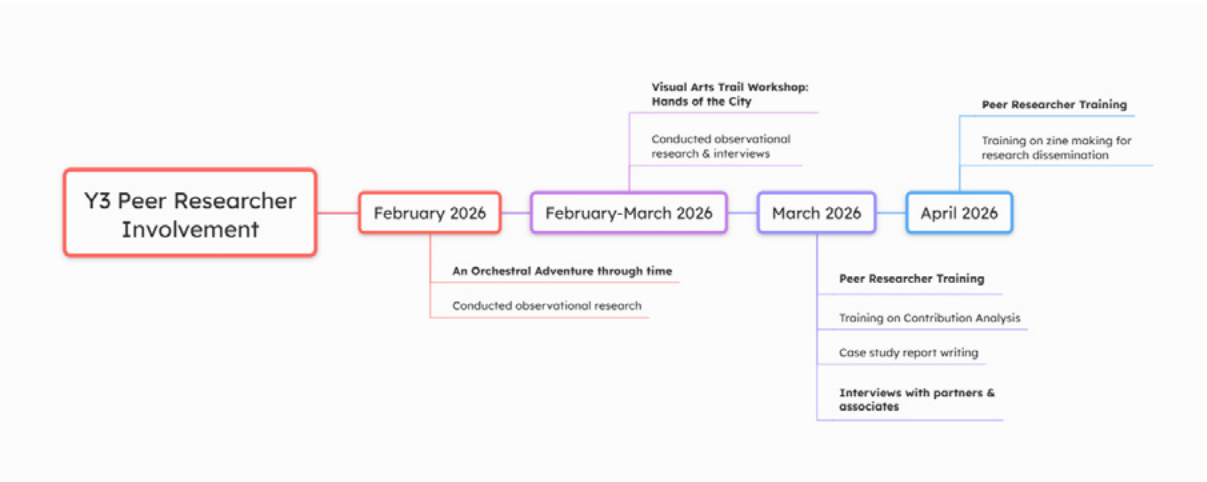
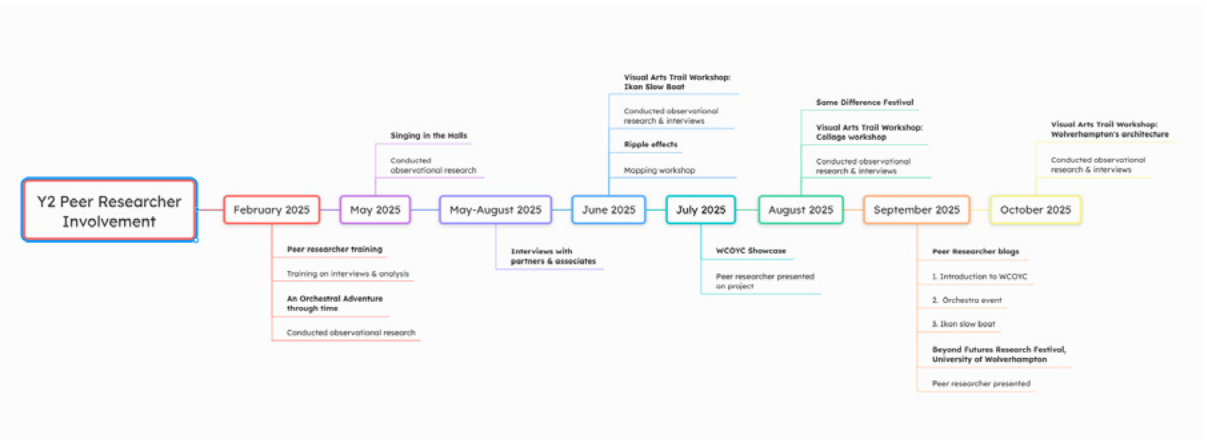
Reflections on WCOYC and hopes for the future

In their reflections, multiple Community Peer Researchers emphasised the value that WCOYC has had to their communities. They shared how privileged they feel to be involved in an arts project that has provided so many opportunities not only to the young people participating but also to them as researchers. For the researchers, this project has given them newfound connections with Wolverhampton and its communities. Attending visual arts workshops and trails, concerts, orchestral performances, and festivals, and observing or speaking to young people there, has reinforced the importance of arts, culture, and community for young people in Wolverhampton.

