Evaluation of the Creative Youth Nurture Fund

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1. EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The Creative Youth Nurture Fund was established as a pilot initiative under the Creative Youth Plan 2023-2027 to embed creativity into the lives of children and young people facing significant barriers to cultural participation.

With a total investment of €727,234 distributed across nine projects, the fund involved "seldom-heard" young people such as those with disabilities, refugees and asylum seekers, young Travellers, LGBTQI+ youth, those with mental health challenges and those interacting with the care or youth justice systems.

The primary objective was to empower these young individuals by placing them at the centre of the design process, ensuring they could shape their own creative engagements in safe, culturally responsive environments that prioritised their agency and voice.

The funded projects successfully engaged diverse young people through varied artistic mediums, ranging from podcasting and digital media, to drama and dance. Participation numbers highlighted the fund's reach into specific “seldom heard” communities. For example, Foróige’s "City Instincts" project engaged 164 young people, including 94 beneficiaries of temporary protection from Ukraine, 30 young people seeking asylum, and 19 neurodivergent youth. Similarly, the National Concert Hall’s "Music in Mind" programme reached 259 participants across ten centres, while the "Hear I Am" project at Oberstown Children Detention Campus empowered 44 young people in detention to produce over 20 podcasts.

The evaluation found that these co-designed interventions provided critical outlets for self-expression, helping participants navigate complex identities and traumatic experiences in supportive, non-clinical settings. Participants reported measurable increases in self-confidence, self-esteem, and transferable skills such as communication, digital literacy, and leadership.

Beyond individual benefits, the projects successfully challenged societal stigmas and shifted public perception. A notable example was the "Building Bridges" drama project led by young Travellers, after which 83% of audience members reported believing that Travellers deserve greater community support.

By validating the voices of marginalised youth and providing high-quality creative opportunities, the fund helped reduce social isolation and strengthen community connections. Both reduced social isolation and strengthened community connections are foundational prerequisites for social cohesion, as they help create relationships, trust, and participation.

Despite these successes, the implementation revealed significant structural and operational hurdles. Recruitment and sustained engagement were often difficult due to housing insecurity, such as frequent transfers within the IPAS system, and a distrust of institutions.

The intense emotional toll of working with traumatised young people also led to staff burnout, highlighting a need for support structures for the creative facilitators and youth workers.

Key lessons for future initiatives emphasise the potential of moving away from short-term pilot models, budgets that explicitly cover "wraparound" services such as clinical supervision and trauma-informed training, and key prerequisites for participation such as transport, food, and translation.

While the pilot demonstrated the transformative power of creativity, ensuring sustainable impact requires systemic advocacy to address the root causes of marginalisation alongside robust resourcing for the youth organisations delivering this work.

2. PURPOSE OF THIS EVALUATION

This evaluation was conducted to assess the **impact, effectiveness, and sustainability** of projects funded by the **Creative Youth Nurture Fund**. The primary objective was to understand how funded initiatives supported **seldom-heard young people** to develop creative skills, build confidence, enhance social inclusion, and amplify their voices. Insights from the evaluation will inform future funding practices and strategic approaches to strengthening creative engagement opportunities for marginalised youth.

Overall Evaluation Approach

The evaluation was guided by a framework informed by **realist evaluation principles**, which are particularly well suited to assessing complex, place-based, and relational creative interventions. This approach enabled the evaluation to move beyond identifying *whether* projects worked, to explore **how, why, and under what conditions** outcomes were achieved. Specifically, the evaluation examined the interaction between **context**, **mechanisms**, and **outcomes**, allowing for a nuanced understanding of what works, for whom, and in what circumstances.

The framework focused on four key areas of inquiry

1. Understanding the environments and delivery contexts in which projects operated.
2. Identifying key issues and barriers faced by young people, and how projects sought to address them.
3. Assessing the tangible differences projects made in the lives of participating young people.
4. Generating learning to inform the future design, targeting, and delivery of Creative Youth funding.

Data Collection

A **mixed methods approach** was adopted to ensure both breadth and depth of evidence, combining qualitative and documentary data sources. This allowed for triangulation across multiple perspectives and strengthened the robustness of findings.

The primary data sources included

- **Semi-structured interviews with project teams**, capturing practitioner perspectives on project design, delivery approaches, challenges, adaptations, and perceived impacts on young people.
- **Review of project proposals**, providing insight into intended outcomes, target groups, planned mechanisms of change, and alignment with Creative Youth objectives.
- **Review of individual project reports**, enabling analysis of reported activities, outputs, outcomes, reflections, and lessons learned across the funded portfolio.

Together, these sources provided a comprehensive evidence base spanning **intended design**, **implementation experience**, and **reported outcomes**.

Data Analysis

Qualitative data from interviews and documentary sources were analysed using a **systematic thematic analysis approach**, supported by **MaxQDA qualitative analysis software**. The use of MaxQDA enabled transparent, rigorous, and auditable analysis across multiple data types.

The analysis process involved

- Developing an initial **coding framework** aligned to the evaluation questions and realist evaluation concepts (context, mechanisms, outcomes).
- Coding interview transcripts, project proposals, and project reports within MaxQDA, allowing for consistent treatment of all data sources.
- Iteratively refining codes to reflect emerging themes, patterns, and divergences across projects and contexts.
- Exploring relationships between themes, compare experiences across different project types and target groups, and identify recurring enabling factors and barriers.

Findings were synthesised and interpreted with attention to both **common patterns** across the fund and **distinctive or innovative practices** emerging in specific projects.

3. OVERVIEW OF THE CREATIVE IRELAND NURTURE FUND

The Creative Youth Nurture Fund[1] was a pilot initiative designed to support cultural, artistic, and creative projects led by young people in Ireland. Stemming from the Creative Youth Plan 2023-2027[2], the fund aimed to embed creativity into the lives of children and young people to enhance their happiness, wellbeing, and personal development.

A key focus of the fund was to reach specific groups of children and young people who are often "seldom heard"[3] and face barriers to accessing creative opportunities. The fund specifically targeted young people living with disabilities/or from the neurodivergent community, refugees and asylum-seekers, those with mental health issues, LGBTQI+ youth, Traveller and Roma communities, those in or transitioning from the care system, and individuals engaged with the youth justice system.

A central principle of the fund is empowering young people, particularly those aged 6-24, by placing them "in the driving seat" of project design and implementation. This youth-led approach is guided by the National Framework[4] for Children and Young People's Participation in Decision-making, ensuring that young people have as much agency as possible. The fund welcomed a wide array of creative forms, including circus, film, music, dance, theatre, visual arts, digital technology, and fashion.

In addition to this, Creative Ireland supported fund beneficiaries through targeted capacity building, including the Creative Youth Evaluation Framework and associated training, training in creative facilitation and creativity-led practice, and supports delivered through Hub na nÓg to strengthen child and youth participation and co-design.

The Creative Youth Plan acknowledges that factors such as socio-economic background, migrant status, and disability can create significant barriers to participation in cultural and artistic life. The fund therefore prioritises applicants who can demonstrate how they will effectively support these groups.

As these are pilot projects, evaluation was a critical component and successful applicants had to systematically assess and report on their project's impact, learnings, and sustainability, with direct input from the young people involved. This learning process was intended to help identify the best ways to reach and engage these young people for future initiatives.

