

Creative Connections

Creative opportunities for
children, young people
and families

Evaluation Report



Project

Creative Connections



Report

Evaluation Report



Organisation

Action for Children/
Foster Care Wales



Funding

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Author

Dr Bethan Ryland
Independent Evaluation



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The
Riverfront
Newport

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1. Executive Summary

Creative Connections was developed by Action for Children and Foster Care Wales to provide children and young people in foster care with accessible opportunities to participate in creative activity. Funded through the Arts Council of Wales Arts, Health and Wellbeing Fund, the programme was intentionally non-therapeutic. Children were not expected to explore their care experiences or personal difficulties through their artwork; instead, activity was shaped around their interests, ideas and choices.

The programme involved 42 children and young people, including children from seven Action for Children foster families and four Local Authority foster families. Across the programme, 63 sessions were recorded through individual, family and group provision, with four creative practitioners contributing to delivery. The programme culminated in an exhibition at the Riverfront Theatre & Arts Centre, where 120 artworks were displayed and 44 people attended.

The evaluation used a mixed-method approach, drawing on children's feedback, foster-carer accounts, practitioner reflections, social-worker perspectives, session measures, project records and creative outputs. Evidence from across the programme was considered together, allowing recurring patterns to be identified while retaining differences in individual experiences.

The findings identified recurring evidence of developing engagement and confidence, positive relationships and connection, communication, meaningful choice, positive immediate emotional experience, and pride in creative achievement. Engagement often developed over time, while children increasingly expressed preferences, introduced ideas and influenced their creative activity. Shared creative experiences also provided opportunities for positive interaction between children and foster carers, and children frequently described feeling relaxed, happy or calmer during sessions. Across the four-day Local Authority teen programme, all 13 recorded end-of-session responses were positive, providing additional evidence of children's immediate experiences of participation.

Taken together, the findings suggest that these experiences were shaped by more than creative activity alone. Time, relationships, accessibility, flexibility, children's interests and choices, the way activity was facilitated, and opportunities for achievement and recognition all formed part of the context in which participation developed. The evaluation therefore suggests that the value of Creative Connections lies not only in providing opportunities to create, but in providing those opportunities in ways that are flexible, responsive and meaningful to children and families.



The evaluation also identified value for foster carers and families, particularly where creative activity provided opportunities to create together, share positive experiences and connect around a focus that was not centred on difficulties or concerns.

Experiences varied between children and forms of provision, and longer-term outcomes were not systematically measured. The findings should therefore be understood as recurring experiences and observed or reported changes within Creative Connections rather than outcomes assumed to apply to every child. The recurrence of similar findings across different sources and forms of provision nevertheless strengthens the overall evidence.

The recommendations support the continued development of Creative Connections over a sufficient period for engagement and relationships to develop, while retaining flexible routes into participation, meaningful choice and responsiveness to children's interests. They also identify opportunities to broaden the creative offer, develop the family dimension, strengthen professional support and progression opportunities, and build longer-term evaluation into future delivery.

Overall, the evaluation provides a clear basis for the continued development of Creative Connections. Its value appears to lie in combining accessible creative opportunities with relationships, flexibility, meaningful choice and responsiveness to children's individual interests and circumstances. Future development can build on these foundations while continuing to strengthen the evidence over time.



Creative Connections

Project at a Glance

Who took part?



42

children and young people



11

foster families
7 Action for Children
4 Local Authority



4

creative practitioners



Individual, family and group provision

What was delivered?



63

sessions in total

A flexible programme of individual, family and group sessions, including:



1:1 sessions



Family sessions



Local Authority sessions
(with families and young people)



Support group session



Art Club sessions

(Some participants accessed more than one type of session)

How was it delivered?



At home

Bringing creativity to families



Creative spaces

A dedicated, welcoming environment



Flexible delivery

Tailored to each child and family

Teen programme results

All 13 recorded end-of-session responses were positive.



13/13

12 "I feel great"
1 "I feel better than before"

Creative achievements



120

artworks displayed



44

people attended the exhibition



2. Introduction and Project Background

Creative Connections was designed by Action for Children/Foster Care Wales and funded through the Arts Council of Wales Arts, Health and Wellbeing Fund. The project provided creative opportunities for children and young people living in foster care through individual, family and group-based activity.

The programme was developed around a clear distinction between creative and therapeutic provision. Creative Connections was not art therapy, and practitioners were not working as therapists. Creative activity was not intended to diagnose, treat or interpret psychological or emotional difficulties. Instead, the programme created opportunities for children to engage with creativity on their own terms, with participation shaped by their interests, preferences and individual circumstances.