These opportunities are invaluable and Community Peer Researchers have all emphasised their hopes for the future, for sustainable funding to provide creative opportunities for all young people in Wolverhampton, espe-

cially those from lower-income backgrounds who are less able to pay for opportunities themselves.

A timeline of the WCOYC peer researcher journey



Part 5: Contribution Story: Wolverhampton City of Youth Culture (WCOYC)

Wolverhampton City of Youth Culture was delivered within a context of significant social and economic disadvantage, where many children and young people face barriers to cultural participation, including poverty, transport costs, safety concerns, limited arts provision in schools, and low awareness of creative pathways. These wider structural challenges continued throughout the programme and remained outside the direct control of WCOYC.

The evidence suggests that WCOYC made a significant contribution to increasing opportunities for children and young people to engage with arts, culture and creativity across the city. Through a partnership model involving cultural organisations, educational institutions, community groups and young people themselves, the programme expanded access to high-quality cultural experiences, many of which represented first-time opportunities for participants. Examples included large-scale music events, digital creativity programmes, youth leadership activities, festivals, peer research, and artist-led workshops delivered in both formal and informal settings. Collectively, these activities reached thousands of young people and increased exposure to cultural venues, creative practices and artistic role models.

There is credible evidence that participation in WCOYC contributed to a range of short- and medium-term outcomes. Across the case studies, young people reported increased confidence, creative skills, social connections, self-expression and aspirations. Many participants developed transferable skills such as teamwork, communication, leadership and problem-solving, while some progressed into volunteering, further cultural participation, employment, apprenticeships or creative career pathways. The peer researcher programme demonstrates particularly strong evidence of progression, with participants gaining research, leadership and professional skills that opened new educational and employment opportunities.

The evidence also suggests that WCOYC strengthened the city's cultural ecosystem. Partners consistently reported improved collaboration, stronger professional networks, increased organisational learning and new opportunities for joint working. The programme helped create a shared focus on young people's cultural participation across the city and enabled organisations to test new approaches, reach new audiences and build capacity. The Cultural Youth Board and other co-production mechanisms further contributed to embedding youth voice within decision-making processes.

However, the evaluation also identified factors that may have limited the extent of change achieved. For some activities, participation in some activities remained uneven across some groups, including young people with disabilities, boys and certain age cohorts. Transport barriers, concerns about safety, parental perceptions of arts careers, school engagement challenges and broader socioeconomic inequalities continued to affect access and progression. These factors provide alternative explanations for why some intended outcomes were achieved more strongly than others and highlight the importance of viewing WCOYC as one contributor within a wider system of influences affecting young people's lives.

Overall, the contribution analysis suggests that WCOYC made a meaningful and credible contribution to widening access to arts and culture, strengthening young people's confidence, skills and aspirations, and building a more connected and youth-focused cultural infrastructure across Wolverhampton. While longer-term outcomes such as sustained cultural participation, improved employment prospects and systemic reductions in inequality cannot be attributed to WCOYC alone, the evidence indicates that the programme has helped establish many of the conditions and pathways necessary for these longer-term changes to occur.

Part 6: Recommendations

Based on the evidence presented across the report, the strongest recommendations are those that build on demonstrated success (partnership working, youth leadership, arts access, peer research and progression pathways) while addressing recurring barriers (transport, awareness, sustainability, accessibility, school engagement, safety and unequal participation).

6.1 Short-term Recommendations (next 12 to 24 months)

1. Improve Visibility and Public Awareness of WCOYC

A recurring finding was that young people, families and even participants were often unaware of the wider WCOYC identity.

Actions:

- create a central online platform;
- develop a youth-focused communications strategy;
- strengthen branding across all partner activities;
- improve social media coordination.

2. Address Transport and Access Barriers

Work with:

- transport providers;
- schools;
- community organisations.

