



# *ELEVATE YOUTH ARTS*

Final Report

Irish Refugee Council



Clár Éire Ildánach  
Creative Ireland  
Programme



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# Executive Summary

*Elevate Youth Arts* was an 18-month multidisciplinary creative arts initiative implemented by the Irish Refugee Council (IRC) for young people aged 16-24 seeking international protection. Based on feedback and experience running previous arts projects, the IRC youth work team, along with creative facilitators Chriszine Backhouse and Kelvin Akpaloo and three young leaders, devised this project and were awarded €58,000 from Creative Ireland's Creative Youth Nurture Fund.

## *Aims and Objectives*

The goal of this project was to empower young people seeking international protection to develop their creativity, build confidence, develop new skills, and have fun. The project also aimed to model creative methods of youth participation and evaluation through the role of the youth leaders, the Youth Advisory Group, and the creative symposium.

## *Outcomes and Outputs*

The main activity in *Elevate Youth Arts* was a one-week arts residential in West Cork in June 2024. During this intensive week, the participants worked in groups to co-create a performance on the theme of power, titled 'Rising Voices'. The performance combined spoken word, dance, and song and was initially performed at the Cork Midsummer Festival on the Saturday of the residential week. The group also performed 'Rising Voices' at Electric Picnic and again in November at a creative symposium. The symposium was a youth-led event involving performance, panel discussions, and research presentations reflecting on the experience of the project as a whole. The project led to significant improvements in the participants' confidence, creative abilities, and emotional wellbeing, as well as contributing to knowledge generation and best practice in implementing creative arts projects with young people seeking international protection.

## *Findings and Recommendations*

The young people who participated in *Elevate Youth Arts* project reported forming strong friendships, discovering new creative outlets, and gaining self-confidence. They felt empowered by sharing their message with the audience and working collectively to raise awareness on social justice issues they feel passionately about. The project provided a platform for young people to voice their opinions and feel valued and heard.

*Elevate Youth Arts* demonstrates the importance of funding youth and community groups that have established relationships with young people seeking protection to implement creative projects, providing leadership and capacity-building pathways for young leaders from ethnic minority backgrounds, and ensuring long-term project funding to support meaningful youth participation. Practical recommendations for working with this group include providing sufficient budget for transport, ensuring government departmental support, and providing

adequate supervision and support for youth workers and facilitators. Key considerations for future youth arts projects include embracing a focus on wellbeing, ensuring sustained youth work support, and fostering trusted relationships with young people. Within this project, the consistency provided by youth workers was vital in supporting young people through emotionally challenging times and encouraging their participation in the project. Overall, *Elevate Youth Arts* has demonstrated the significant benefits of sustained, creative engagement for young people who have lived experience of seeking international protection. It has provided a platform for these talented young individuals to share their voices, connect with their peers, and develop a sense of belonging and identity.

**Image 1: Group photo outside CECAS on day of Cork Midsummer Festival Performance**



## 1. Introduction

*Elevate Youth Arts* was an 18-month multidisciplinary creative arts project for sixteen young people seeking international protection in Ireland. The goal of this project was to empower these young people to develop their creativity, build confidence, develop new skills, and have fun. The project brought together young people from the Irish Refugee Council's youth group, two youth arts facilitators (Chriszine Backhouse and Kelvin Akpaloo) and three young facilitators (Daniel Kamenyezi, Nike-Monisola Awoyemi, and Marwa Zamir). The core activity was a one-week youth arts residential which took place in West Cork in June 2024. During this week, the group worked together to create a performance on the theme of power combining dance, song, and spoken word. At the end of the week, the group performed their piece, titled 'Rising Voices', at the Cork Midsummer Festival. The second main activity was a creative youth-led symposium in November 2024. During the symposium, the group performed extracts from 'Rising Voices' and took part in and chaired panel discussions on the project and importance of youth arts. An unexpected bonus activity of this project was a trip to Electric Picnic in August 2024 where the group performed 'Rising Voices' on the Global Green stage.

*Elevate Youth Arts*, like all our work, was devised based on the learnings and feedback from previous work with our youth group, and with Chriszine and Kelvin, who we have been working with since 2020. These previous projects, due to time and funding limits, have been quite short, with not enough time to fully facilitate the active participation of young people in the project design and delivery. One of the reasons we applied for funding for a more sustained, longer-term project was to facilitate the young people to have a more active role in directing the project. Another reason was to provide leadership pathways for young creative facilitators emerging from within the group and for them to have the opportunities to increase their capacity and skills.

## 2. Team and Key Participants

The *Elevate Youth Arts* project team was comprised of two staff members from the Irish Refugee Council - Natasha Muldoon and Aoife Dare; two creative facilitators – Kelvin Akpaloo and Chriszine Backhouse; and three youth facilitators – Marwa Zamir, Nike-Monisola Awoyemi, and Daniel Kamenyezi who are members of the IRC's Young Leaders group. Natasha Muldoon coordinated the project with support from Aoife Dare. Chriszine Backhouse and Kelvin Akpaloo lead the creative work with significant support from Daniel Kamenyezi, Nike-Monisola Awoyemi, and Marwa Zamir.

The Youth Advisory Group was made up of six young people: Daniel, Nike-Monisola, Marwa, Blessing, Sandile, and Yassine.

The *Elevate Youth Arts* group was made up of sixteen young people (eight male, eight female) all of whom are in Ireland for the purpose of seeking international protection. Before *Elevate* started, these young people were all involved in the IRC's youth project and therefore we had no challenges in recruiting young people for *Elevate*. The IRC's youth project supports 16 to 24 year olds who are seeking international protection in Ireland and those with refugee status. Quite a large proportion of the young people we work with are here in Ireland unaccompanied; they have arrived here without the support of immediate family. The young people we support are often very isolated and are affected by a cross-section of issues including language barriers, lack of access to accurate information, lack of access to education and training, lack of family support, lack of peer support, and issues with their mental health and wellbeing. In addition to the experiences leading them to seek protection, many of these young people have further experienced intensely traumatic journeys to get here, including spending long periods of time without food and water, months of walking, and dangerous sea crossings. Some have lost contact with their families, many are age-disputed or 'deemed adult' and thus not receiving the same supports as other young people their age. Further, they face challenging living conditions in the Direct Provision/IPAS system, have very limited financial means, and experience barriers to integration, inclusion, and participation. Despite the many challenges and difficulties these young people have faced, they are resilient, determined, and ambitious.

### 3. Outputs and Outcomes

#### 3.1 Outputs

1. **A one-day capacity building workshop** with the three young leaders/youth co-facilitators. This workshop took place on 24/02/2024. This workshop was led by Chriszine Backhouse and it focused on building a strong foundation for the facilitation team. Throughout the workshop, the group explored the leadership qualities present within the group and how they would work as a team throughout this project. During the workshop, the stages of group development were discussed – forming, storming, norming, performing and adjourning. By the end of this workshop, the leadership team had a clear and unified vision of the collective aims of the project and how we would collaborate to achieve these.
2. **A Creative Youth Advisory Group** was created to oversee the project design, implementation and evaluation. This group had six participants, three of whom are the youth co-facilitators from IRC's Young Leaders Programme. This group met regularly throughout the timeline of the project in order to shape the direction of the project and to input into decisions and share feedback from the wider group.