This approach meant that creative activity did not need to begin with a difficulty to be addressed or a personal experience to be explored. It could begin with an interest, an idea, a material or something a child wanted to create. This positioned creativity as an opportunity for participation in its own right, while maintaining clear professional boundaries between creative practice and therapeutic intervention.

2.1 A flexible model of delivery

Creative Connections was delivered through a flexible model rather than a standardised programme of workshops. Provision included sustained 1:1 sessions, family activity, Art Club and support-group activity, alongside programmes involving Local Authority foster families and teenagers. Sessions took place within a dedicated Arts Space and, where appropriate, in family homes.

The different forms and locations of delivery allowed provision to be adapted to individual and family circumstances. Children could participate individually, alongside foster carers or with other children. Home-based sessions increased accessibility for families unable to travel easily, while the Arts Space provided a dedicated environment with access to a wider range of materials and space for creative activity.

The creative offer was also varied, including drawing, painting, collage, clay, model-making, origami, printing, spray painting, story boxes and collaborative work. Rather than following a fixed curriculum, activities could be adapted according to children's ages, interests, circumstances and preferred ways of participating.

Flexibility operated within a structured professional framework. Sessions retained a clear creative purpose and appropriate boundaries while allowing children to make choices, take



breaks, move between activities and engage at different levels. Participation was therefore not dependent on completing a predetermined activity or producing a finished piece of work.

2.2 Children, foster carers and relationships

Creative Connections recognised that children's participation took place within the wider context of foster-family relationships. Foster carers were therefore not positioned solely as adults responsible for facilitating children's attendance but could have an active role within the creative provision.

Depending on the form of provision and individual family circumstances, carers could participate in activities, create alongside children, share ideas and materials, or provide support while a child worked independently. At other times, 1:1 provision gave children dedicated creative time while allowing carers to step back from the session.

The Local Authority strand extended the range of provision through dedicated family sessions and an age-specific programme for teenagers. Together, these different approaches allowed children and families to participate in ways appropriate to their circumstances, while retaining the core principles of flexible, interest-led creative provision.

2.3 The role of the creative practitioner

Creative practitioners were central to the delivery of Creative Connections. Their role extended beyond providing instruction in a particular art form and included facilitating creative environments in which children could participate in different ways, explore their interests and make meaningful choices.

Practitioners worked responsively, adapting creative activity to children's interests, levels of engagement and individual circumstances while maintaining a clear creative purpose. This required a balance between providing structure and allowing children sufficient flexibility to influence their own participation.

Clear professional boundaries were integral to the approach. Practitioners worked alongside social work, fostering and therapeutic professionals rather than seeking to replicate their roles. Training in trauma and attachment informed their approach to engagement and participation, while delivery remained firmly within the scope of creative rather than therapeutic practice.

The role of creative practitioners and the professional support surrounding delivery are considered further within the evaluation findings and recommendations.



2.4 Scope of the project

Creative Connections involved 42 children and young people, alongside Action for Children and Local Authority foster families. Across the programme, 63 sessions were recorded, delivered through individual, family and group formats by four creative practitioners.

The programme culminated in an exhibition at the Riverfront Theatre & Arts Centre, where 120 artworks produced through Creative Connections were displayed and 44 people attended. The exhibition brought together work from across the programme and provided an opportunity for children and families to see their creative work presented and recognised within a shared public setting.

A detailed breakdown of delivery is provided in Section 5.

2.5 Purpose of the Evaluation

The purpose of this evaluation is to examine what can reasonably be learned from Creative Connections and the evidence generated through its delivery.

The evaluation considers children's and young people's experiences of participation; patterns of engagement; relationships with creative practitioners and foster carers; communication and immediate emotional experience; choice and agency; achievement and recognition; and the experiences of foster carers and families.

It also considers the conditions that may have shaped these experiences, including flexibility, the environment in which activity took place, different forms of delivery and the wider professional context surrounding the creative work.

The evaluation does not assume that participation produced the same outcomes for all children, nor does it attribute observed changes to creative activity alone. Instead, evidence from different participants, delivery strands and sources is considered together to identify recurring patterns, differences in experience and areas where the evidence is more limited. This provides a basis for understanding both what was observed through Creative Connections and what can reasonably be learned for future delivery.

Section 3 presents the Evidence and Rationale for Creative Connections, drawing on relevant Welsh and UK literature. Section 4 sets out the evaluation approach, and Section 5 describes what was delivered. Sections 6–10 then present the findings, provide an individual case study, consider the strength of the evidence and future learning, set out recommendations for future development, and conclude the evaluation.