Potential actions:

- travel vouchers;
- subsidised transport;
- coordinated coach booking systems;
- neighbourhood-based outreach delivery.

Transport costs and safety concerns were repeatedly identified as barriers.

3. Increase Accessibility Auditing

Conduct an accessibility review of all programmes focusing on:

- physical access;
- neurodiversity;
- sensory needs;
- communication requirements;
- inclusive facilitation.

Several sections raise questions about accessibility for children and young people with SEND.

4. Strengthen School Engagement

Develop a dedicated schools engagement plan including:

- named school champions;
- teacher networks;
- curriculum links;
- regular communication channels.

Schools remain the most important route to young people but are described as difficult to engage consistently.

5. Improve Engagement with Parents and Carers

Develop targeted messages highlighting:

- transferable skills;
- employability benefits;
- wellbeing outcomes;
- career opportunities linked to arts and culture.

Parental concerns about creative careers were a recurring theme.

6. Expand Volunteer and Leadership Opportunities

Create more structured opportunities for children and young people to:

- host events;

- curate exhibitions;
- lead activities;
- become ambassadors;
- support festival delivery.

This would build on the successes of Youth Boards and volunteering initiatives.

7. Target Low-Participation Groups

Undertake a demographic participation review and introduce targeted interventions where participation for particular intersectional groups is low, particularly among:

- boys;
- children and young people with SEND;
- younger age groups;
- young people from specific neighbourhoods.

A more intentional approach to equity could strengthen future impact.

8. Improve Signposting Between Partner Activities

Create a shared referral mechanism so that participants attending one activity are routinely connected to:

- further workshops;
- festivals;
- volunteering;
- training;
- employment opportunities.

This would strengthen progression pathways across the partnership.

9. Develop Safety-Informed Programming

Respond to concerns regarding travel and city-centre safety by:

- providing clearer travel guidance;
- increasing daytime provision;
- linking with existing youth safety initiatives;
- identifying safe routes and meeting points.

Safety emerged as a notable barrier to participation.

10. Capture Longitudinal Outcomes

Introduce follow-up tracking for participants at 6, 12 and 24 months to assess:

- sustained participation;
- educational outcomes;
- employment outcomes;
- wellbeing;
- progression into creative pathways.

This would strengthen the contribution story and evidence base for future investment.

6.2 Long-term Recommendations (3 to 10 years)

1. Establish a permanent Wolverhampton Youth Culture Partnership

Develop WCOYC from a funded programme into a sustained city-wide partnership with a formal governance structure, shared strategy and collective funding model. This would preserve partnership relationships, prevent fragmentation and support joint funding applications. Several partners identified sustainability concerns beyond the current funding period.

2. Develop a City of Youth Culture Legacy Strategy

Create a 5-year legacy plan centred on:

- cultural participation;
- youth leadership;
- creative careers;
- inclusion and equity;
- cultural place-making.

The strategy should include measurable city-level outcomes and accountability mechanisms.

3. Build a Creative Progression Pathway Framework

Move beyond one-off engagement opportunities by creating clear pathways from:

- participation;
- volunteering;

- youth leadership;
- peer research;
- internships;
- apprenticeships;
- employment.

The peer researcher journey and examples such as BBC apprenticeships demonstrate that progression routes can be transformational but currently appear limited to relatively small numbers of young people. https://livewlvac-my.sharepoint.com/personal/m_puttick_wlv_ac_uk/_layouts/15/Doc.aspx?sourcedoc={2895D8B9-81C3-4665-AB6F-2E82F829D357}&file=WCOYC_Y3ReportDRAFT_15JULY2026.docx&action=default&mobileredirect=true

4. Introduce a “Cultural Passport” for Young People

Develop a city-wide cultural passport allowing young people to:

- record participation;
- gain awards or recognition;
- access incentives;
- discover future opportunities.

This builds on suggestions emerging from partner interviews and could support long-term engagement across multiple organisations.

5. Strengthen Inclusion for Underrepresented Groups

Develop targeted programmes for:

- boys and young men;
- children and young people with SEND;
- early years groups;
- refugee and newly arrived communities;
- young people from areas of highest deprivation.