3. **An information session was held on March 27<sup>th</sup>** and this session also involved activities which created a baseline for evaluation. This was attended by 17 young people, and it was facilitated by the three youth co-facilitators and two IRC project staff.
4. **1 day introductory workshop** with participants and facilitators took place. This was focused on relationship building with the creative facilitators and for the group to get to know each other, establish group guidelines and create a safe and comfortable environment for the participants to express their views. The group had the opportunity to discuss, plan, and shape the project, decide on creative methodologies, time frames, and issues/topics that interest them using a variety of creative facilitation approaches. This took place on the 6<sup>th</sup> April and 17 young people attended, alongside the three youth co-facilitators, two creative facilitators, and two IRC project staff.
5. **A second workshop** took place on 17<sup>th</sup> April which was aimed at supporting group formation and bonding. An additional aim of this workshop was to promote positive wellbeing among the group and to encourage self-care practice. Farah Elle (a Libyan-Irish musician) led a wellbeing and music workshop and led the young people through some techniques that can be used to enhance relaxation, manage stress, and increase self-esteem. This workshop was attending by 16 young people, the youth co-facilitators, and IRC project staff.
6. **A third workshop** took place on the 22<sup>nd</sup> May. This was aimed at preparing the group for the upcoming week-long residential. This was an opportunity to go through the plan for the residential and respond to questions. This was attended by 15 young people, the youth co-facilitators, and IRC project staff.
7. **A one-week Youth Arts Residential:** 16 young people, three youth co-facilitators, 2 creative facilitators, and 2 IRC staff took part in a one week residential where they had the opportunity to learn and try out a variety of arts methodologies. These included dance, spoken word, music, song, and playback theatre. They used creative methodologies to discuss topics and issues that are important to them and ‘deep dive’ into these methodologies. They explored the theme of ‘Power’ through these methodologies to create a piece titled ‘Rising Voices’. There were two performances during this week. A local performance at Cork Centre of Excellence for Climate Action and Sustainability (CECAS) in Leap Co. Cork and a performance in Cork Midsummer Festival.
8. **Electric Picnic Performance:** an unexpected output was a performance at Electric Picnic. This was due to the success of the performance at Cork Midsummer Festival – an invitation was extended for the group to perform at Electric Picnic. The performance took place on Sunday 18<sup>th</sup> August and the rehearsal was on Saturday 17<sup>th</sup> August. 12 young people participated in this, alongside the 3 youth co-facilitators. The two creative facilitators and two IRC project staff also attended.
9. There was a **Creative Symposium** on November 18<sup>th</sup> to provide a forum to reflect on the project as a whole and share learnings with a wider audience. The youth participants took a lead role in this event, sharing their experiences and learning. They also performed

various pieces from their ‘Rising Voices’ performance. Three academic researchers from third level institutions who are interested in this area and linked in with the project in various capacities presented on their research findings. The group worked together on 16<sup>th</sup> November to rehearse and prepare for the symposium.

10. **Final Report:** Following on from the symposium the focus turned to working on the final report. The final report includes recommendations on the following points: How Creative Ireland can best reach young people seeking asylum/with refugee status; How these young people can be best supported to nurture their creative potential; How these young people can be best supported to actively participate in project design, implementation, and evaluation; The key learnings from the process and symposium; The key challenges for engaging with this group and recommendations to overcome these challenges; Key considerations when working with this cohort in a creative arts project.

## 3.2 Outcomes

1. **Engage with young people seeking international protection and young refugees aged 16-24:** 16 young people seeking international protection/with refugee status participated in this project.
2. **Increase capacity of three young leaders in understanding and using youth arts methodologies for creative facilitation.** Post-symposium, the three young leaders who co-facilitated this project were asked; ‘Has being a facilitator in *Elevate Youth Arts* resulted in you gaining a better understanding of creative methodologies and being more confident in using them?’ The options of responses were Strongly Agree/Agree/Neutral/Disagree/Strongly Disagree. All three answered **Strongly Agree**.
3. **Increase the active participation and empowerment of young people seeking international protection and young refugees in decision-making, project management, and implementation via the creation of the Creative Youth Advisory Group:** A Youth Advisory Group was established with three young people from the group and three youth co-facilitators. This group met together at various stages throughout the project, including daily meetings during the residential, to input into decision-making and steer the direction of the performance and project in general.
4. **Develop the skills and confidence of young refugees and young people seeking international protection in the creative arts:** Through the findings of the surveys, interviews, and panel discussion, it can be stated that participating in this project developed the skills and confidence of the young people in the creative arts.

**5. Contribute to knowledge generation and best practice in youth arts projects with young refugees and young people seeking international protection:** There has been research carried out stemming from this project. Chriszine Backhouse applied for and obtained ethical approval from Munster Technological University to use this project for research purposes. The Irish Refugee Council and Dr. Angela Veale (UCC) were included in the ethics application. This allowed Angela to be present during the residential and observe the creative process (this was agreed upon collectively as a group) and allowed us to carry out audience surveys after the performances as well as interviews with the project participants. Chriszine is looking at the project through the lens of Global Citizenship Education. She presented some preliminary findings at the creative symposium in November; the title of her presentation was '*Exploring the Transformative Power of Co-Created Performance: A Study on the Impact on Young People Seeking International Protection and Audience reception*'. Dr. Angela Veale presented her findings at a conference on Migration and Belonging in July 2024<sup>1</sup> and her presentation was co-created with Chriszine and two young people from the group. Chriszine Backhouse, Aoife and Angela also wrote and published an article in the online journal *Policy & Practice: A Development Education Review*<sup>2</sup>. Drawing on Paolo Freire's<sup>3</sup> work on critical pedagogy, the article looked at the role of young people seeking international protection as educators with Global Citizenship Education.

In addition to the research mentioned above, one of our youth co-facilitators Nike-Awoyemi Monisola, focused on this project for her MA thesis in Child, Youth and Community, University of Galway. Her study is titled '*An Examination of Elevate Youth Arts Project's Impact on Young Migrants' Sense of Belonging and Identity*'.

The symposium was also a way to share our best practice with other youth workers and creative arts professionals. Through the presentations and panel discussions, our methods for engaging meaningfully with this group of young people were highlighted and discussed.

**6. Contribute to knowledge generation and best practice in using creative evaluation methods in youth arts project with young people seeking international protection and young refugees:** There were various methods used to monitor and evaluate this

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<sup>1</sup> Veale, A., Backhouse, C., Richard, B. and Msimango, N. (2024) 'Image Theatre Practice as Disruptive Experience: Transformative Power of Co-Created Performance: A Study on the Impact on Young People Seeking International Protection and Audience Reception'. *Fourth Annual Conference of Possibility Studies 2024*, Cambridge, UK. July 08-12th 2024.

<sup>2</sup> Backhouse, C., Dare, A. and Veale, A. (2025) 'The Role and Impact of Young People Seeking International Protection as Global Citizenship Educators Through Performance', *Policy and Practice: A Development Education Review*, Issue 41.

<sup>3</sup> Freire, P. (1970) *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, New York: Continuum.

project. Each facilitator had their own ‘toolkit’ of evaluation methods that they brought to the project. For example, we used the visual scale activity to develop a baseline at the start of the project. This was deemed to be an appropriate method as it was accessible to all young people – the emojis gave clear visual cues for anyone with literacy or language difficulties. We were fortunate to have group members who could support with translation for their peers when needed. Image theatre was another method used to capture how the young people were feeling at various stages of the project. One of the creative facilitators introduced a visual mapping exercise that was carried out each morning of the residential – all participants drew themselves on this map to represent how they were feeling each day. This was an effective way to gauge the energy of the group each day and have a better sense of who may need some additional support. As aforementioned, the symposium was also a method of creative evaluation. It was an opportunity for young people to share their perspectives on being part of the journey of the project and to speak about the impact this had on them.

## 4. Public Engagement Outcomes

### 4.1 Social Media Analytics and Media Coverage

**Table 1: Social Media Stats-Elevate Youths Project**

Platform	Impressions	Views	Engagements (likes/comments/shares/ retweets)
LinkedIn	10,5 K	n/a	1,7K
Facebook/Instagram	24,5K	21,9K	1,2K
X	1K	n/a	39
YouTube	n/a	171	11

Updates on the project were regularly shared in the Irish Refugee Council newsletter which circulates to approx. 8000 individuals. Our residential stay at CECAS, Leap, Co. Cork was mentioned in the local newspaper – The Southern Star – along with a photo of the group.