Aims and Objectives

The Creative Ireland Nurture Fund aimed to support youth-led initiatives over a period of 18-24 months. The projects had to be "community" based, not within the school system. The five core aims of the Creative Youth Nurture Fund Initiatives were:

1. Accessibility for children and young people

[1] https://www.creativeireland.gov.ie/en/news/announcement-of-the-creative-youth-nurture-fund/
[2] https://www.creativeireland.gov.ie/app/uploads/2023/03/Creative-Youth-Plan-2023-2027.pdf
[3] Page 41, *Creative Youth Plan 2023-2027*
[4] https://hubnanog.ie/participation-framework/

2. Overcoming barriers faced by 'Nurture Cohorts' to creative opportunities
3. Child-centred decision making (informed by National Framework)
4. Engaging and fun creative opportunities
5. Participant-informed project evaluation

The pilot fund encouraged partnerships between organisations and individuals that work in education, early years and school-age childcare, youth and community work, artists and creative organisations. After an open call for projects, nine successful recipients shared a fund of €727,234. The awardees were

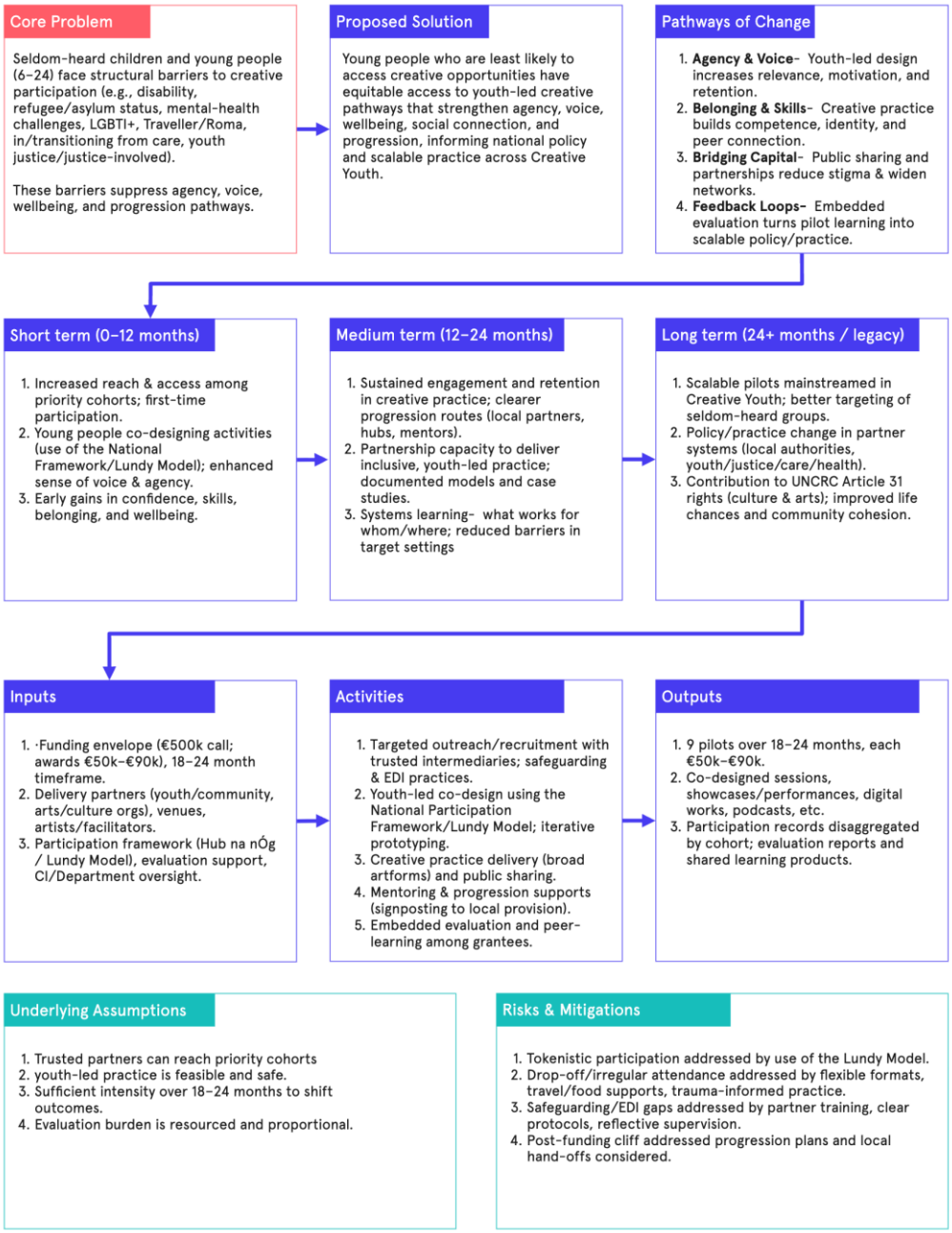
- *The Elevate Youth Arts Project* - The Irish Refugee Council – Cork/Dublin;
- *Áit Eile*[5] - Creative Spark- Louth/Meath;
- *Building Bridges* - Ballyhoura Development CLG- Limerick;
- *Journeys* - Helium Arts – Dublin;
- *Glór Dance Project* - Traces Dance Ensemble and Down Syndrome Ireland Waterford/South Kilkenny Branch – Wexford/Waterford;
- *Hear I Am* - Oberstown Childrens Detention Campus – Dublin;
- *City Instincts* – Foróige – Dublin;
- *Creative Aftercare Communities* - Limerick Learning Hub – Limerick; and
- *Music in Mind Youth Programme* - The National Concert Hall – Dublin.

Theory of Change

A Theory of Change has been developed to articulate how and why the Nurture Fund was expected to achieve its intended outcomes. The Theory of Change is a framework that maps the logical sequence from inputs and activities through to outputs, outcomes, and long-term impacts. It identifies the assumptions underpinning the programme, the causal pathways through which change is expected to occur, and the indicators by which progress can be assessed.

By making these pathways explicit, the Theory of Change supports both implementation and evaluation, ensuring that learning from the Nurture Fund contributes to evidence-based policy and the wider goal of embedding children's rights to culture and creativity.

[5] Changed to "*The Blooming Minds Club*" with input from participants.



Evidence Review

In order to inform this evaluation, a rapid review of scientific literature in relation key aspects of the programme i.e. psychological and emotional benefits, social and community integration, and educational and skill development was undertaken.

What this review told us is that involving young people from seldom-heard groups in creative practices such as theatre, music, podcasts, and art can have profound impacts on their personal development, social integration, and overall wellbeing.

These creative engagements provide a platform for **self-expression, skill development, and community building, which are crucial for individuals who often face social exclusion and identity challenges**. The benefits of such involvement are multifaceted, encompassing psychological, social, and educational dimensions.

While the benefits of involving seldom-heard youth in creative practices are significant, it is important to consider the challenges and limitations of such initiatives. For instance, ensuring sustained engagement and support from caregivers, youth workers and professionals is crucial for the success of these programmes. (Salmon and Rickaby, 2014).

There is also a need for more research and investment in arts-based interventions to fully understand and maximise their potential impact on marginalised youth (Walls et al., 2016).

Despite these challenges, the positive outcomes highlighted in the research underscore the value of creative practices as a tool for empowerment and social change. Some of these are outlined below.

Psychological and Emotional Benefits

- Creative practices offer a therapeutic outlet for young people to explore and express their experiences and emotions. This is particularly beneficial for those who have experienced trauma or displacement, as it provides a safe space for reflection and healing (Hanrahan and Banerjee, 2017) (Sonn et al., 2018).
- Participation in arts-based programmes has been shown to enhance self-esteem and confidence. For instance, young people in care who engaged in theatre and music initiatives reported improved mental health and resilience (Salmon and Rickaby, 2014).
- The arts can foster a sense of vitality and joy, as participants often describe feeling more alive and engaged when involved in creative activities (Hanrahan and Banerjee, 2017).

Social and Community Integration

- Creative projects facilitate social inclusion by building social bonds and creating a sense of common experience among participants. This is particularly important for marginalised youth who may feel isolated from mainstream society (Wright and Palmer, 2009).
- Arts-based interventions can help young people from refugee backgrounds to settle and integrate into new communities by providing opportunities to share their stories and connect with others through shared cultural expressions (Sonn et al., 2018) (MacPherson and Katsilerou, 2025).
- Theatre programmes have demonstrated the power of theatre to build community and foster inclusion among young people seeking sanctuary (MacPherson and Katsilerou, 2025).

Educational and Skill Development

- Involvement in creative practices can provide pathways back to education and employment by developing transferable skills such as communication, teamwork, and problem-solving (Wright and Palmer, 2009).

- Arts engagement encourages creativity and critical thinking, which are valuable skills in both academic and professional settings. This is particularly beneficial for young people who have been disengaged from traditional educational systems (Harris and Staley, 2011).
- Participatory arts projects can also serve as a platform for young people to develop leadership skills and take on active roles in their communities (Walls et al., 2016).

4. PROFILES OF EACH PROJECT

This section presents concise overview of each project, highlighting the unique objectives, target demographics, and creative methodologies employed by each project. The projects collectively demonstrate a commitment to fostering confidence, agency, and social inclusion among seldom-heard youth through diverse artistic practices.

Each introduction below aims to convey the project's significance and its potential for transformative impact, setting the stage for a deeper exploration of its successes and challenges. The introductions underscore the innovative approaches taken to address complex social issues through creative engagement.