Evidence throughout the report suggests participation inequalities remain despite substantial achievements.

6. Position Creative and Digital Skills as Core Youth Infrastructure

Given the success of Learn Play and the importance of digital creativity, establish a city-wide creative and digital skills programme linking:

- arts;
- technology;
- gaming;
- VR;
- digital production;
- creative industries careers.

This could connect schools, employers, colleges and cultural organisations.

7. Create a Sustainable Youth Cultural Leadership Model

Expand Youth Boards and co-production structures so young people influence:

- commissioning;
- programming;
- event design;
- evaluation;
- city cultural strategy.

Young people have demonstrated capacity to participate meaningfully in governance and delivery.

8. Embed Evaluation and Peer Research as Permanent Features

Develop a recurring peer researcher programme linked to the University of Wolverhampton to:

- build local research capacity;
- support youth voice;
- generate impact data;
- create future employability pathways.

The peer researcher model appears to be one of the programme’s strongest legacy outcomes.

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Appendix

Literature review: barriers to youth employment and skills development

Societal factors: BREXIT and Covid-19

The adverse impact of Covid-19 on the wellbeing of children and young people is of concern given their developmental stage in life and has therefore become a high priority for policymakers (CSJ, 2020; EPI, 2021; OHID, 2021c). Although children and young people as a group had lower mortality statistics and less severe outcomes than adults (PHE, 2020a; Hagell, 2021), containment measures to mitigate the spread of Covid-19 amongst the general population had a significant impact on the lives of children and young people. Most notably, the physical closure of schools to 24 the majority of children between March to July 2020, and then again between January and March 2021, had a significant impact on the educational attainment and wellbeing of many children and young people (Lee, 2020; OHID, 2021c). Indeed, a small-scale case study conducted in 2021 in one school setting found that concerns about the risk of Covid-19 transmission in school was greatly outweighed by perceived risks of missed learning (Lorenc et al., 2021). There is strong evidence to suggest a rise in anxiety amongst young people due to their perception that the pandemic would have an impact on their future employment prospects. Almost half of young people (aged 16 - 25) surveyed by The Prince's Trust during the pandemic (46%) stated that finding a job felt 'impossible' (The Prince's Trust & YouGov, 2020). There have also been concerns raised that children and young people may suffer stigmatization in the wider community, following media reports of asymptomatic transmission amongst young people and outbreaks in schools (Wright et al., 2021a) (Spicksley et al., 2022).

Intersectional factors

Existing literature highlights the significant role that arts-based engagement can play in supporting children and young people who experience social, emotional and structural disadvantage, particularly boys and young men. Research indicates that engagement with the arts is shaped by intersectional factors such as gender, social class, ethnicity and experiences of adversity, including adverse childhood experiences (ACEs) and social exclusion. Thompson and Tawell's (2017) study of an arts-based intervention for adolescents at risk of school exclusion demonstrates that creative practices can create safe, exploratory spaces that enable young people to reframe their identities, develop emotional expression and re-engage with their social environments. Such findings position the arts as a potentially transformative mechanism for supporting young people facing behavioural and emotional challenges.

A growing body of research has specifically examined boys' engagement, or lack thereof, within educational, cultural and social systems. National and regional evidence points to widening gendered disparities in education, employment and wellbeing, with boys and young men increasingly overrepresented among those who are disengaged from education, employment or training (Centre for Social Justice, 2025). These challenges are exacerbated by socio-economic disadvantage, ethnicity and family circumstances, including the absence of stable adult role models. Projects such as *Taking Boys Seriously* (Ulster University, 2021) and *Being a Boy* (Arts University Bournemouth, 2022) demonstrate that strengths-based, participatory and creative approaches can support boys' self-worth, resilience and sense of agency, particularly among those from working-class or marginalised backgrounds. Arts-led interventions have also been shown to challenge deficit narratives around masculinity and provide alternative ways for boys to explore identity, emotion and belonging (Holdsworth, 2013).