### 4.2 Audience Engagement and Participation

#### *Local Performance at CECAS, Leap Co. Cork*

To support the young people with preparing for their performance in Cork Midsummer Arts Festival, through consultation with the young people, it was decided that the group would

perform ‘Rising Voices’ for CECAS staff on Friday 14<sup>th</sup> June. An audience of fifteen people attended who were made up on staff from CECAS and their friends/family.

### ***Cork Midsummer Festival***

On Saturday 16<sup>th</sup> June, the *Elevate Youth Arts* group performed ‘Rising Voices’ to an audience of 48 individuals in ActorsVision in Cork City. This performance was included on the programme for the Cork Midsummer Festival 2024. We received significant support and encouragement from Susan Holland, Engagement and Outreach officer for Cork Midsummer Festival. After the finale of their performance, the young people invited audience members to join them on stage for a dance. This has become a signature of theirs – each performance since has ended with the audience being invited to join the group on stage to dance together. This breaks down the barriers between audience and performers and has allowed meaningful connections to develop. Following the performance, there was a lively panel discussion between three young people from the *Elevate* group and the audience, which included questions on the creative process, highlights and challenges, the residential, and role of the Youth Advisory Group.

### ***Electric Picnic***

On Sunday 18 August the group travelled to Electric Picnic to perform ‘Rising Voices’ in the Global Green arena. The opportunity to perform at Electric Picnic came about through an existing relationship between Global Green and Creativity & Change. We ran a snap fundraising campaign to cover the cost of the bus. The group performed while the Wolfe Tones were performing on the main stage, drawing the largest audience ever seen at Electric Picnic. Given this, we were very pleasantly surprised that we had about 40 people in the audience for our show. The feedback was very positive and the organisers of Global Green were delighted with the group.

### ***Creative Symposium***

The symposium was held on Monday 18 November in Smock Alley Theatre, Dublin. There were approximately 40 audience members in attendance. The audience included arts professionals, youth workers, representatives from Creative Ireland and Mount Street Club Trust, Irish Refugee Council staff and Board members, and friends and family members of the participants. The Creative Symposium is discussed in more detail in section 5.3.

### ***Post Performance Surveys***

At the performances in CECAS, Cork Midsummer Festival, and the Creative Symposium, audience members were invited to complete a post-performance feedback survey. This survey was designed by Chriszine Backhouse from Creativity and Change to gather data for her research

project (Chriszine obtained ethical approval from MTU to use this project for research purposes). Across the three events, 42 people filled in a survey – eight at CECAS, 24 at Cork Midsummer Festival, and 10 after the symposium.

Image 2: Graphic Harvesting from the performance at Cork Midsummer Festival captured the main messages and themes of 'Rise Up'



## 5. Project Evaluation

In our initial project proposal, we conceived of three methods of evaluation: creative evaluation methods with the participants, the creative symposium, and this report. In addition, we are including here the feedback and findings from interviews with young people and surveys filled in by the audiences in Cork and Dublin. This data was collected as part of Chriszine Backhouse's research on creative arts projects with young people seeking international protection. Ethical approval for this data collection was obtained from Munster Technological University prior to the residential and IRC youth workers were involved in the data collection.

## 5.1 Creative Evaluation

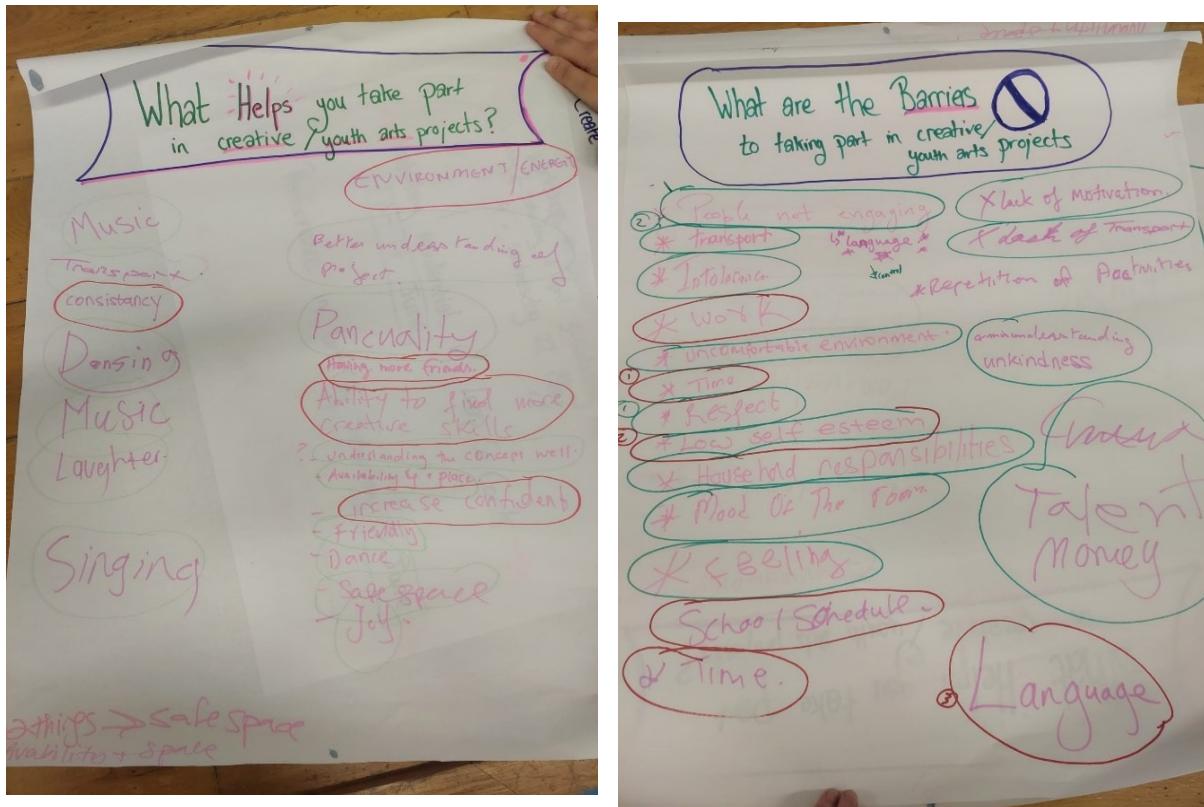
In our first workshop with the participants, we created a baseline for evaluation purposes and to support us to identify the needs of the young people. We used the method of a visual scale and had emojis to represent the scale: Strongly Disagree / Disagree / Neutral / Agree / Strongly agree. We read out various statements and the group moved behind the emoji that best represents their answer. We repeated this activity at the end of the project (post-symposium). As Table 1 shows, there was a marked increase in the ‘strongly agree’ category in the pre and post surveys. This is most notable in statement 1 (‘I feel comfortable sharing my ideas in a group’), statement 2 (‘I am confident sharing my talent in different ways’) and statement 5 (‘I think art can be used to raise awareness of social justice issues’) where the increase was 40%, 30% and 20% respectively. These findings are supported by the data from the participant interviews, discussed below.