Ballyhoura Development CLG - "Building Bridges"

Building Bridges was a community drama project In East Limerick that engaged young Travellers aged 15-24 who were not in education, employment, or training, offering a safe and empowering space to explore their identities and aspirations through participatory drama.

This project aimed to build confidence, foster self-expression, and develop problem-solving skills. The project resulted in powerful public performances that challenged societal perceptions and advocated for greater inclusion within the wider community.

The Building Bridges project fulfilled its objectives and planned activities, but the actual implementation involved a more extensive and adaptive approach to address the multifaceted challenges faced by young Travellers. Challenges included persistent societal discrimination, socioeconomic disadvantages, and the complex personal issues faced by participants, necessitating flexible approaches and additional resources.

Implementation

The implementation largely adhered to those planned at the start. Some of the key activities included;

- A **steering group** was established and met four times, chaired by a member of the Traveller community, and included representatives from various agencies and the Traveller community.
- Four structured blocks of **drama workshops** were delivered, along with an additional 20 workshops funded through SICAP. The co-design approach, where young people chose themes and methods, was central to maintaining engagement and fostering ownership, as intended.
- **Multiple performances** were delivered locally and regionally, a two-person "Inner Dialogue" piece at Mary Immaculate College. The "Inner Dialogue" performance was also adapted into a mini-film documentary.
- An experienced **community arts facilitator** (Aisling Ryan) and a **Traveller Peer Link Worker** (Martin Ward, later Aoife Power). The peer worker's role was particularly crucial for recruitment and sustained engagement.
- An **evaluation** supported by action research was completed.

Impacts

Significant increases in confidence, self-expression, and social inclusion were reported by participants and project teams in both the evaluation reports and interviews. One young person stated that "*It was the first time I felt proud of myself in front of people*".

The use of drama, particularly the "Inner Dialogue" piece, effectively enabled participants to address sensitive issues like mental health and stigma, transforming personal struggles into community education tools.

Public performances led to measurable shifts in audience perceptions, with 75% reporting increased comfort interacting with Travellers and 83% believing Travellers deserve greater community support. The co-design approach fostered ownership and re-engaged participants with learning.

This indicates a significant impact on opening up access to inclusion in the wider community. The project also fostered transferable skills such as communication, teamwork, emotional regulation, and creative problem-solving, which extended beyond artistic competencies and were applied in civic events.

Despite the challenges faced, the project's success can be attributed to several enablers such as culturally responsive facilitation, Traveller leadership, co-design processes, and the integration of creative work with practical training opportunities. The flexibility of the programme, allowing participants to drop in and out without stigma, and the consistent support from the peer worker and facilitators were crucial for maintaining engagement.

Creative Spark - "Áit Eile" Project

Creative Spark "Blooming Minds Club" was an innovative arts and health programme designed for young people aged 13-18 experiencing mental health difficulties in Louth and East-Meath. The project offered a creative hub where participants co-design art projects with professional artists.

This project delivered in partnership with HSE CAMHS (Child and Adolescent Mental Health Services) and Dundalk Institute of Technology aimed to mitigate feelings of isolation and stigmatisation, increase self-esteem, and foster meaningful connections through various art forms, ultimately influencing how mental health services operate for young people in Ireland

The primary objective was to engage young people aged 13-18 experiencing mental health difficulties from Louth and East-Meath CAMHS in designing and producing a new creative arts hub.

The overarching aim was to advance education and benefit the community by improving core skills, aiding learning, and raising confidence and self-esteem among creative practitioners and entrepreneurs.

The project sought to gain shared awareness and understanding of the specific needs of this "seldom-heard cohort" through engagement in high-standard creative arts projects, prioritising the voice of young people.

Implementation

The implementation largely adhered to those planned at the start. Some of the key activities included;

- An "Áit Eile Ambassador Group" was established to ensure youth voice in project design and artist selection.
- A creative hub HQ operated weekly at Creative Spark Dundalk, with satellite outreach workshops at Drogheda and Dundalk CAMHS.
- A wide range of art forms were offered, including printmaking, painting, ceramics, digital fabrication, and special effects makeup, facilitated by professional artists.
- Artist-in-residence programmes were implemented at CAMHS locations, integrating art into therapeutic and life skills groups for young people and their families.

- A documentary was made about the process, and a researcher gathered feedback through focus groups to inform a formal evaluation report.
- Youth-led Christmas stalls and exhibition showcases were organised, providing participants with opportunities to display their work and engage with the public.

Impact

The "Blooming Minds Club" significantly impacted young people experiencing mental health difficulties by providing a unique, co-designed creative arts hub. The project fostered a sense of belonging and reduced feelings of isolation, with participants describing the club as a "home away from home" and a "comfortable and welcoming environment".

Through engagement with professional artists in various art forms, young people developed artistic skills, increased confidence, and improved self-esteem. The club's emphasis on co-design allowed participants to choose courses and artists, empowering them to take ownership of their creative journeys and express their opinions freely.

Family members reported positive changes, noting increased confidence, improved social skills, and a newfound ability for their children to talk confidently to adults and pursue future dreams.

The project also served as a vital resource for CAMHS, enhancing clinical care by providing a non-judgmental, therapeutic space where young people could explore emotions through art and build social connections

Down Syndrome Ireland Waterford/South Kilkenny Brance & Traces Dance Ensemble - "Glór Dance Project"

The "Glór Dance Project" was a pioneering 18-month dance and personal development initiative in Waterford, specifically designed for young people aged 13-24 with additional needs, primarily those with Down Syndrome, to amplify their voices and visibility in society. Through weekly youth-led contemporary dance workshops and public performances, this project empowers participants to take ownership of their creative expression, develop nonverbal literacy, and challenge societal perceptions of disability, fostering confidence and a strong sense of identity.

Outputs included a "Town Take-Over Visibility Day," a new youth dance work, youth ambassadors, weekly youth-led workshops, and a "Good Ideas" segment.

Implementation

The implementation largely adhered to those planned at the start. Some of the key activities included;

- A public information night and taster dance workshop were held to recruit new members aged 16-24 with additional needs.
- Weekly youth dance workshops were conducted at various venues, with an average of 13 young participants.
- The project produced two public showcases of artistic work, "Turas" (The Journey) and "Féach," which included a photographic/audio exhibition and a "Town Take-Over Day" dance trail.
- Youth advocacy days were implemented, focusing on "Peer to Peer Mentoring," "Role and Poll Day" (identifying roles like Youth Ambassadors), and "How I See Waterford" (dance and architecture exploration).
- Facilitators adopted a "guidance-based" and "hosting the space" role, encouraging young dancers to take ownership and lead exercises.
- Feedback mechanisms included visual drawings and art materials to capture participants' emotions and ideas, especially where verbal articulation was challenging.

Impact

The "Glór Dance Project" impacted young people with Down Syndrome and other additional needs by amplifying their voices and increasing their visibility through contemporary dance.

The project fostered a strong sense of ownership and leadership among participants, with facilitators adopting a "guidance-based" role that encouraged young dancers to lead exercises, express emotions, and formulate ideas.

Through weekly workshops and public showcases like "Turas" and "Féach," participants developed nonverbal literacy, enhancing their expression and ability to respond to others through movement.

The "Town Take-Over Day" and photographic/audio exhibition "Féach" promoted increased visibility of young people with additional needs in public spaces, challenging perceptions and highlighting their artistry.

Youth advocacy days, including "Peer to Peer Mentoring" and "Role and Poll Day," empowered participants to support each other, make decisions, and take on production roles, fostering self-confidence and a sense of achievement.

The project's focus on creative decision-making and ownership strengthened participants' sense of identity and connection to their hometown.

Foróige - "City Instincts"

"City Instincts" was a dynamic creative youth work project delivered by **Foróige** in Dublin City, targeting 13–24-year-olds from five seldom-heard groups, including refugees, neurodivergent individuals, LGBTQI+ youth, young Travellers, and those involved with the youth justice system.

The project aimed to engage and unite marginalised young people through five creative mediums of dance, street art, music production, digital media, and cookery, with a focus on building creative competencies, determination, agency, and confidence.

The project engaged 164 young people, exceeding the target of 100 young people. Furthermore, the project successfully engaged young people from all five target groups identified at the start of the project i.e. refugees and asylum-seekers, the neurodivergent community, LGBTI+ young people, Young Travellers, and young people engaged with the youth justice system.