The literature further emphasises the importance of safety, trust and supportive relationships in enabling children and young people to access arts and youth provision. Evidence from the Youth Endowment Fund (2024) suggests that structured activities, including arts programmes and youth clubs, can act as protective spaces for young people affected by violence or vulnerability, often serving as 'hooks' into wider support services. Arts-based youth work and creative programmes—such as *Breaking Out Boys* and participatory drama and activism projects—have also been used to address sensitive issues including misogyny, online harm, consent and gender-based violence in ways that are accessible and engaging for boys and young men (Porter & Standing, 2025). Collectively, this literature underscores the value of arts engagement not only as cultural participation, but as a preventative, relational and developmental approach within children and youth services.

Safety in the city

Young people in Wolverhampton face a complex relationship with city safety, often reporting lower feelings of personal safety than official crime statistics suggest. While recent police data highlights a 34% drop in serious youth knife violence, local youth surveys reveal persistent anxieties regarding bullying, street safety after dark, and regional gang activity (City of Wolverhampton Council, 2024; Safer Wolverhampton Partnership, 2026; Adams-Quackenbush & Mee, 2022; City of Wolverhampton Council, 2025).

Key Insights from Local Youth Data

Data from the city's *Health Related Behaviour Survey* and feedback from the Wolverhampton Youth Council highlight several core themes regarding how young people perceive safety (City of Wolverhampton Council, 2024; Safer Wolverhampton Partnership, 2026; Adams-Quackenbush & Mee, 2022; City of Wolverhampton Council, 2025):

- **Safety After Dark:** Only 36% of secondary school students feel safe in the city after dark (City of Wolverhampton Council, 2024).
- **Declining Travel Confidence:** Students have reported a downward trend in feeling safe while traveling to and from school, as well as when hanging out in their local neighbourhoods during the day (City of Wolverhampton Council, 2024).
- **The Protective Knife Paradox:** Investigative local reports reveal that a segment of Wolverhampton youth carry weapons purely out of a misplaced need for protection, citing peer pressure and fear of walking short distances alone (City of Wolverhampton Council, 2024).
- **Bullying & Discrimination:** Secondary pupils have expressed growing concerns over online and in-person bullying, alongside a perceived drop in how effectively schools handle racially motivated harassment (City of Wolverhampton Council, 2024; Safer Wolverhampton Partnership, 2026).

Where Young People Feel Most Unsafe

- **The City Centre:** The night-time economy and major transport hubs are frequently flagged as intimidating, prompting the city to deploy dedicated *Night Guardians* and outreach teams (City of Wolverhampton Council, 2024; Safer Wolverhampton Partnership, 2026; Adams-Quackenbush & Mee, 2022; City of Wolverhampton Council, 2025).
- **Specific Hotspot Neighbourhoods:** Areas with historic gang or anti-social behaviour ties—such as Whitmore Reans, Heath Town, Park Village, and Bilston—are perceived as higher-risk zones by local youth (City of Wolverhampton Council, 2024).
- **Bentley Bridge Retail Park:** Incidents of youth-related nuisance have made this a point of anxiety, leading to a new [Public Space Protection Order \(PSPO\)](#) to disperse hostile groups (City of Wolverhampton Council, 2024).

Active Safety Interventions & Support Systems

To bridge the gap between youth perception and reality, the [Safer Wolverhampton Partnership Strategy](#) has deployed several youth-centric safety initiative (City of Wolverhampton Council, 2024):

- **Detached Youth Outreach:** Street-based teams from the [YMCA](#) and Wolves Foundation engage vulnerable teenagers directly in public hotspots to de-escalate tensions (City of Wolverhampton Council, 2024).
- **Safe Havens:** Designated safe zones operate in the city centre providing immediate first aid, temporary refuge, and secure transport links for young people—particularly women and girls (City of Wolverhampton Council, 2024; Safer Wolverhampton Partnership, 2026; Adams-Quackenbush & Mee, 2022; City of Wolverhampton Council, 2025).
- **School Intervention Schemes:** Organisations like the [Wolverhampton Violence Reduction Service](#) work inside classrooms to challenge weapon-carrying cultures and mentor at-risk students (City of Wolverhampton Council, 2024).

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