Creative Connections

Evaluation Report

Author: Dr Bethan Ryland





3. Evidence and Rationale

Creative participation with children and young people who have experience of care has received increasing attention within arts, social care and research contexts. Programmes have used visual arts, music, theatre and other creative forms in a range of settings, with studies reporting potential benefits relating to confidence, communication, self-expression, social connection and participation.

The evidence base remains relatively limited. Studies vary considerably in scale, purpose, delivery model and methodological quality, and much of the available research is qualitative. There is also less evidence concerning longer-term outcomes and the extent to which changes reported during creative programmes can be attributed specifically to creative participation (Peeran, 2016; Coram Institute for Children, 2025).

The rationale for Creative Connections therefore sits within an evidence base that is promising but not conclusive. This section considers what existing research suggests about creative participation for children and young people with care experience, alongside the limitations and areas of uncertainty relevant to this evaluation.

3.1 Creative Participation and Care Experience

The Coram Institute for Children (2025) reviewed 21 UK studies of creative interventions involving children and young people experiencing disadvantage and exclusion, including those with care experience. The interventions covered a range of creative forms, including mixed arts, music, theatre, visual arts and Arts Award activity.

Across the studies reviewed, reported outcomes included confidence, self-esteem, social skills, communication and relationships with peers and facilitators. Other reported outcomes included self-awareness, identity, wellbeing, resilience and empathy (Coram Institute for Children, 2025).

Similar themes were identified in an earlier review examining arts and cultural education for looked-after children and young people. Peeran (2016) identified potential benefits relating to self-esteem, confidence, emotional literacy, relationship-building and social and cultural capital.

The more recent Coram review also identifies limitations within the existing evidence base, including variation in the quality of evaluation, limited quantitative evidence and insufficient evidence concerning longer-term outcomes. It calls for more robust and adequately resourced evaluation, using methods appropriate to the children and young people involved (Coram Institute for Children, 2025).



Taken together, the existing evidence provides a credible basis for examining creative participation with children and young people with care experience. However, differences in programme design, participant groups and evaluation methods mean that findings need to be interpreted within the contexts in which they were generated.

3.2 Evidence from Wales

Research undertaken in Wales provides particularly relevant evidence concerning creative participation among young people in foster care.

An arts-based programme delivered through Wales Millennium Centre as part of the Confidence in Care programme involved eight young people in foster care alongside foster carers and creative facilitators. The ten-week programme incorporated games, puppet-making, singing, acting and drawing. The associated research drew on interviews, observations, reflexive diaries and creative research methods to examine the experiences of young people, foster carers and facilitators (Mannay et al., 2018; Mannay et al., 2022).

The research identified positive experiences relating particularly to confidence and social connectedness. It also drew attention to the context surrounding participation. Relationships with facilitators, foster-carer involvement and aspects of the wider social environment were identified as relevant to participants' experiences (Mannay et al., 2022).

This suggests that creative participation cannot necessarily be understood solely in relation to the activity itself. The relationships and circumstances surrounding participation may also contribute to how young people experience creative provision.

The study involved a small participant group and was predominantly qualitative. It therefore provides detailed insight into the experiences of those involved but cannot establish whether similar outcomes would occur across a larger or more diverse population. Its value lies particularly in understanding participants' experiences and identifying areas for further investigation (Mannay et al., 2022).

3.3 Creativity, Participation and Communication

A further strand of Welsh research has examined how creative approaches can support communication and participation among care-experienced children and young people.

Mannay et al. (2019) explored creative participatory approaches with care-experienced children and young people in Wales. Their research demonstrates how creative and visual methods can provide opportunities for communication that may differ from those available through conventional adult-led questioning.



Although this research focused on participatory methods, it has relevance to creative provision more broadly. Creative activity can provide a shared focus through which children communicate ideas, express preferences, make decisions and introduce their own interests.

This does not require creative activity to be understood as therapeutic. Communication can occur through and around creative participation without requiring children to disclose or explore difficult personal experiences. This distinction is relevant to Creative Connections, which was designed as creative rather than therapeutic provision.

Research also demonstrates considerable variation in the forms that creative participation can take. Plus One, developed through the Derby Cultural Education Partnership, provided creative opportunities for young people with direct experience of care through a multi-arts approach (Nunn et al., 2019). The programme is also included within the Coram Institute for Children's wider review of creative interventions involving children and young people experiencing disadvantage and exclusion (Coram Institute for Children, 2025).

Together, these studies illustrate the diversity of creative approaches within this field. Programmes differ in their purpose, duration, setting, creative form and methods of participation, making it important to consider findings within the context of the particular programme being evaluated.