The report provides detailed breakdowns of participant demographics, including engagement from Ukrainian/Beneficiaries of Temporary Protection (94),young people seeking asylum (30), and neurodivergent youth (19).

While significant challenges were not highlighted throughout interviews or the evaluation reports there are a number of implicit challenges that had to be overcome. These include challenges in securing consistent, dedicated spaces to run activities, the complexity of managing a diverse range of activities and tailoring them to different groups.

The project demonstrated a strong commitment to fostering young people's confidence, skills, and agency through creative expression and active participation.

Implementation

The implementation largely adhered to those planned at the start. Some of the key activities included;

- A dedicated Youth Officer, Svitlana Falenda, was appointed in March 2024 and was involved ingroup and one-to-one work, with ongoing supervision and support from senior management.
- There was extensive outreach to schools, Gardaí, UBU-funded organisations[6], community development groups, and other youth organisations to identify young people. While the report doesn't explicitly detail the outreach methods, the successful engagement of 164 participants from all target groups indicates effective outreach strategies were employed.
- Interventions and activities were delivered at various sites across Dublin City, including Foróige centres, the Dublin Mosque, Eastwall International Protection Accommodation Service system (IPAS) centre, St. Andrews Community Centre, Ringsend and Irishtown Community Centre, The Junction, Pearse Street Library, and NCAD, indicating a flexible and responsive approach to location needs.

[6] UBU-funded organisations are local, targeted youth services in Ireland, supported by the government's "UBU – Your Place Your Space" scheme, delivering essential programmes for marginalised young people (ages 10-24) focusing on health, education, and social skills through community-based support and safe spaces.

- Project staff were trained in Hub Na nÓg's Everyday Spaces Training and this was implemented the learning in programme delivery.
- A Youth Advisory Committee, composed of participants from the Ukrainian Beneficiaries of Temporary Protection, IPAS residents, LGBTQI+, and Autism Spectrum Disorder communities, who met to advise on content. It also highlights that all engaged young people were made aware of Foróige Youth Participation Structures.
- **There were a wide range of offerings a**nd workshops, including Soundsurfers, VRóige, other digital youthwork programmes, dance, street art, cookery, and music production. Young people also participated in various Foróige digital youth work programmes like Level UP, Lego robotics, Scratch/coding and 3D printing.

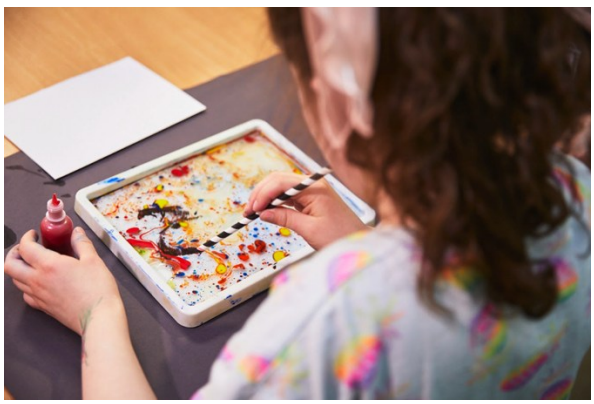
Impacts

The "City Instincts" project impacted marginalised young people in Dublin by offering diverse creative outlets and fostering personal growth. The project provided opportunities to explore dance, street art, music production, digital media, and cookery. Participants displayed improved confidence, and self-efficacy, engaging in artistic mediums they previously lacked access to.

The project enhanced communication and teamwork skills, and fostered relationships with project staff, increasing awareness of available support services. Through activities like digital youth work, VR workshops, and music production, young people gained new skills and confidence in utilising technology.

The youth advisory committee ensured participants' voices directed the projects, promoting active involvement in their development and amplifying their life experiences in broader youth participation structures

Helium Arts - "Journeys" (Helium Arts is now called Helium)



"Journeys" was a two-year collaborative project led by Helium Arts, in partnership with the Lynn Clinic and the HSE Refugee Health Clinic, dedicated to supporting the wellbeing of children aged 8-12 living with lifelong health conditions, particularly from refugee, asylum-seeking, and other marginalised backgrounds.

The project used creative engagement within healthcare and community settings to help children express their experiences, nurture creative passions, and reduce social isolation, while also informing national policies on inclusion health for children

Implementation

The implementation largely adhered to those planned at the start. Some of the key activities included;

- Creative engagement was delivered in the waiting area of the Lynn Clinic in Dublin 1, with artists providing one-to-one creative sessions.
- Community arts workshops were delivered in partnership with the HSE Refugee Health Clinic at the National Reception Centre, Balseskin, including a three-day Autumn Camp.
- A partnership agreement was signed with Children's Health Ireland, and artists were appointed to work closely with clinical teams and interpreters.
- Translated marketing materials and evaluation tools were developed in 11 languages and received the NALA Plain English Mark to improve accessibility.
- Trauma-informed mentorship and supervision were provided to artists, and training in intercultural competency was given to the artist team.
- A "Journeys – For a Better Tomorrow" art exhibition was held at the Irish Museum of Modern Art (IMMA), showcasing participants' artwork

Impact

The "Journeys" project impacted children aged 8-12 with lifelong health conditions by providing creative engagement in clinical and community settings. The project offered a unique opportunity for children to express their experiences and ideas, nurturing their creative passions while supporting integration and reducing social isolation.

In the Lynn Clinic, creative engagements provided a safe space for children to be themselves, exercise agency, and avoid re-traumatisation during sensitive parental consultations.

The project developed crucial wraparound supports, including translated marketing materials in 11 languages and accessible community venues, to overcome barriers to engagement for marginalised groups.

The "Journeys – For a Better Tomorrow" exhibition at IMMA showcased participants' artwork, elevating their voices and perspectives into the public sphere and celebrating their creativity rather than their adversity.

The project also led to significant organisational change within Helium Arts, embedding trauma-informed and culturally responsive practices across its national programmes, ensuring greater access and inclusion for vulnerable children.

Irish Refugee Council - "Elevate Youth Arts"

"Elevate Youth Arts" was an 18-month multidisciplinary creative arts project by the Irish Refugee Council, empowering young people aged 16-24 seeking international protection to develop creativity, build confidence, and acquire new skills.

This project featured a week-long arts residential and public performances, actively involved young people in project design, implementation, and evaluation through a Creative Youth Advisory Panel, aiming to amplify their voices and contribute to best practices in youth arts for young people seeking international protection.

Implementation

The implementation largely adhered to those planned at the start. Some of the key activities included;

- A one-day capacity-building workshop was held for three young leaders/youth co-facilitators.
- A Creative Youth Advisory Group was formed with six participants, including the youth co-facilitators, to oversee project design, implementation, and evaluation.
- Introductory workshops focused on relationship building, establishing group guidelines, and co-designing project elements, including creative methodologies and themes.
- A one-week youth arts residential in West Cork involved 16 young people, three youth co-facilitators, two creative facilitators, and two IRC staff, culminating in a performance titled 'Rising Voices'.
- The group performed 'Rising Voices' at the Cork Midsummer Festival and, unexpectedly, at Electric Picnic.
- A youth-led creative symposium was held, featuring performances, panel discussions, and research presentations, with youth participants taking a lead role.

Impact

The "Elevate Youth Arts" project impacted young people seeking international protection and young refugees aged 16-24 by fostering creativity, confidence, and empowerment.

The core activity, a one-week arts residential, culminated in the co-creation and performance of "Rising Voices," a piece combining spoken word, dance, and song, which was showcased at the Cork Midsummer Festival and Electric Picnic.

This provided participants with a powerful platform to share their message on social justice issues they felt passionately about, leading to a sense of agency and empowerment.

The project significantly improved participants' self-reported confidence, creative abilities, and emotional well-being, with many forming strong, lasting friendships and discovering new creative outlets like poetry and spoken word.

The establishment of a Creative Youth Advisory Group ensured young people's active participation in project design, implementation, and evaluation, giving them a voice in decision-making and steering the project's direction.

Limerick Learning Hub - "Creative Aftercare Communities"

"Creative Aftercare Communities" was a project by Learning Hub Limerick, designed to support approximately 20 young people aged 17-23 transitioning from care or already in aftercare, particularly those not receiving an aftercare allowance.

This project aimed to identify and expand participants' creative interests through one-to-one and group engagements with creative practitioners, fostering social opportunities, developing soft skills like self-advocacy, and informing Tusla and partner organisations on the benefits of arts-based approaches for engaging this seldom-heard cohort.