**Table 2: Pre and Post Project Evaluation**

<b>Statement</b>	<b>Strongly Agree</b>		<b>Agree</b>		<b>Neutral</b>		<b>Disagree</b>	
	Pre	Post	Pre	Post	Pre	Post	Pre	Post
I feel comfortable sharing my ideas in a group	29%	69%	29%	13%	35%	19%	6%	0%
I am confident sharing my talent in different ways	24%	56%	18%	31%	35%	13%	24%	0%
I know what my creative skills are	35%	47%	18%	24%	35%	18%	12%	12%
I am confident taking part in creative/youth arts projects	53%	63%	47%	37%	0%	0%	0%	0%
I think art can be used to raise awareness of social justice issues	49%	69%	33%	31%	11%	0%	7%	0%

An additional activity that we used was the method of Speed Graffiti (learned by IRC staff in a workshop organised by Creative Ireland) to determine **‘What helps you take part in creative/youth arts projects?’** and **‘What are the barriers to taking part in creative/youth arts projects?’**. The group selected the 2 most important factors for supporting them to take part in creative/youth arts projects as being: **Safe space and availability of space**. The group selected the most significant barriers as: **people not engaging, not feeling respected, time (lack of), and low self esteem**. This information supported all staff and facilitators involved to be aware of what was needed to ensure meaningful engagement from the young people.

Image 3 and 4: Barriers and Supports



## 5.2 Interviews with Participants

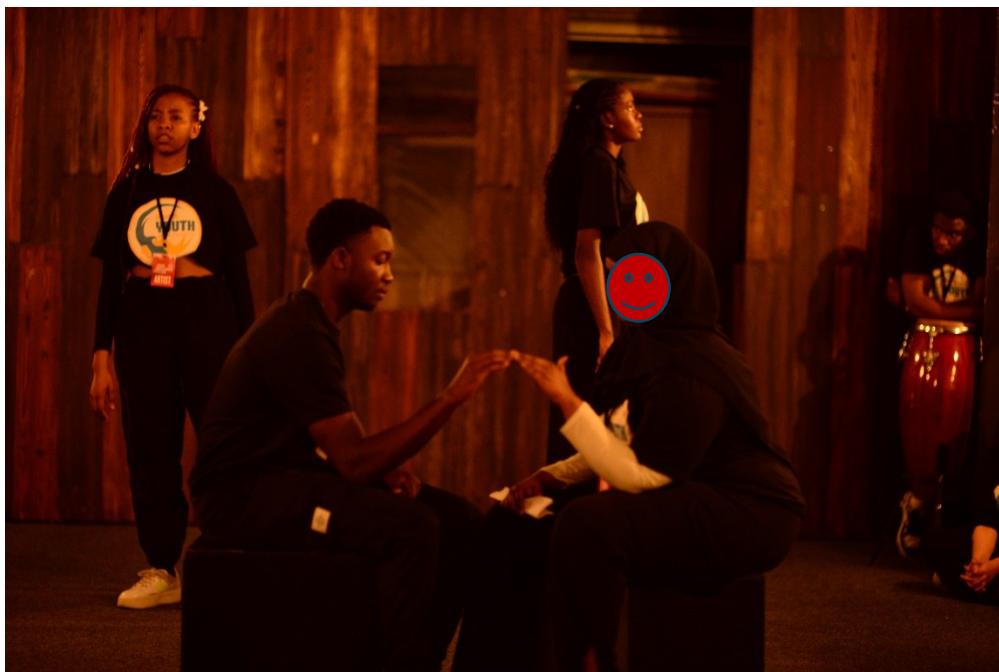
After the residential and performance at Electric Picnic, five young people who participated in the project were invited to take part in interviews to gain a deeper understanding of the impact that being part of *Elevate Youth Arts* project had on them. These interviews took place on Zoom between September and October 2024. The young people were asked to share their experience of the project and how they engaged in the creative process, how their involvement in the project influenced their creative abilities or expression, how it impacted their emotional wellbeing, agency, and sense of empowerment, and how the project has influenced their understanding of global justice. In this section, we discuss a few of the key themes that arose in the participant interviews.

### Creative Abilities and Artistic Expression

In terms of their creative abilities, all participants agreed that this project had a significant impact. Participant 2 described how the project pushed her to “explore new depths of creativity” within herself and how she felt that the project had become “more than just a movement but an

expression of emotions and ideas” which encouraged all the group members “to experiment with new techniques and approach our art with a purpose and driven mindset”. Participant 5 also described how the project has opened up new creative avenues for her, in this case spoken word and poetry, which she previously did not engage in. Participant 3 described how the project has made her “more expressive” with her singing. She contrasted her previous experience in a choir, where the ‘rules’ of singing are quite structured, with her experience in the *Elevate* singing group where the vibe was more “feel free to do what you must and just connect to the song”. This experience, she said, has helped her to “connect much more with the music” because unlike before when she felt like she was just singing “on the surface”, now she is going much deeper.

**Image 5: Spoken Word piece from rehearsal at Cork Midsummer Festival**



### *Emotional Wellbeing*

It was clear from the answers shared by the young people that one of the most significant outcomes of the project to them was the friendships formed, especially during the residential period. Strong and long-lasting bonds were developed. Participants built trust between one another and felt safe to open up to new connections. Participant 1 spoke about how they felt that they had no friends before joining the group and how this made them feel sad. However, they said that the connections made during the residential are still continuing and that this has made them feel better: “we’re always together. Like, going for a movie and everything. We’re always together”. Participant 4 also described having “very good friends” now who they meet all the time. Participant 3 described how the project “opened up my heart a bit”. They spoke about how they felt there was a safeguard on their heart but after participating in the project “that wall was

kind of taken down" allowing them to connect with people more deeply. Similarly, Participant 2 spoke about how the project allowed her to connect with others who probably have similar concerns and passions "by creating a sense of a strong community and support [network]".

Another way the project impacted the participants' wellbeing was through creativity. It is evident that discovering their creative abilities and learning new methods to be self-expressive has given the young people a toolkit to support their wellbeing beyond this project. Participant 2, for example, described how "being able to express her emotions through dance" helped her to release stress and how this made her body feel "happy and healthy". She also spoke about how dancing helped her to manage feelings of frustration and helplessness, which come from being confronted with all the difficult things going on in the world. Dancing, Participant 2 feels, has given her a sense of fulfilment and purpose – emotions that she has brought with her into other areas of her life such as college. Participant 5 also spoke about the role that poetry and writing now play in helping her manage her emotions: "nowadays, I tend to write a lot about how I'm feeling in whatever I'm facing. And so it's like...I'm voicing my opinion in some type of way. And [this] literally gives me a sense of relief because I'd be having so much on my mind and [now I can] just take it out and just put it on a piece of paper".

The third way the project impacted the participants' sense of wellbeing was in relation to self-confidence. Participants expressed how their experience of the project bolstered their confidence and helped them to see new possibilities for themselves. Participant 4 described how he had never performed before or done anything creative in fact, but now after performing twice, he feels like he can do anything. In particular, it has increased his confidence in college where he now feels more capable of speaking up in class and expressing himself publicly: "whenever I'm in my class I can talk anything. I can say anything and I can stand in front of...all...my class members you know". This sense of newfound confidence is echoed by Participant 5, who felt that creating a powerful piece in such a short time frame changed their perspective on what they could achieve: "it definitely made me see that oh it's possible to create something that is really amazing and epic in a certain space of time...it just made the impossibles that I was thinking of possible". This feeling of 'anything is possible' was also mentioned by Participant 2 who spoke about how the project has shown her that "you can do anything you want in this world as long as you put your mind to it"

**Image 6: Dance rehearsal at Cork Midsummer Festival**



### *Agency and Empowerment*

During the interviews, the young people were asked if participating in this project had had an impact on their sense of agency or empowerment. Their answers reflect the empowerment they felt when the message they wished to share reached and affected the audience. They also shared how working as a collective to raise awareness on an issue made them feel more powerful and created a sense of community. Participant 1 described how the project gave them “a sense of power” but not in the sense of being powerful but in the sense of having and accomplishing a mission. The mission in this case was sharing the group’s message with the audience and Participant 1 commented that “there was such a strong sense from the audience that they took the message that the group was trying to give them” and that “it was really successful”. For Participant 1 this gave them the feeling that “what you wanted to do has been done”. Participant 2 spoke about how the project helped her to feel like she was “taking an active role in making a difference, no matter how small it was” and gave a stronger belief in her ability to influence change collectively, as part of a group. This was echoed by Participant 3 who said “working in the project just made me feel even more empowered, even stronger than I knew I was. Especially seeing that they were that there were other people with the same mindset”. Participant 4 emphasised the idea of youth being instrumental in driving change “Let’s change the world. This [is] possible with young people, especially because they have power.”