3.4 What Remains Uncertain?

Despite recurring reports of positive experiences and outcomes, important gaps remain within the evidence base.

Much of the available research is qualitative and involves relatively small participant groups. This provides valuable insight into participants' experiences and the processes surrounding creative participation, but offers less certainty about whether similar patterns would be found across larger populations.

There is also variation in how outcomes are defined and assessed. Terms such as confidence, wellbeing, communication and engagement may be informed by participant accounts, professional or practitioner observations, structured measures, or combinations of different evidence. Findings described using similar terminology may therefore represent different aspects of experience or change.

Evidence concerning longer-term outcomes is also less developed. Many evaluations focus on experiences during or immediately following participation, with fewer studies examining whether reported changes continue beyond the period of creative provision (Coram Institute for Children, 2025).



Creative Life Story Work provides one example of a more extensive evaluation approach within work involving care-experienced children and young people. Developed by Blue Cabin and partners, the programme differs from Creative Connections in purpose, using creative approaches within life story work to support children and young people to explore their past, present and future. Its evaluation incorporated a randomised controlled trial, process evaluation and cost analysis involving children and young people aged 5–17 across three Local Authorities (Taylor et al., 2022).

Although the two programmes are not directly comparable, this evaluation illustrates the importance of matching conclusions to the type and strength of evidence available. Different methods answer different questions: qualitative evidence can provide detailed understanding of experience and perceived or observed change, while other designs may be required to establish the extent, duration or attribution of particular outcomes.

These considerations are relevant to the interpretation of Creative Connections and inform the evaluation approach set out in the following section.

3.5 Rationale for Evaluating Creative Connections

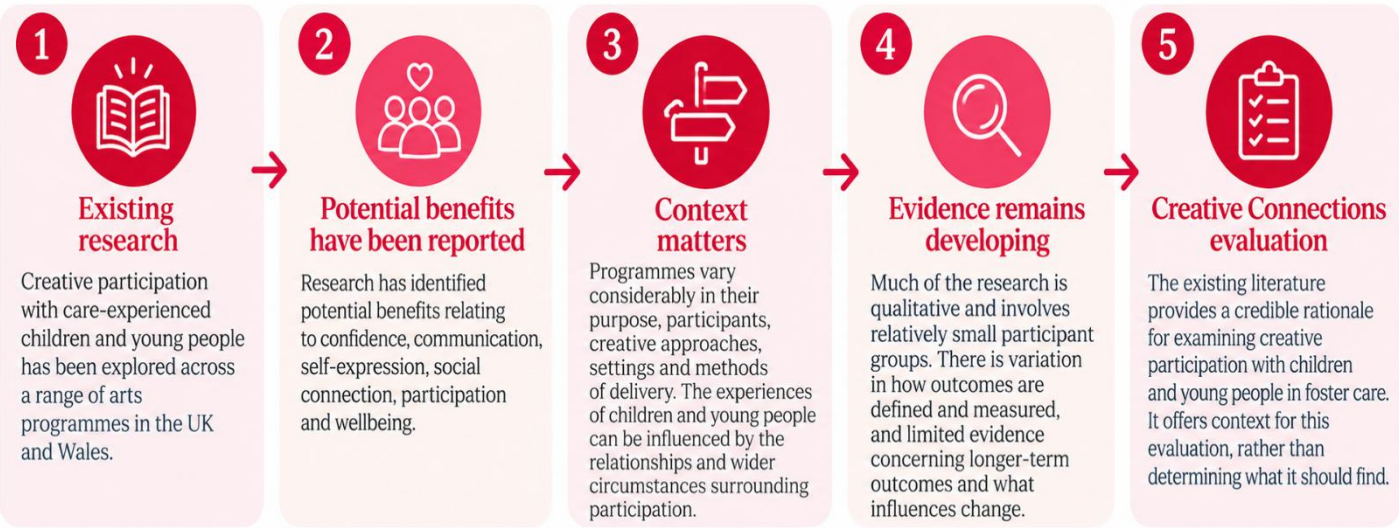
The existing literature provides a credible rationale for examining creative participation with children and young people in foster care. Research in Wales and elsewhere in the UK has identified positive experiences and potential outcomes associated with creative provision, while also demonstrating variation between programmes and limitations within the wider evidence base.

Creative Connections provides an opportunity to examine these questions within its own context of individual, family and group-based creative provision. The evaluation therefore considers what the evidence generated through the programme indicates about children's and young people's experiences of participation and any patterns of change identified across different forms of evidence.