Implementation

The implementation largely adhered to those planned at the start. Some of the key activities included;

- A Project Steering Group was established to support implementation.
- A project worker was recruited, and a researcher was contracted, with job specifications reviewed by the EPIC youth council.

- Potential participants were identified through steering group partners and other external relationships.
- The project worker facilitated participants, using the Lundy framework, to explore creative interests through one-to-one and group engagements, including taster workshops.
- Interested participants were supported to guide the project's development and research direction, with their input informing interactions with the Steering Group.
- A contracted researcher, supported by the project worker, engaged with participants to understand the project's impact across multiple life domains.
- The final project was presented to key stakeholders, incorporating inputs from the project worker, researcher, and participants.

Impact

The project's primary impact was to provide a supportive environment where participants could expand on their creative interests and explore potential pathways in education, employment, and well-being through creative outlets.

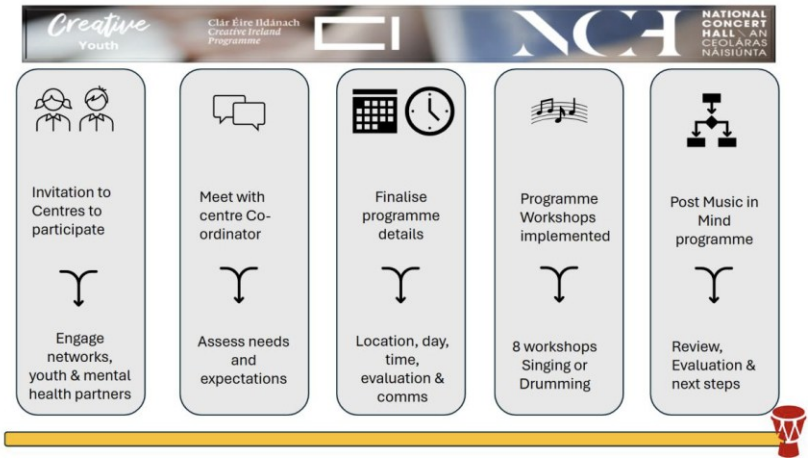
The project fostered social opportunities through group engagement with creative practitioners, helping to build connections among participants. It also focused on developing participants' soft skills, such as self-advocacy, which are crucial for navigating independent adulthood.

By involving participants in guiding the project's development and research, the project empowered them and ensured their voices were central to the process.

The project helped inform Tusla and partner organisations on using arts and creative approaches as alternative and effective methods for engaging with and supporting young people in aftercare.

The project team has been successful in securing follow-on funding from sources other than Creative Ireland. This is testament to the quality of the project but will also extend the impact narrative of the Nurture Fund across other sectors.

National Concert Hall - "Music in Mind Youth Programme"



The National Concert Hall's "Music in Mind Youth Programme" addressed critical mental health issues among young people in marginalised communities. The project leveraged the proven benefits of musical engagement to provide a creative communal outlet.

This programme, delivered through 8-week participative music workshops in percussion or singing across various centres, aimed to improve participants' quality of life, enhance mental wellbeing, and foster social connections, with a strong emphasis on youth voice and trauma-informed practice.

The project explicitly aimed to address mental health issues in marginalised communities such as refugees/asylum-seekers, LGBTQIA+, Traveller community, and those in the care system.

Implementation

The implementation largely adhered to those planned at the start. Some of the key activities included;

- An 8-week participative music workshop programme was created, with the first session dedicated to co-planning and developing a comfort agreement with young people.
- Workshops were held twice a year in each centre, engaging various youth groups across six counties.
- The NCH collaborated closely with partner organisations, ensuring programmes integrated the unique cultures and needs of specific target populations.
- Designated local coordinators were assigned to liaise with the NCH, promote the programme, manage sign-ups, and communicate evaluation requirements.
- Facilitators with extensive experience in working with marginalised groups and training in mental health and trauma-informed practices were engaged.
- A three-part evaluation process (pre-programme, weekly, and post-programme) was implemented, including a brief weekly check-in questionnaire and the use of Plickers for anonymous feedback.

Impact

The "NCH Music in Mind Youth Programme" significantly impacted vulnerable young people aged 12-24 across six counties by addressing mental health issues through musical engagement.

The programme engaged 259 young people across 10 centres in 6 counties. Facilitators were experienced in working with marginalised groups and trained in mental health and trauma-informed practices. The programme was adapted for specific settings, such as Oberstown Children Detention Campus, where small group sessions were held due to security policies.

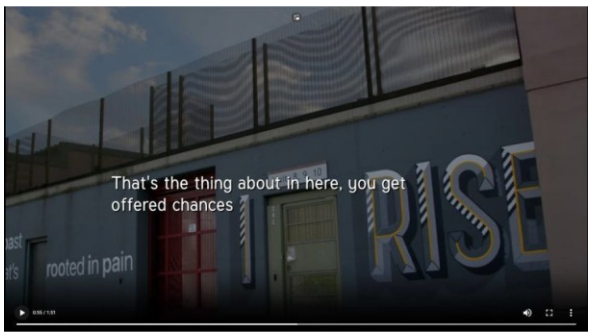
The project evaluation reported personal growth, increased mood, enhanced collaborative skills, and boosted self-confidence, leading to an overall improvement in participants' quality of life.

Music served as a therapeutic outlet, improving emotional regulation and providing a consistent, positive routine that many participants looked forward to weekly. The co-planning and development sessions ensured young people's voices were central to the programme design, allowing them to choose music and shape activities, which created a sense of safety, empowerment, and rapport.

The project successfully adapted to unique settings, such as Oberstown Children Detention Campus, demonstrating its versatility and positive impact even in highly controlled environments.

For the Bonnybrook Youth Group, the project fostered strong local coordination, high group cohesion, and peer support, culminating in a sharing day at the National Concert Hall that left participants feeling "excited and proud"

Oberstown Children Detention Campus – “Hear I Am Podcast Project”



The “Hear I Am Podcast Project” at Oberstown Children Detention Campus aimed to empower young people in detention by giving them a voice on topics relevant to their lives, fostering creative and collaborative learning experiences.

This project, involving young people in every stage from building the podcast room to choosing themes and conducting interviews, aims to improve digital and media literacy, self-advocacy, and self-expression, while also exploring potential career paths in media production and strengthening Oberstown's rights-based approach to care.

The project specifically aimed to give young people in detention a voice on relevant topics through podcasting, fostering belonging and empowerment. Outputs included an advisory group, participant collaboration, practical skills workshops, and podcasts for internal campus use.

Implementation

The implementation largely adhered to those planned at the start. Some of the key activities included;

- An advisory group was established, and young people collaborated with this group on podcast ideas, with the Oberstown Advocacy Officer ensuring youth consultation.
- Workshops were conducted on practical skills, including using podcasting equipment, with young people involved in building the podcast room.
- The workshop facilitator designed and delivered the course, overseeing the podcast series with youth input and liaising with staff and guests.
- A suite of over 20 podcasts was produced, made available only within the campus for future use, fostering discussions among young people and staff.
- The project aimed to upskill participants and staff to ensure sustainability and integration into the campus activities curriculum.
- Evaluation was completed with young people identifying learnings, and data protection compliance was ensured through DPIA and LIA assessments

Impact

The "Hear I Am" podcast project profoundly impacted young people in detention at Oberstown by empowering them with a voice and fostering creative and collaborative learning experiences. The project enabled 44 young people, aged 15-18, to discuss topics relevant to their lives, reclaim their narratives, and educate others, fostering self-awareness, belonging, and empowerment.

Participants were central to the project's design, from building the podcast room to choosing themes, creating music, and conducting interviews, which instilled a sense of ownership and achievement.

The dedicated soundproofed podcast studio became a "quiet, calming space" that encouraged young people to open up, concentrate, and listen to each other, fostering an exceptionally open and creative atmosphere. The project enhanced practical and life skills, including digital and media literacy, self-advocacy, and self-expression.

Despite legal restrictions on external publication, the podcasts were used internally to stimulate discussions among young people and staff, strengthening Oberstown's sense of community and providing a new way for staff to understand young people's views and experiences.