An important aspect of agency and empowerment is feeling valued and heard and this was echoed by the interview participants. The young people interviewed spoke about feeling a sense of connection with the audience and the value they gained from being heard and having a

platform to voice their opinions on issues that are relevant to their lives and that they feel passionate about. Participant 2 described reading a poem, on behalf of another member of the group, for the audience and how this experience gave her “more confidence to speak to the audience and tell them that there is a system problem and...we should open our eyes to the reality in the world, you know, and try to make a change”. Participant 3 spoke about the need to “find more ways to connect with people and show them how serious everything is, and how we have a voice, and how we can change stuff that’s happening around us” while Participant 5 commented on how the fact that some people are “willing to hear us out and willing to give us this opportunity to voice our struggles” helped her to open her mouth and “actually step up and speak up for myself”.

### 5.3 Creative Symposium

The symposium was very much a youth-led event and the hosts for the event were two young people from the group – Luyanda and Divin. Part one of the symposium involved sharing the background of the project. Natasha Muldoon from the Irish Refugee Council spoke about how previous short-term youth arts projects led to the development of this proposal with Chriszine Backhouse and Kelvin Akpaloo, and how young people were recruited from our wider youth group. Representatives from the Youth Advisory Group shared their experiences and expressed how they contributed to shaping the direction of the project and the performance. The final segment from part one involved presentations from three academics who have carried out research connected to *Elevate Youth Arts* Project. Nike-Monisola Awoyemi, MA student in Child, Youth and Community in the University of Galway, Chriszine Backhouse from Munster Technological University, and Angela Veale from University College Cork.

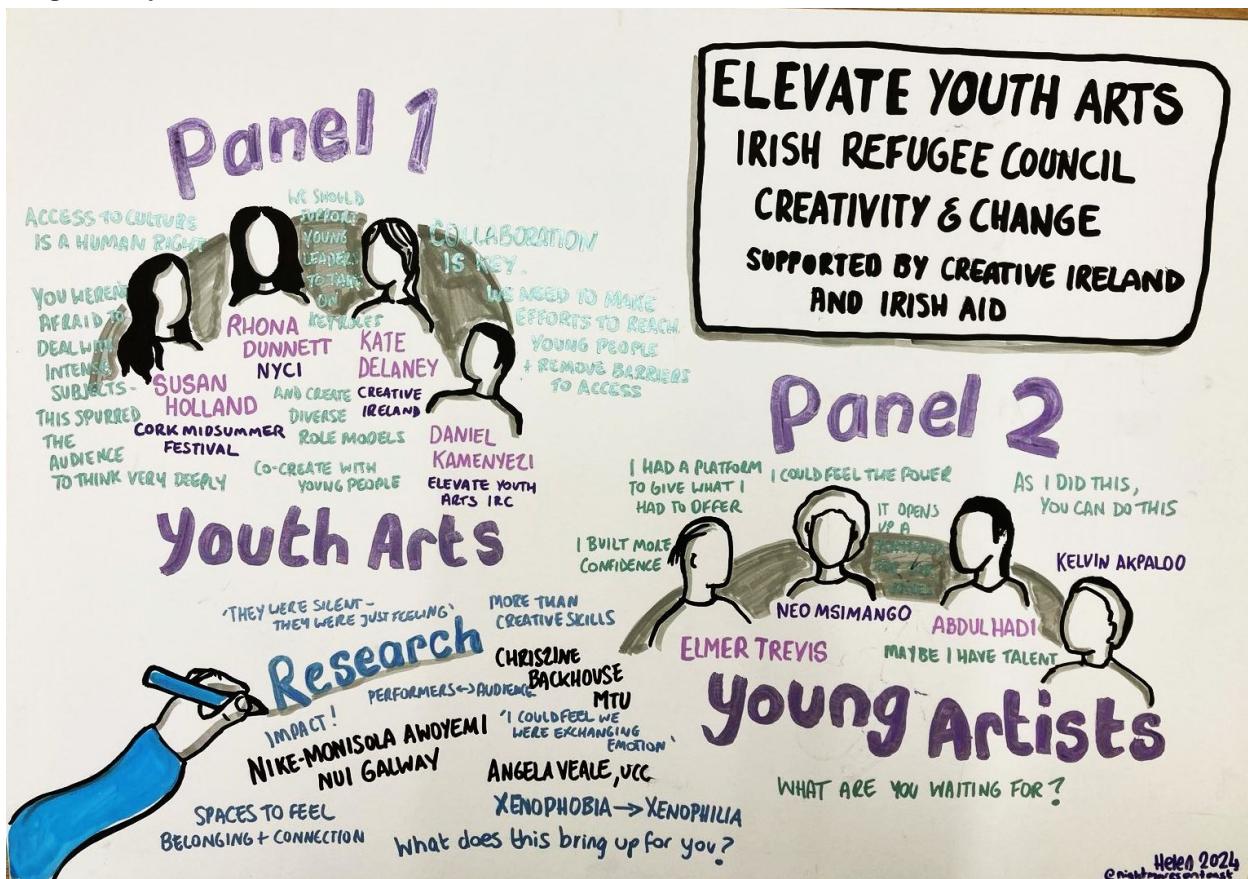
The performance of ‘Rising Voices’ was broken down into smaller pieces and dispersed throughout the symposium. After the presentations from the researchers, the first performance piece took place. This comprised of body percussion, drumming, and a spoken word poem titled ‘My Youthful Letter’. Following on from this, the Youth Arts panel were invited to the stage. This panel involved professionals working in the youth arts sector; Rhona Dunnett - National Youth Council of Ireland, Susan Holland – Head of Participation at Cork Midsummer Festival, and Kate Delaney from Creative Ireland. This panel was moderated by Daniel Kamenyezi, a youth facilitator from the project. The panel involved lively discussions on how to ensure youth arts is accessible to all young people in Ireland and how to nurture young leaders emerging, in particular from ethnic minority backgrounds. It was also highlighted by a panel member that access to culture is a human right. This discussion was followed by the second performance piece of the evening which involved the song ‘Rising Together’, spoken word poems ‘I am the Victim’ and ‘The Other Me’, and the dance ‘In the Real World’.

Image 7: Panel of young participants from the creative symposium



The second and final panel for the event was the panel of Young Artists. *Elevate Youth Arts* project participants Neo, Elmer and Abdul were guided through their discussion by moderator Kelvin Akpaloo. The young people spoke about the impact being part of this group had on them personally, their highlights, and a message they would share to other young people to encourage them to get involved in youth arts projects. The young panellists shared what their expectations were of the project. Abdul spoke about how taking part, and in particular encouragement from his peers and the leaders, supported him to recognise his talents. He explained that when he started, he didn't know what talent he had, but the inspiration from others in the group gave him confidence to step out of his comfort zone and try new things. By the end of the experience, he expressed how his self-belief had grown: 'Maybe I have this talent, I can do it!' This sentiment was also shared by Elmer who described how 'after the one week in Cork we built a lot of confidence'.