Existing research provides context for interpreting these findings rather than determining what the evaluation should find. The analysis remains attentive to differences between participants and forms of provision, as well as to areas where the available evidence supports more limited conclusions.

Creative Participation: What Does the Evidence Tell Us?

Existing research provides a useful context for understanding creative participation with children and young people with care experience. The evidence suggests potential benefits, while also highlighting important limitations.





4. Evaluation Approach

The evaluation adopted a mixed-method, child-centred and relationship-centred approach. It was designed to examine how children and foster families experienced Creative Connections, what changes were observed or reported, and the circumstances surrounding those experiences.

Quantitative and qualitative evidence were considered together. Delivery and participation data provided information about the reach and structure of the programme, while children's comments, foster-carer and professional perspectives, practitioner reflections, session measures and creative evidence provided insight into experiences of participation and change.

This approach reflects established principles of mixed-method evaluation, in which different forms of evidence are combined to develop a more complete understanding than either quantitative or qualitative evidence can provide alone (Greene, Caracelli and Graham, 1989; Creswell and Plano Clark, 2018).

A structured analytical process was used to examine evidence across sources, identify recurring patterns and retain differences or evidence that complicated emerging interpretations.

4.1 Evidence Base

The evaluation drew on evidence collected across the different strands of Creative Connections.

Quantitative evidence included participation and session records, records of creative outputs, exhibition attendance and structured start- and end-of-session responses within the Local Authority provision.

Qualitative evidence included children's and young people's comments, foster-carer feedback, social-worker and other professional perspectives, practitioner session reflections and observations, case-study material and creative outputs. Repeated session records also enabled patterns of participation to be considered over time where sufficient evidence was available.

Different sources provided different perspectives on the programme. Children's comments offered direct insight into their experiences; foster carers provided observations from within and beyond creative sessions; practitioners documented participation across repeated contact; and social workers contributed professional perspectives on children's and families' engagement.



Creative work was also considered as evidence of participation, decision-making, experimentation and achievement where appropriate. Artwork was not interpreted psychologically or used to infer children's internal emotional states. This maintained a clear distinction between evaluating creative participation and making therapeutic or clinical interpretations.

4.2 Capturing Immediate Emotional Experience

The Local Authority family and teen programmes used a simple visual weather-chart measure through which participants indicated how they felt at the beginning and end of sessions.

This provided an accessible and repeated form of self-reported evidence about immediate emotional experience. Within the four-day teen programme, all 13 recorded end-of-session responses were positive: 12 indicated "I feel great" and one indicated "I feel better than before". The five-week family programme also showed a predominantly positive pattern across the available start- and end-of-session responses.

These measures were interpreted specifically as evidence of participants' immediate experiences within individual sessions. They were not designed as clinical measures of wellbeing or as measures of longer-term psychological change.

The start- and end-of-session responses were therefore considered alongside other evidence, including children's comments, practitioner observations and foster-carer accounts, rather than being used independently to infer broader outcomes.

4.3 A Child-Centred and Relationship-Centred Approach

Children's experiences were not assessed solely through adult accounts. Their comments, choices and creative decisions, together with changes in patterns of participation where these were documented, were treated as important sources of evidence.

Direct child voice was captured principally through comments made during creative activity. These provided first-hand accounts of particular experiences but were not assumed to represent the experiences of all children involved in Creative Connections.

The evaluation also considered the relational context in which participation occurred. This reflected both the structure of Creative Connections and the wider evidence discussed in Section 3, which indicates that relationships and the social context surrounding creative participation may be relevant to how children and young people experience provision (Mannay et al., 2022; Coram Institute for Children, 2025).



Relationships were therefore considered both in relation to children's experiences of Creative Connections and as part of the context surrounding participation. This allowed changes in engagement to be examined alongside the circumstances in which they occurred rather than as isolated observations.