5. INSIGHTS FROM THE PROJECTS

A realist evaluation of the combined projects and overall Nurture Fund programme reveals several Context-Mechanism-Outcome configurations that explain what works, for whom, in what contexts, and how. These projects consistently leverage creative arts to address complex social and emotional challenges faced by marginalised youth, leading to significant personal and community-level transformations.

This section focusses on three project contexts specific to the Nurture Fund and outlines the mechanisms and outcomes of each of these. The three contexts are:

1. Addressing Social Exclusion and Trauma through Creative Engagement
2. Organisational Capacity and Funding Structures
3. Unique Challenges of Specific Cohorts

Context 1 - Addressing Social Exclusion and Trauma through Creative Engagement

The projects operate within contexts of significant social exclusion, trauma, and distrust in traditional institutions among young people. This includes young Travellers not in education, employment, or training; young people transitioning from the care system; youth experiencing mental health difficulties; and young asylum seekers and refugees. These groups often face barriers such as discrimination, low self-esteem, lack of opportunities, and unstable living conditions.

Mechanism 1 - Creating Safe, Culturally Responsive, and Participant-Led Spaces

Core to these projects was the setting up of safe, culturally responsive, and participant-led creative spaces. This was achieved through a number of mechanisms.

Projects prioritised young people's input in shaping activities, themes, and methods. This fosters a sense of ownership and relevance, ensuring content reflects lived realities and cultural values. For instance, the "Building Bridges" project allowed young Travellers to choose themes and methods for drama workshops, leading to authentic narratives about mental health and societal barriers. Similarly, "Blooming Minds Club" participants actively designed their art experiences, including the club's name and logo.

The presence of experienced facilitators, often with backgrounds in youth work, social care, or art therapy, was crucial. Some of these facilitators were trained in trauma-informed practices and culturally competent approaches, creating environments where young people feel respected and understood. The "Creative Aftercare Communities" project benefited from tutors with care experience, fostering empathy and trust.

Incorporating peer support workers or youth leaders from the target communities significantly enhances trust and engagement. The "Building Bridges" project highlighted the critical role of a Traveller peer engagement worker in recruitment and sustained participation. In "Elevate Youth Arts," youth leaders acted as a bridge between facilitators and participants, contributing to project design and public speaking.

Projects adapted to the complex and often unpredictable lives of participants, offering flexibility in attendance, activity choices, and locations. This included the provision of transport, translated materials, and accessible venues. The "Journeys" project, for example, adapted activities to be sensory-rich and portable, accommodating children in transient living situations.

Creative activities were often integrated with practical skills training, well-being sessions, and connections to wider support networks. "Building Bridges" offered driver theory preparation and manual handling certification alongside drama workshops. "Helium Arts" invested in trauma-informed training and artist well-being to ensure sustainable delivery.

Outcomes 1 - Enhanced Confidence, Agency, and Social Connection

The consistent application of these mechanisms leads to a range of positive outcomes for individuals, communities, and partner organisations.

Outcome	Description
Increased Confidence and Self-Expression	Participants demonstrated significant improvements in self-confidence, self-esteem, and the ability to express themselves, often in ways they previously found challenging. The "Glór Dance Project" saw young dancers with Down Syndrome gain confidence in public speaking and decision-making, culminating in a participant delivering an address to the Mayor.
Development of Transferable Skills	Beyond artistic skills, participants acquired crucial social and emotional competencies such as communication, teamwork, problem-solving, emotional regulation, and leadership. The "Hear I Am" podcast project at Oberstown saw young people develop interview techniques, digital literacy, and self-advocacy skills.
Enhanced Social Connection and Belonging	Projects fostered strong friendships, reduced isolation, and created a sense of community and belonging among participants. The "Creative Aftercare Communities" project brought together young people transitioning from care who had not previously known each other, leading to new friendships and shared experiences.
Challenging Stigma and Shifting Perceptions	Public performances and exhibitions served as powerful platforms to challenge stereotypes, raise awareness, and foster empathy among wider audiences, including policymakers and the general public. The "Building Bridges" project's "Inner Dialogue" performance significantly shifted audience perceptions regarding Traveller mental health and inclusion.
Pathways to Further Engagement and Opportunities	Projects inspired participants to pursue further education, employment, or continued creative practice. The "Creative Aftercare Communities" project saw one participant become a gardener and another enrol in art school. The "Blooming Minds Club" inspired a participant to study 3D gaming and another's mother to enrol in a digital making diploma.
Organisational Learning and Capacity Building	Partner organisations gained valuable insights into effective engagement strategies for marginalised groups, leading to improved policies, training, and service delivery. Helium Arts, for example, developed and translated

	marketing materials and trauma-informed training, which were rolled out across its national programs.

Context 2 - Organisational Capacity and Funding Structures

Projects operated within diverse organisational structures, ranging from established national bodies to smaller, artist-led initiatives. Funding structures, particularly the Creative Youth Nurture Fund, play a critical role in enabling or constraining project delivery.

Mechanisms 2 - Strategic Funding Allocation and Adaptive Management

The fund's ability to support staff salaries, specialised training, and infrastructure, coupled with a degree of flexibility in budget reallocation, was a key mechanism. Other key mechanisms included:

- Funding for project coordinators, peer workers, and professional artists/facilitators was crucial for sustained engagement and quality delivery. The "Glór Dance Project" highlighted the transformative impact of being able to employ a project manager and multiple facilitators, enhancing the quality of one-to-one support.
- Funding for trauma-informed practice, cultural competency, and youth participation training for artists and staff was essential for working with vulnerable populations. This built capacity within organisations and among artists, creating a more skilled workforce for socially engaged arts.
- Investment in dedicated spaces, equipment, and accessible resources (e.g., translated materials, transport) directly supported project delivery and long-term sustainability. The "Hear I Am" project at Oberstown built a dedicated podcast room, which became a permanent creative space.

While initial proposals provide a framework, the ability to adapt to emerging needs and reallocate funds is vital for youth-led and emergent projects. Creative Ireland's responsiveness to budget adjustments was appreciated by the Irish Refugee Council. However, some projects noted a tension between the fund's ambition for youth-led work and rigid financial structures that limited spontaneous creative adaptations.

Outcomes 2 - Enhanced Organisational Capacity and Sustainability Challenges

Outcome	Description
Increased Organisational Capacity	Projects led to significant internal learning, improved processes, and enhanced ability to work with diverse and vulnerable groups. Helium Arts, for example, developed a Youth Participation Framework and improved evaluation methodologies.
Sustainability and "Cliff Edge" Concerns	Despite successful project delivery, a recurring challenge was the lack of follow-on funding, leading to a "cliff edge" effect where momentum and relationships was difficult to sustain. This was particularly acute for smaller organisations or those working with highly vulnerable populations

	who require long-term, consistent support. As noted previously, some of the project team, such as Limerick Learning Hub and Foroige, have been successful in securing follow on fundings.
Advocacy and Systemic Change	Projects highlighted the need for funders to advocate for systemic changes within government and partner agencies to address structural barriers that impact participants' lives(e.g., housing insecurity, inconsistent services). Creative Ireland is seen as having a role in brokering conversations and influencing policy beyond direct funding.

Context 3 - Unique Challenges of Specific Groups of Young People

Each project works with distinct cohorts facing unique challenges, requiring tailored approaches.

Mechanisms 3 - Tailored Engagement and Specialised Support

Projects employed specific strategies to address the particular needs of their target groups:

For Young Travellers (Building Bridges) participatory drama was used to explore identity and barriers, with a strong emphasis on Traveller leadership and peer support to build trust and cultural relevance.

For Youth in Aftercare (Creative Aftercare Communities) creative activities were offered as a "gateway" to engagement, recognising participants' complex histories and distrust of formal systems. The project built on existing referral networks with social care agencies.

For Youth with Mental Health Difficulties (Blooming Minds Club) a therapist was central to the project, providing psychological safety and managing complex emotional needs. The enterprise centre setting offered a "third space" away from clinical or school environments.

For Young Asylum Seekers/Refugees (Elevate Youth Arts, Journeys) projects prioritised practical supports like transport and food, acknowledge the transient nature of participants' lives, and build on established relationships with youth workers who understand the asylum process.

For Youth in Detention (Hear I Am) the project created a dedicated, safe space (podcast room) within the detention campus, allowing for creative expression while navigating strict security and confidentiality rules. It integrated with educational and recreational programs.

For Youth at Risk of Mental Health Difficulties (Music in Mind Youth Programme) the projects emphasised creating a safe space, using professionally trained facilitators, and offered consistent, structured musical engagement to build trust and routine.