Image 8: Graphic Harvest Panel Discussions

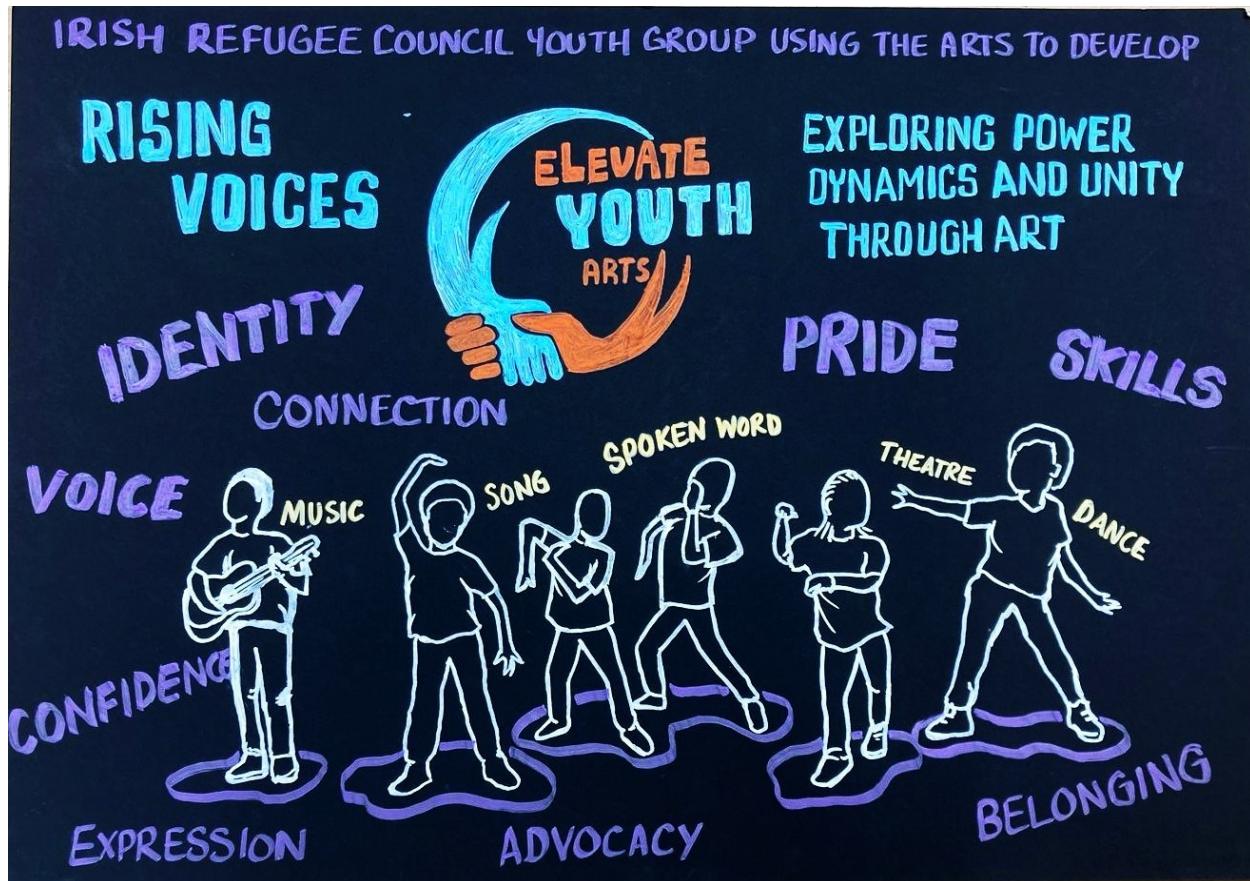


Neo shared how she did not know what to expect from participating and she was nervous at first: 'I could feel the power from what they (Aoife and Natasha) were telling me and I'm going for it'. Elmer also echoed this experience, stating 'I wasn't aware that this is how big it was going to be. I just knew I was going to Cork to create something amazing'. From hearing the young people's perspectives on joining the project, it is evident that having a trusting relationship built in advance with the youth workers supported them to have the confidence to apply and take part. Moreover, as with the interviews, the panellists shared how they were passionate not only about performing, but also about using their voices to share a message on the theme of power. As Elmer explained: 'We are not just here to perform, but to pass a message' and as affirmed by Neo: 'I am really appreciative of this moment. Getting to be on this platform where we can use arts to raise our voices is really amazing'.

Reflected in the panel discussion was the meaningful connections and friendships that were developed throughout this project. As Neo eloquently articulated: 'I have met really beautiful souls and I am keeping them'. It was evident from hearing each young person speak about the friendships they built with other participants that this was a significant outcome for them and will have a lasting positive impact on their lives. The final question put to the panellists was what

message they would like to share with other young people and Abdul's encouraging response 'If I can do it, you can do it' received an enthusiastic response from the audience.

Image 9: Graphic Harvest Symposium Overview



Similar to the interview findings, the panel discussion reflected the increase in self-confidence that the young people gain from engaging in *Elevate Youth Arts*. It also highlighted the importance of the meaningful friendships developed and the long-term positive impact it has had on their wellbeing – a support network has been created. Lastly, the young people spoke about recognising the potential for youth arts as a vehicle for raising awareness of social justice issues and feeling empowered as a result of gaining a platform to have their voices heard and be valued.

After this inspiring conversation was concluded, the final performance piece took place – spoken word poem 'Dear Human', the song 'Let's Change the World', and the dance 'Rise Up'. The audience engaged through being invited to the stage at the very end of the event to join the young people in dancing – most of the audience joined in for this and it created a wonderful atmosphere of joy and connection. The audience was also invited to fill in a survey at the end of the event and a reminder email was sent out in the following week.

## 5.4 Audience Feedback

A young person, from the wider Irish Refugee Council youth group, who attended the symposium, wrote a poem inspired by what she witnessed and learned about during the event.

### **Inspired by *Elevate Youth Arts* by Atalanta**

*Being in a new place can be lonely, scary and not to mention cold.  
So she tries communicating with people to find a place.  
A place where she can take a chance to express herself.  
A place where she can build her confidence and not let it crumble.  
A place where she can build long lasting friendships and never grow out of them.  
A place where she can participate and feel appreciated.  
She just wants the thrill of hard work so that the rewards are just worth it.  
She doesn't care if it's too early in the morning or late at night, she just wants to channel her energy for the right purpose.  
She wants to explore her talent and is willing to experiment to see where she really fits.  
She is an artistic soul with a vision and is ready to bring it to life.  
Finally, she finds a place and is given the support required.  
All thanks to the community and the people who are willing to support her.  
She blossoms to the most beautiful flower that she was meant to be.*

### **Audience Feedback: What themes or messages did you take away from the symposium?**

The following answers were submitted from the audience, through the post-symposium survey, which reflect the impact that the symposium had on those who were present:

1. The journey and struggle of newcomers to the country, the importance of providing a safe space, how important it is for young people to be heard
2. The cohesion of the young people from the group shows how integration should and can work.
3. Importance of youth arts in building confidence and self-expression.
4. The power of connection, how creativity & the arts can be a brilliant way to build understanding.
5. Inequity, hardship, joy, community, and growth are all things that can exist in the same space. Young people should always have a voice in this world, and it everyone's job to ensure that spaces and opportunities are created to *Elevate* the voices of marginalised communities.
6. Uplifted, inspired, love

7. We need to support young people's energies and talents; change comes from strong personal motivation and collective action; those who can amplify the work and outputs of young people have a responsibility to do this and ensure they get the necessary resources and funding to continue and widen out the target group for similar creative arts work with diverse young people and move towards integration work.
8. That young people want a voice, that people should take time to look at other people's experiences and not to turn away.
9. Solidarity, Empowerment & Joy
10. Themes of injustice, racism, oppression, and call for change. Theme of solidarity and resilience was also strong

## 6. Relevant Findings and Recommendations

### 6.1 Reaching Young People Seeking Protection

Creative Ireland can best reach young people seeking asylum/with refugee status by connecting with and funding community and youth organisations that are already supporting young people seeking international protection/with refugee status. If these organisations have already built-up trust and relationships with young people, they are well placed to develop a meaningful creative arts project. During our initial consultation with the young people engaged in our project, they highlighted having a 'safe space' as one of the most important supportive factors to them joining a youth arts project. Therefore, ensuring that there is a space available where young people feel welcomed, included, respected and safe is crucial. Youth work groups can provide this 'safe' space.