4.4 Theory of Change

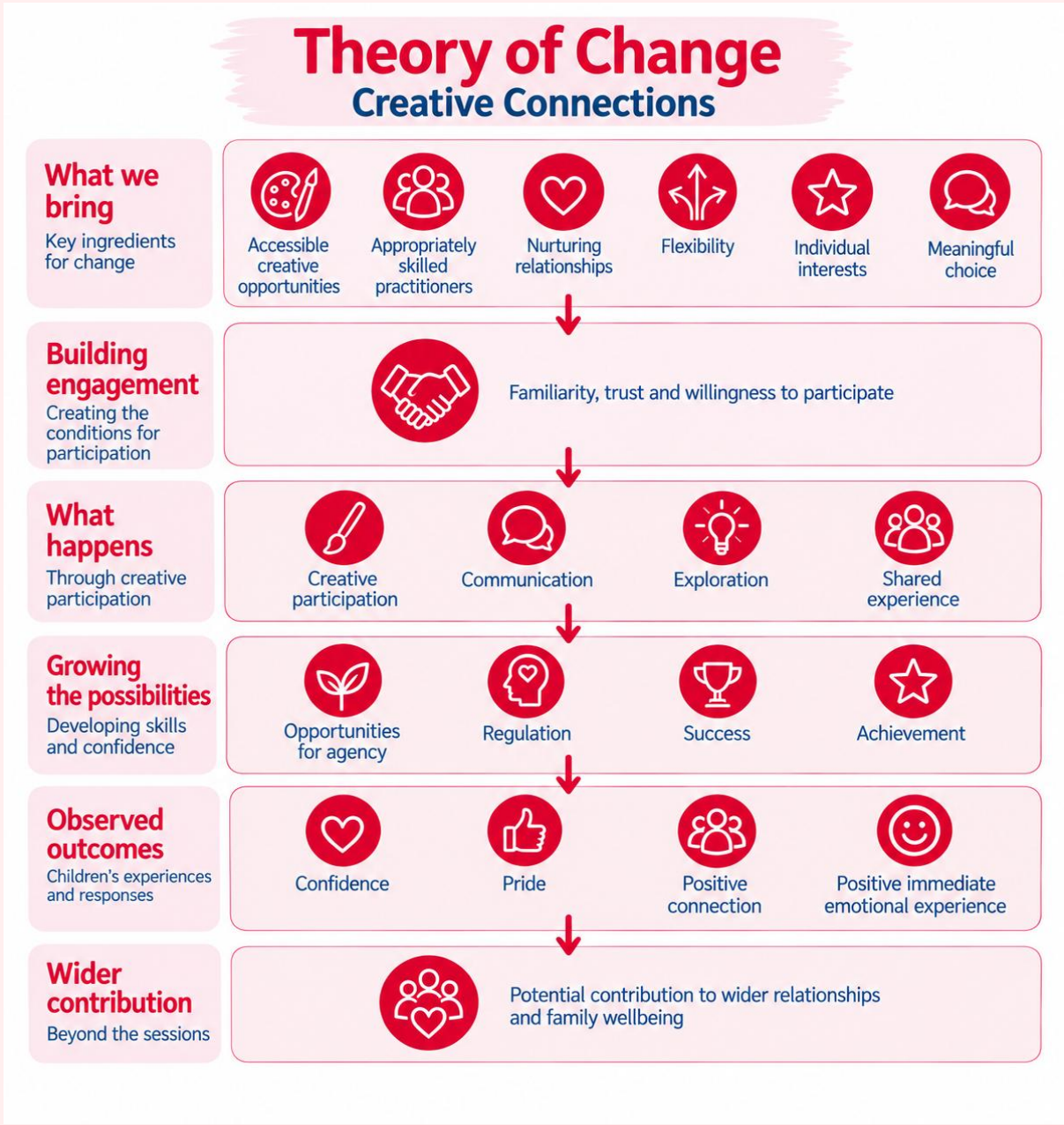
A Theory of Change was used to provide a structured framework for examining how different elements of Creative Connections might relate to participation and subsequent experiences.

The model proposed that accessible creative opportunities, relationships, flexibility, individual interests and meaningful choice could interact to support participation. It then provided a framework through which evidence concerning communication, connection, agency, immediate emotional experience and creative achievement could be examined.

The Theory of Change was not treated as a statement of established impact or as an assumption that participation would produce the same outcomes for every child. Rather, the proposed relationships within the model were examined against the evidence generated through Creative Connections.

Children entered the programme with different interests, circumstances and ways of participating, and engagement could vary both between children and across sessions. The model was therefore understood as a flexible framework rather than a linear sequence through which every participant was expected to progress.

The Theory of Change informed the analysis without determining its conclusions. Evidence that supported the proposed relationships was considered alongside evidence that differed from, complicated or provided insufficient support for them.



The pathway should be understood as a flexible framework rather than a linear model of change. Children participated in different ways and engagement could vary both between children and across sessions. The relationships proposed within the Theory of Change were therefore examined against the evidence rather than assumed to occur, with evidence that supported, differed from or complicated the model retained within the analysis.



4.5 Analysis and Triangulation

A structured evidence analysis matrix was used to organise and compare evidence across Creative Connections. Evidence was considered in relation to its source and context, allowing recurring patterns to be identified while retaining differences between participants and forms of provision.