Outcomes 3 - Targeted Impact and Adaptability

Outcome	Description
Tailored Personal Growth	Outcomes were specific to the needs of each group, such as addressing mental health stigma for Travellers, fostering independence for youth in aftercare, or providing a creative outlet for those in detention.

Adaptation of Models	Projects demonstrated the necessity of adapting established models to suit the unique constraints and needs of specific cohorts. For example, the "Music in Mind" program adjusted its group size and duration for youth in detention and asylum centres.
Systemic Challenges Remain	Despite project successes, broader systemic issues (e.g., IPAS transfers, lack of aftercare support, waiting lists for mental health services) continued to pose significant challenges to sustained engagement and long-term impact. This highlights the need for continued advocacy and multi-agency collaboration beyond the scope of individual projects

6. LESSONS LEARNED

This section synthesises key lessons learned from the projects and combines insights from interviews and a review of the evaluation reports. The section focusses on common challenges and effective strategies across recruitment and engagement, logistical and operational issues, funding, emotional toll on staff, unforeseen events, and safeguarding.

Recruitment and Engagement Challenges

Recruitment and engagement proved to be a multifaceted challenge across projects, primarily due to the vulnerable nature and often insecure housing of the target populations. Projects targeting young Travellers, refugees, asylum-seekers, and those in the care system faced significant barriers.

For the "Building Bridges" project, initial engagement with young Travellers was facilitated by Ballyhoura Development's long-standing relationships and the appointment of a Traveller Peer Link Worker, which was crucial for building trust and culturally relevant guidance.

However, persistent discrimination, socioeconomic disadvantage, and mental health challenges among participants posed ongoing barriers to sustained involvement. The "City Instincts" project, working with similar marginalised groups, also highlighted the need for outreach to schools, Gardaí, and specialised youth organisations to identify participants.

The "Helium Arts 'Journeys'" project, while engaging children with lifelong health conditions from refugee and asylum-seeking backgrounds, encountered significant distrust of institutions among families, making initial engagement and evaluation difficult. Language barriers were a constant challenge, necessitating interpreters and translated materials. The transient nature of participants living in temporary housing such as hotels or emergency accommodation, made continuity of engagement challenging.

Similarly, the "NCH Music in Mind Youth Programme" struggled to engage specific cohorts like the LGBTQIA+ community due to privacy fears, and the Traveller community due to the need for extensive preparatory work to build trust. For refugees and asylum-seekers, the constant changes in their circumstances made sustainable programme implementation difficult, suggesting that shorter, more frequent programmes may be a solution.

A recurring theme was the importance of a "safe space" and building trust. Participants in "Elevate Youth Arts" emphasised that a safe, welcoming, and respectful environment was crucial for their participation. The "Blooming Minds Club" also underscored the importance of a nurturing space where young people felt comfortable and respected, especially those with mental health difficulties.

Logistical and Operational Challenges

Logistical and operational challenges varied but often revolved around venue suitability, participant mobility, and the unique constraints of working with vulnerable populations.

For "Glór Dance Project," they used multiple venues across different contexts, including a national opera house. This was both challenging and refreshing, as it allowed the group to adapt to new spaces

and energies. However, the management of finances by a third-party organisation caused "unnecessary disruption and stress".

"Elevate Youth Arts" faced significant challenges managing the insecure conditions experienced by participants who were living within the IPAS system. Young people were moved to new accommodation centres, often without notice, making continued engagement difficult or impossible without dedicated transport budgets. The transition back to IPAS accommodation after a residential programme was also challenging, requiring extra support for participants. Obtaining permissions for participants to leave their accommodation for residential programmes involved extensive liaison with IPAS and centre managers, and even then, breakdowns in communication could lead to stressful situations.

"Helium Arts 'Journeys'" highlighted the need for accessible community venues, located in inclusion health clinics and IPAS centres, with consideration for public transport routes. The project also invested in a pilot bus service to provide transport for children at higher risk of exclusion, including members of the Travelling Community, which yielded unexpected positive outcomes in connection and friendship building.

The "NCH Music in Mind Youth Programme" noted that inconsistent staffing and facilities at local centres could limit programme effectiveness and implementation. They recommended allocating designated funding for local coordinators and ensuring consistent child protection and participant support.

Funding Issues

Funding emerged as a critical factor, with some projects often finding initial budgets insufficient for the complex needs of their target groups.

The "Building Bridges" project, initially budgeted at €105,000, incurred final costs of €178,154, demonstrating the depth and complexity of participant needs. The ability to secure additional funding through SICAP and other streams was essential, highlighting the resource-intensive nature of the work and the need for flexible, multi-agency funding.

"Elevate Youth Arts" received €58,000 from the Creative Youth Nurture Fund and an additional €5,000 from the Communities Integration Fund to cover unforeseen expenses, such as additional refreshments and higher transport and venue costs than initially budgeted. The project coordinator's salary, initially planned for one day per week, was found to be insufficient for the intensive workload, suggesting a need for increased allocation in future projects. The flexibility of the Creative Ireland team in allowing budget changes was highly appreciated.

The "NCH Music in Mind Youth Programme" recommended including a dedicated preparatory phase in planning and budgeting to build relationships and networks with partners, and to allow time for services to advertise and recruit without urgency. They also suggested planning and budgeting for a limited number of small-group cohorts, as standard group sizes are not always suitable for high-need environments.

Emotional Toll on Staff

Working with vulnerable young people, particularly those who have experienced trauma, placed a significant emotional toll on project staff and facilitators.

In "Elevate Youth Arts," youth workers found the project "very emotional" and were "mentally, emotionally, and physically exhausted" by the end of the residential week. Their role extended beyond

facilitation and into to managing catering, supporting emotional well-being, and handling logistical issues, all while navigating their own emotional responses to the participants' experiences. The evaluation emphasised the critical need for a robust support system, including solid project management, open communication, and targeted supervision for youth workers.

"Helium Arts 'Journeys'" recognised the importance of artist well-being and provided significant investment in training around trauma-informed practice and care, as well as mentorship and supervision for artists. This support was deemed essential for the project's success and for ensuring artists could sustainably engage with the complex needs of the children.

The "NCH Music in Mind Youth Programme" ensured that all facilitators had extensive experience with marginalised groups and had completed mental health and trauma-informed practice workshops. They recommended expanding facilitator support and training to include regular check-ins, peer learning forums, and access to one-to-one support for challenges.

Unforeseen Events and Effort Required

Projects often encountered unforeseen circumstances that demanded flexibility and additional effort from staff.

The "Building Bridges" project noted that flexibility was essential to accommodate participants' complex lives, including housing instability, caregiving responsibilities, and community unrest. The project team's persistence in sustaining meaningful engagement despite these obstacles was a notable strength.

An "unexpected bonus activity" for "Elevate Youth Arts" was an invitation to perform at Electric Picnic, which required a snap fundraising campaign to cover transport costs and additional logistical planning. This demonstrated the need for adaptability and quick response to emerging opportunities.

"Helium Arts 'Journeys'" experienced clinic cancellations and staff changes, requiring the appointment of a new lead artist. The project also had to adapt its typical activities in the Lynn Clinic, shifting from structured activities to sensory-rich materials, in response to the profound trauma and developmental delays experienced by many children.

The "Oberstown 'Hear I Am' podcast project had to creatively adapt its approach to sharing podcasts due to legal restrictions on disseminating information that might identify young people in detention. This led to the creation of a "Podcast Club" and internal campus dissemination channels. The changing population of young people in Oberstown also influenced project planning, requiring flexibility in how young people could participate and complete a series of podcasts.

Safeguarding

Safeguarding was a paramount concern, particularly when working with vulnerable young people. Projects implemented various measures to ensure the safety and well-being of participants.

The "Blooming Minds Club" emphasised the crucial role of the art therapist in ensuring psychological safety, risk aversion, and overall duty of care for young people with moderate to severe mental health difficulties. The art therapist acted as a liaison between CAMHS, participants, families, and artists, ensuring effective communication and quality assurance. Training workshops for professional artists on working with young people with mental health difficulties were also provided to equip facilitators with necessary skills and safeguarding knowledge. The concept of "contextual safeguarding" was

highlighted, emphasising the importance of developing caring, trusting relationships, and providing a safeguarding policy that protects young people from harm outside their homes.