**Recommendation: Fund youth and community groups, *who already have a proven track record of working with and supporting young people seeking international protection*, to implement creative arts projects.**

### 6.2 Supporting Creative Potential

One of the key outcomes of this project was increasing the capacity of three young leaders to develop creative facilitation skills. Having leadership pathways for young people from asylum seeking/refugee backgrounds is essential to nurture their creative potential. This point was also reflected in the panel discussion with youth arts professionals. It was emphasised that young people from ethnic minority backgrounds need to be supported to ensure they have opportunities to reach their creative potential and take on leadership positions.

'Not feeling respected' and 'low self-esteem' were highlighted as potential barriers for young people participating in youth arts projects. Therefore, as expressed above, emphasis needs to be placed on creating an inclusive and respectful environment. We took time to build group rapport

and collaboratively discussed the group guidelines that were necessary to ensure that all members of the group felt comfortable to engage and felt valued. With regards to self-esteem, activities were embedded into our planning to gently build up the confidence of group members and ease them into learning new creative skills.

Language barriers is another important consideration. We were fortunate to have young people in the group who could support with translating for their peers when needed. Having young leaders/creative arts facilitators who can support with translation if needed will assist with reaching and engaging young people who may be finding it challenging to get involved in arts activities.

**Recommendation: Provide pathways and capacity building for young leaders from ethnic minority backgrounds to take on leadership roles in youth arts projects.**

### 6.3 Supporting Youth Participation

When considering youth participation throughout the project we used the Lundy Model of Space, Voice, Audience, and Influence. The development of the Youth Advisory Group (YAG) proved to be an effective way to ensure that the young people were supported to actively participate in project design, implementation and evaluation. Key decisions for the project were made in collaboration with the YAG. To illustrate some of the decision-making the YAG contributed to, they inputted into the schedule for the residential, decided on costume ideas, and led a daily activity for the full group during the residential. They also met each evening of the residential to discuss the schedule for the next day, share feedback from the wider group, and shape the performance. The wider group of young people also had the opportunity to actively lead on various areas of the project. In our initial session with all of the creative facilitators, the young people were invited to identify a theme/topic they would like to explore in this project through creative means. The methods of Open Space and Group Brainstorming was used to identify the themes emerging. The young people then prioritised the themes using Sticky Dot Method. By narrowing down the themes in this way and allowing space for group discussion, we came to a consensus of selecting the theme of 'Power'. Another example of active participation is when young people were invited to design a logo for the project and for the T-Shirt design. The entries were voted on by the group and the winning design was selected. We had a WhatsApp chat group for the project and we regularly shared updates and used the method of 'Polls' to get group consensus on decisions that needed to be made. The young people also had the opportunity to decide on the design of the symposium. We had a meeting with the YAG to discuss what should be included in this event and how it should flow. All young people were then invited to nominate themselves, or other group members, to take on flows for the event such as hosting, panel members, and moderators. From our learnings, a long-term project (12 months+) allowed this meaningful youth participation to develop. Also, the training and toolkits provided by Creative Ireland on promoting youth participation were very helpful.

**Recommendation: Continue to offer funding for long-term projects and provide support with training for youth workers and facilitators on creative methods for youth participation.**

## 6.4 Understanding Challenges

There are many challenges to overcome when working with young people seeking international protection. In this section, we will discuss some of the challenges we faced from a project management perspective. By focusing on these challenges, it is not our intention to take away from the huge success of this project and the great sense of enjoyment and achievement we all felt in carrying it out. Rather, it is to shed light on the very real and practical issues that we faced in the hope that this helps other groups do this work successfully in the future.

### *IPAS Transfers*

During this project, a few young people were transferred to new IPAS accommodation centres. There are two types of transfers: 1) Transfers of young people who have status – in this scenario, young people staying in IPAS with status are, at very short notice, informed they must find alternative accommodation or be transferred, usually to a tented site. 2) Transfer of young people who are still in the protection process – young people may get transferred to another IPAS centre for an unknown reason. When transfers take place, they are usually done suddenly and at short notice. This is very stressful for the young person. Transfers can make it difficult/impossible for a young person to continue engaging with our work, depending on their new location. Being prepared for this eventuality is important; with adequate budget resources to cover transport, young people can be supported to continue engaging.

**Recommendation: Ensure budget for transport has enough allocated to it to cover the likely scenario that some participants will be transferred and it may be costly to for them to continue.**

### *Transitions*

Homelessness and the transition back to IPAS accommodation post-residential were also challenges for this group. Being away for a week and everything that this involved (a certain level of freedom, independence, fun, community, etc.) made it particularly hard for the group to return to their ‘normal’ lives in IPAS accommodation. Some participants were staying in tented accommodation, some were living in cramped conditions with other family members and it was a big adjustment for them to return. The transition back to their accommodation is something we factored in towards the end of the residential – we talked about it as a group, we provided extra

support where necessary and we made sure to check in with everyone individually after we parted ways.

**Recommendation: Ensure the transition back to IPAS accommodation is taken into consideration and young people are supported to prepare for the transition back.**

### *Permissions*

There was a lot of work involved in making sure the young people would not lose their IPAS accommodation by going on the residential. It is not easy taking young people out of their accommodation for a week, particularly in the current climate (shortage of IPAS accommodation). Therefore, we made sure that the managers of each centre, as well as IPAS, knew what was happening and why. We wrote to IPAS directly and we also wrote to the manager of each centre. Some managers also required IPAS to write directly to them.

Unfortunately, despite all of this preparation one of the young people returned to their IPAS accommodation to be refused entry and was left outside until we managed to speak to the management of the accommodation centre to rectify this and they were allowed to re-enter. This occurred due to a breakdown in communication between IPAS and the centre manager. It was a very stressful experience for the young person involved.

**Recommendation: Ensure there is support from the relevant government department(s) to guarantee that young people living in IPAS accommodation do not face barriers to attending youth arts residential/opportunities.**

### *Emotional Wellbeing and Support*

It was an absolute privilege to run this project and we are very grateful that we had the opportunity to do it. However, it was a very emotional project for us as youth workers and by the end of the residential week in particular we were mentally, emotionally, and physically exhausted. Although we were not facilitating the creative workshops, we were organising and managing everything else from catering issues to supporting the young people's emotional wellbeing (we had participants who did not want to get out of bed, who got bad news from home, who struggled with the schedule or with group dynamics, etc.) to organising transport, shopping, room bookings, snacks, free time activities, etc.. Through all of this we were also on an emotional rollercoaster ourselves – seeing these young people work together to create this amazing performance, seeing people who had never performed before stand up and speak out, seeing the friendships and connections that developed, seeing the joy and happiness and love that radiated from the group all week, and holding all of these feelings while also holding space for all of the participants' feelings, recognising and understanding the challenges they have faced and continue to face, and all the while knowing what they would be going back to at the end of the week. In addition, although we had a couple of days off at the end of the residential, we were then straight into our summer programme of work with the wider IRC youth group including weekly workshops and a 3-day wilderness expedition. Due to internal organisational issues, we

had no line manager during this time and although we were engaging in external group supervision, what we really needed was a solid and thorough debrief post-residential and more targeted supervision (i.e. just the two of us) in the weeks that followed..