Five principal themes emerged through the analysis: confidence and engagement; relationships and connection; communication; choice and agency; and achievement and pride. Immediate emotional experience was also examined as a distinct area because of the availability of repeated start- and end-of-session measures within the Local Authority provision, alongside qualitative evidence from other strands.

The analysis also identified factors that appeared to shape how Creative Connections was experienced, including flexibility, different forms of delivery and the involvement of foster carers and families. These were considered alongside the outcome themes rather than treated as outcomes in themselves.

Triangulation was used to examine whether emerging interpretations were supported across different sources and perspectives. This is an established principle within mixed-method evaluation, where convergence between different forms of evidence can strengthen the credibility of an interpretation (Greene, Caracelli and Graham, 1989; Creswell and Plano Clark, 2018).

Triangulation did not require all sources to provide the same evidence. Instead, the analysis considered where evidence converged, differed or provided additional context. For example, an observed change in a child's engagement could be considered alongside the child's comments, foster-carer feedback and practitioner observations where these were available.

Variation was retained within the analysis. Children participated in different ways and engagement could vary between participants and across sessions. Evidence that differed from or complicated an emerging pattern was therefore considered alongside evidence that supported it.

This process provided the basis for the findings presented in Section 6. The findings represent recurring patterns within the available evidence while retaining differences between individual children, families and forms of provision.





5. What Was Delivered

Creative Connections delivered a varied programme of creative activity for children and young people living in foster care and their families. The project reached 42 children and young people, involving seven Action for Children foster families and four Local Authority foster families. Across the programme, 63 sessions were recorded, with four creative practitioners contributing to delivery.

Provision included individual and family activity, Art Club, an Action for Children support group session and Local Authority family and teen provision. These categories reflect the different ways in which activity was organised and should not be interpreted as mutually exclusive.

The programme was delivered through different formats rather than as a standardised course. Children and families could participate individually, together as families or as part of a group, according to their circumstances, interests and preferences.

5.1 Individual and Family Provision

Individual creative work formed a substantial part of Creative Connections, with 47 1:1 sessions recorded. Sessions took place both in family homes and within the dedicated Arts Space, providing different routes into participation according to children's and families' circumstances.

The creative offer included drawing, painting, colour mixing, clay, construction, model-making, origami, batik, cyanotype and sun printing, spray painting, pom-pom making and animation. Children's existing interests, including space, animals, nature, gaming and music, were frequently used as starting points for creative activity.

Family provision created opportunities for children and foster carers to participate together. Five family sessions were recorded, alongside family participation within other strands of the programme. Activity included individual and shared making, enabling children and carers to work alongside one another or collaborate on particular pieces and ideas.

5.2 Group and Local Authority Provision

Creative Connections also included Art Club activity, an Action for Children support group session and dedicated Local Authority provision.

The Local Authority strand included activity with foster families alongside a four-day programme for teenagers. Family sessions incorporated individual and collaborative making, including work developed around a shared rainforest and jungle theme using painting, clay,

model-making and other materials. The teen programme included painting, printing and other creative activity shaped around participants’ interests.

Across group provision, children could work independently or collaboratively, with activities adapted to participants’ ages, interests and the context of individual sessions.

5.3 Creative Environments and Accessibility

Creative activity took place in different settings, including family homes and the Arts Space. Home-based delivery provided an important route into the programme for families where travel presented a practical barrier. The Arts Space provided a dedicated creative environment with access to a broader range of materials, techniques and space for making.