"Helium Arts 'Journeys'" adopted a trauma-informed, culturally sensitive approach across all levels of delivery, from artist supervision to translated communications. They invested in extensive training for artists and staff on trauma-informed care and intercultural competency, ensuring an anti-racist, anti-oppression approach. The project also developed visual guides and accessible toolkits to support children with additional needs and those with language barriers.

The "Oberstown 'Hear I Am' podcast project prioritised data protection and United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) compliance, which included commissioning a data protection impact assessment and a legitimate interest assessment to ensure young people's rights were protected while enabling creative expression. The project's design ensured confidentiality for external contributors and used internal channels for sharing the podcast experience within the campus community.

The "NCH Music in Mind Youth Programme" ensured that all facilitators had extensive experience and training in mental health and trauma-informed practices. They also emphasised the creation of a "comfort agreement" in the first workshop to provide a sense of safety and empowerment, ensuring participants' voices and concerns were heard and addressed.

These examples demonstrate a consistent commitment across projects to prioritise the safety and well-being of young participants through specialised training, dedicated roles, and adaptable, culturally sensitive practices.

7. KEY FINDINGS ACROSS THE PROGRAMME

The Creative Youth Nurture Fund was designed to engage seldom-heard young people and demonstrated numerous impacts in fostering personal development, social inclusion, and creative expression. However, projects also encountered significant challenges related to systemic barriers and the complex needs of the young people involved.

A consistent strength across all projects was the emphasis on **co-design and youth-led initiatives**. This approach ensured that activities were relevant, engaging, and responsive to participants' needs and interests, fostering a strong sense of ownership and agency.

Projects consistently reported significant improvements in participants' confidence, self-esteem, communication, and social skills. **Creative activities provided safe outlets for emotional expression, problem-solving, and teamwork**. Young people gained confidence to discuss sensitive issues like mental health and discrimination publicly while also stepping into leadership roles, speaking on panels and presenting research.

Many **projects adopted trauma-informed and culturally sensitive approaches**, recognising the complex backgrounds of their participants. This included providing safe spaces, peer support, and facilitators with relevant lived experience or specialised training as well as providing trauma-informed training for artists.

Projects that integrated creative activities with broader wraparound services proved very effective. This included practical support like transport, food, and links to other social and educational services.

Public performances and showcases not only empowered participants but also served as **powerful tools for challenging stereotypes and fostering empathy within wider communities**. The "Inner Dialogue" performance by young Travellers significantly shifted audience perceptions regarding Traveller culture and mental health. Similarly, the "Elevate Youth Arts" project's performances at the Cork Midsummer Festival and Electric Picnic amplified the voices of young asylum seekers, reaching diverse audiences.

Some projects made strategic **investments in physical infrastructure**, ensuring long-term sustainability beyond the funding period. Oberstown's "Hear I Am" project built a dedicated podcast room, which became a permanent feature for youth activities, fostering a sense of pride and ownership among participants.

A recurring concern was the short-term nature of the funding (typically two years), which often felt insufficient for building deep relationships and ensuring long-term impact, especially with vulnerable cohorts. Projects frequently expressed **anxiety about the "cliff edge" effect**, where activities might cease after funding, leaving participants without continued support.

Working with highly vulnerable young people proved **more resource-intensive than initially anticipated**, often exceeding project scope and budget. This led to significant emotional and physical

toll on project staff, with instances of burnout reported. The inconsistent use of formal debriefing or dedicated support for youth workers can be addressed in future.

Despite best efforts, **some projects struggled to consistently engage specific marginalised groups** due to factors like temporary housing, distrust of institutions, and lack of resources within partner organisations.

There was a perceived **mismatch between the qualitative, emergent nature of creative youth work and traditional evaluation metrics focused on quantitative outputs**. Projects highlighted the difficulty of measuring "soft skills" like confidence and emotional regulation with conventional tools, This sometimes led to a disconnect between the rich, transformative experiences and the formal reporting requirements.

Projects frequently **encountered systemic barriers beyond their control**, such as housing insecurity, IPAS transfers, and lack of consistent support from statutory services. These external factors often disrupted participation and added layers of complexity to project delivery.

8. IMPLICATIONS FOR THE DESIGN AND IMPLEMENTATION OF SIMILAR FUNDS

The findings from the evaluations of these projects offer some critical insights for the design and implementation of future youth initiatives involving marginalised groups, including by Creative Ireland.

By addressing these issues, future youth projects can build on the successes of the Creative Ireland Creative Youth Nurture Fund, creating more impactful, sustainable, and responsive initiatives for seldom-heard young people.

Issue	Response
Longer-Term, Flexible Funding	Future funding models must move beyond short-term cycles to enable sustained engagement and relationship-building, especially with vulnerable populations who require more time to build trust. Funding should include dedicated preparatory phases for networking and planning, recognising that groundwork is time intensive. Flexibility in budget allocation and activity adaptation is crucial to respond to emergent needs and maintain youth-led principles.
Integrate Wraparound Services and Holistic Support	Creative projects should be embedded within broader ecosystems of support, linking participants to essential services like transport, food, and mental health resources. Funding should explicitly cover these wraparound costs, acknowledging their necessity for sustained engagement.
Invest in Staff Wellbeing and Professional Development	Recognising the emotional toll of working with vulnerable youth, future projects must prioritise robust support systems for staff and facilitators. This includes formal debriefing, supervision (e.g. clinical supervision model), and access to mental health professionals. Training in trauma-informed practices, cultural competency, and neurodiversity should be a core component for all creative practitioners.
Foster Strategic Partnerships and Community-Led Initiatives	Collaborating with established youth and community organisations that have pre-existing trust with target groups is vital for successful outreach and engagement. Culturally responsive, community-led initiatives, particularly those with peer support workers from the target community, are essential for building rapport and ensuring relevance.
Advocate for Systemic Change and Policy Alignment	Creative Ireland and other funders should leverage their position to encourage broader systemic changes that address the root causes of marginalisation, such as housing insecurity and inconsistent support for young people transitioning from care. This includes promoting policy alignment across government departments (e.g., education, health, social protection) to create more cohesive support pathways.

Evolve Evaluation Methodologies	Evaluation frameworks, such as the Creative Youth Evaluation Framework, need to be adopted and where necessary adapted to genuinely capture the qualitative and emergent outcomes of creative youth work. This means valuing creative outputs as evidence, incorporating participant-led feedback, and recognising the "soft skills" and transformative personal growth that may not fit traditional metrics. Peer-to-peer learning and sharing of evaluation approaches among projects should be encouraged.
Invest in Infrastructure for Long-Term Impact	Where appropriate, funding should support investments in physical infrastructure or equipment that can sustain activities beyond the project's immediate lifespan, fostering a lasting legacy within communities.

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Interview Protocol

A series of semi structured interviews were conducted with key stakeholders from the funded organisations. The interviews were designed to be flexible, allowing for open discussion while being guided by a core set of questions. Each interview was planned to last approximately 60 minutes and was conducted either in-person or via video conference.

The interview protocol was structured as follows-

Introduction (5 minutes)-

- Explain the role of the evaluation team (M-CO).
- Outline the evaluation's purpose, scope, and data usage.
- Secure informed consent, including permission to record, and confirm voluntary participation.

Interview Questions (35–50 minutes)-

Question 1- Contextual Factors

- "What were the main things that influenced how your project was run and how it was received by young people and your team?"
- Follow-up questions explored the influence of the organisation's previous experience, the cohort of young people, and the role of community partnerships.

Question 2- Direct Support and Obstacles

- "In what ways did the Nurture Fund enable you to support young people?"
- This section aimed to identify how the fund addressed key obstacles and what specific opportunities were provided for skill-building and self-expression.

Question 3- Outcomes and Impact

- "What tangible differences did the project funded by the Nurture Fund achieve, and who benefited most?"
- Questions focused on sustainability, unexpected achievements, and how project delivery was adapted to better meet the needs of participants and staff.

Question 4- Lessons Learned and Future Improvements

- "Reflecting on your experience, what lessons can be learned to improve future projects from a similar fund?"
- This line of questioning sought to identify what worked well, what could have been improved, and key recommendations for future replication and sustainability.

Closing the Interview (5 minutes)-

- Thank the participant for their time and insights.
- Confirm next steps and the timeline for the evaluation report.
- Provide contact details for any follow-up questions.

THANK YOU

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