**Recommendation:** For youth workers and facilitators undertaking an intensive piece of work like this with this cohort of young people, particularly if it includes a residential element, it is really important to ensure there is a good support system in place. This work is emotionally rewarding but also taxing; it's important that the project management team is solid, that communication remains open, and that project managers (i.e. youth workers in our case) have good supervision and line management.

## 7. Key considerations

### 7.1 Wellbeing Focus

This cohort of young people are facing many challenges and uncertainties in their lives. Building in workshops/activities that support young people's wellbeing should be a consideration for a future creative arts project. We had a workshop focused on wellbeing pre-residential and aimed to maintain a supportive environment and be attuned to the emotional needs of the young people throughout. Also, consideration should be given to how to maintain support for the participants post-project. As we have an established youth project in the Irish Refugee Council, the young people participating in the project had ways to stay connected after the residential and majority of the group attended our summer youth programme of activities. This provided a way for the young people to stay connected to one another and to engage in activities to boost their wellbeing, in particular after the challenging transition back to their IPAS accommodation.

### 7.2 Youth Work

As stated in the report, it proved vital to have youth workers on this project who had sustained and trusted relationships with the young people. Most of the young people had initially connected with IRC through our Warm Welcome programme which is tailored to help newly arrived young people seeking international protection build friendships, develop skills to support their wellbeing, and get to know their rights and entitlements. As a result of this, the youth workers had developed a connection with the young people from the beginning of their journey in Ireland. When recruiting young people for the *Elevate Youth Arts Project*, the youth workers were a source of encouragement for members who did not know anyone else in the group and helped to dispel self-doubt or uncertainty that the young people may have been experiencing about signing up to take part. As previously mentioned, there were numerous occasions during the project when young people needed emotional support. Due to the already formed

relationships, the youth workers were best placed to support the young people through emotionally challenging times during the project, in particular during the residential. In this project, the youth workers were maintaining contact and check-ins with the participants between all the activities related to the project. Therefore, a key consideration for future creative arts projects is to continue to fund youth work projects to lead on creative arts initiatives, particularly when working with young people who are seeking international protection. This cohort of young people can experience a great deal of upheaval in their lives – transfers to different accommodations etc. Therefore, the consistency in the relationship of a youth worker is vital to developing meaningful participation from the young people. We recognise the essential skills and expertise that creative arts facilitators bring to a project and do not intend to diminish their key role in a successful project – we could not have implemented this project without our amazing creative facilitators. However, we also wish to highlight the important role of youth workers in maintaining holistic support for the young people before, during, and after a creative arts project.

## 8. Conclusion

*Elevate Youth Arts* has been a transformative and empowering experience for all who were involved in it – young people, creative facilitators, and youth workers. Through a series of creative workshops, performances, and a youth-led symposium, the project successfully engaged 16 young people, providing them with opportunities to develop their artistic skills, build confidence, and express their voices through creative mediums.

The project's success is evident in the positive feedback from participants, the unexpected invitation to perform at Electric Picnic, and the active involvement of young people in decision-making processes. The establishment of the Youth Advisory Group and the capacity-building workshops for young leaders have further strengthened the project's impact, fostering leadership and creative facilitation skills among the young people.

Research conducted in conjunction with the project has contributed to the broader understanding of the transformative power of co-created performance and the positive impact that youth arts projects can have on young people. The findings presented at the creative symposium and the planned research publications will continue to inform best practices in youth arts projects.

The project also highlighted several key challenges, including IPAS transfers, obtaining permissions for absence from accommodation, and transitions back to accommodation. Addressing these challenges required careful planning, communication, and support from relevant government departments. The emotional wellbeing of both participants and facilitators was a critical consideration, emphasising the need for strong support systems within organisations.

Key recommendations from the project include funding youth and community groups with established trust among young people seeking protection, providing pathways for young leaders from ethnic minority backgrounds, and ensuring long-term project funding to support meaningful youth participation. Additionally, maintaining a focus on wellbeing and fostering trusted relationships with participants are essential for meaningful youth arts projects.

Overall, *Elevate Youth Arts* project has demonstrated the significant benefits of sustained, creative engagement for young people who have lived experience of seeking international protection in Ireland. It has provided a platform for these young individuals to discover and nurture their creative talents, develop long-lasting friendships, and feel that their voices have been valued and heard. The project's success highlights the importance of supporting creative youth arts initiatives that empower young people.

# Appendix I: Examples of Creative Evaluation Activities

## **Image Theatre**

**Overview:** Image Theatre, a non-verbal performance technique developed by Augusto Boal, involves participants using their bodies to create still images or "frozen sculptures" to represent ideas, emotions, or social issues. It is a method for exploring complex topics in a safe, visual way, and can be used in workshops to generate dialogue and explore different perspectives. In the Elevate project, we used Image Theatre – specifically Freeze Frames – to generate group reflections and discussions on creativity.

**Method:** Divide the group into small groups (for example three people in each group). Using a prompt or question, ask each group to create a Freeze Frame using their bodies. This can be done simultaneously or group by group. Discuss the images created with the whole group.

**Materials:** no specific materials but you do need to prepare prompts/questions in advance, ideally based on an issue of importance that the group has identified.

More information: <https://beautifultrouble.org/toolbox/tool/image-theatre>

## **Visual Scale**

**Overview:** This is similar to a Walking Debate but using a Visual Scale instead of Agree/Disagree. We used face emojis to represent a scale of agreement to disagreement. The emojis were placed in a line on the floor and we then read out statements related to creativity and creative skills as a way to generate a baseline of the group. One facilitator recorded answers and took notes.

**Method:** place visual scale markers on the floor, read out statements one by one and ask the participants to stand at the marker that most closely matches their opinion/experience/feeling. After each statement, lead a short group reflection/discussion.

**Materials:** printed out visual scale; pre-prepared statements

More information: <https://participatorymethods.com/activities/perception-scale/>

## **Speed Graffiti**

**Overview:** This activity is like a relay race – each team must write down as many ideas about a theme as they can. This method is useful for gathering ideas, brainstorming, understanding issues or starting points. It can be used for developing the generative potential of participants

by encouraging them to see that they may have their best ideas by having lots of ideas and pooling the ideas of others.

Method:

- Make sure that everyone understands the statements or questions to begin with. In our group, we used two questions based around facilitators and barriers to creative engagement.
- Write the issues/questions on flip chart paper and stick these to the wall. Divide the group into two (or more if necessary) teams.
- Allocate one flip chart/issue to each team. Give each team a different colour marker to write with. Line them up in two lines.
- Taking turns (like a relay race), each team member runs up to the flipchart paper and writes or draws a response to the prompt.
- When they have finished, they return to their team to pass on the pen and go to the back of the queue, and the next person runs to the paper to write down their idea. Participants are only allowed to write one idea at a time, and they cannot repeat what someone in the team has already written. Once the allocated time for the exercise runs out (about 3 minutes), the team with the most ideas wins.
- Next each group takes the flipchart of another group. They look at the ideas on the page and cross out all the ones that are out of their control. They then swap again and look at the remaining ideas and identify possible solutions to overcome the barriers.
- Each group feeds back on the barriers and solutions.

Materials: Flipchart paper with prompt questions/issues; different colour marker pens; masking tape.

### **Graphic Harvesting**

**Overview:** Graphic harvesting, also known as graphic recording, is the real-time process of visually capturing spoken ideas from an event, such as a conference, workshop, or meeting, using a combination of images, words, and colour.

**Method:** graphic harvesting is usually done by a trained professional who has the skills to capture the important points of a discussion in real time, either on a tablet, paper or whiteboard.

More information:

<http://www.eimearmcnally.com/>

<https://ruthgraham.ie/graphic-harvesting-ireland/>

<https://www.drawesome.ie/>