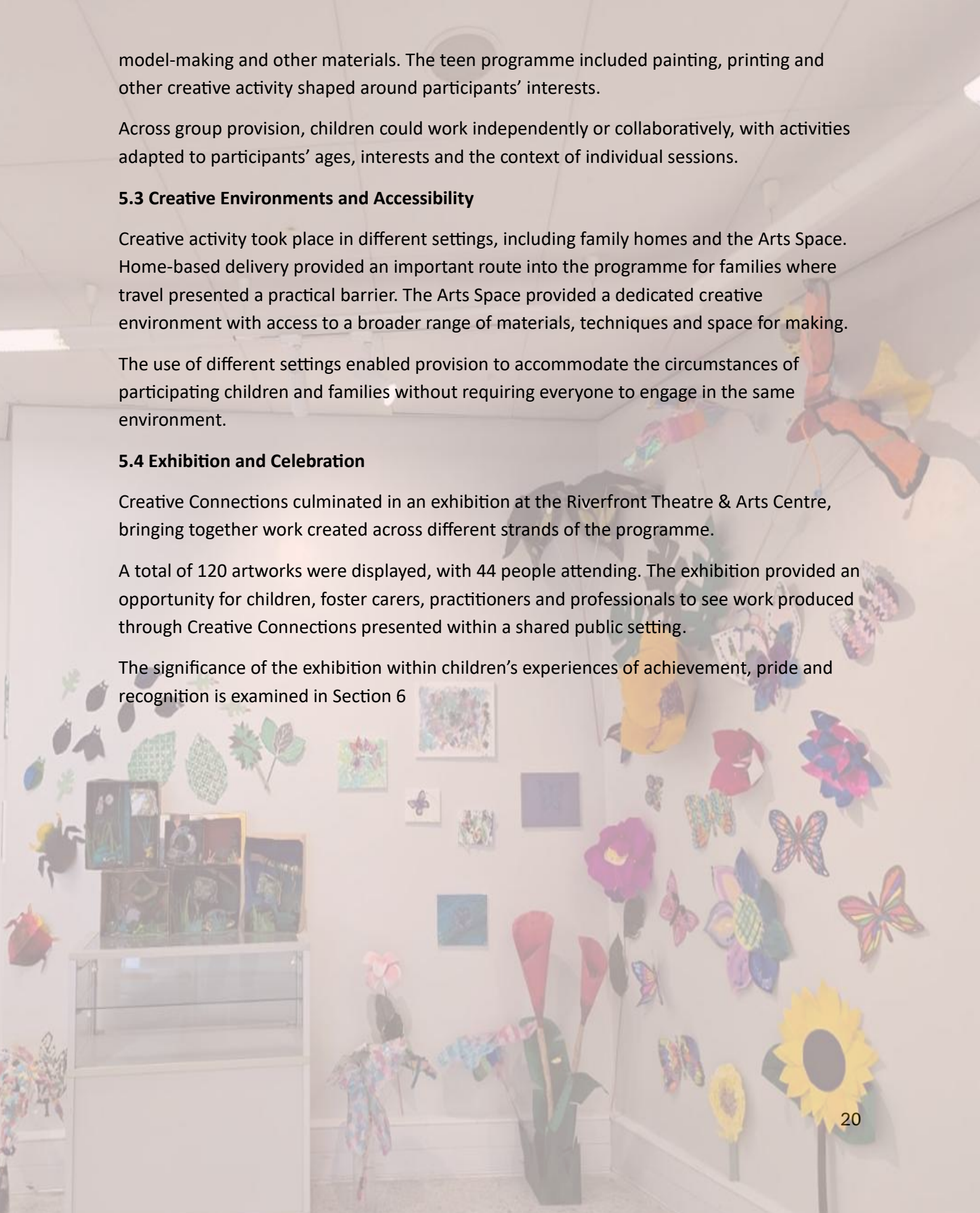
The use of different settings enabled provision to accommodate the circumstances of participating children and families without requiring everyone to engage in the same environment.

5.4 Exhibition and Celebration

Creative Connections culminated in an exhibition at the Riverfront Theatre & Arts Centre, bringing together work created across different strands of the programme.

A total of 120 artworks were displayed, with 44 people attending. The exhibition provided an opportunity for children, foster carers, practitioners and professionals to see work produced through Creative Connections presented within a shared public setting.

The significance of the exhibition within children’s experiences of achievement, pride and recognition is examined in Section 6





6. Findings

The findings presented in this chapter draw on evidence from across Creative Connections and identify recurring patterns in children's and families' experiences of the programme. Five principal areas emerged through the analysis: confidence and engagement; relationships and connection; communication; choice and agency; and achievement and pride. Immediate emotional experience was also examined as a distinct area, alongside emerging evidence concerning foster carers and the conditions surrounding delivery.

Children participated in different ways and received different forms and amounts of provision. The findings therefore reflect recurring patterns within the available evidence rather than outcomes assumed to apply to every participant. Differences in experience and examples of more variable engagement have been retained where they are relevant to interpretation.

6.1 Confidence and Engagement Developed Through Participation

Developing engagement was one of the clearest recurring patterns within the Creative Connections evidence, with indications of increased confidence for some children. This was particularly apparent within repeated provision, where changes in participation could be considered across more than one session.

Practitioner reflections describe children who initially appeared nervous, hesitant or uncertain about what was expected. Early participation could involve observing, talking, listening to music, exploring materials or moving between creative activity and other forms of engagement. Across subsequent sessions, several children were recorded as settling more readily, expressing preferences and increasingly introducing their own ideas.

For one child, initial sessions were characterised by nervousness and heightened alertness. Over time, the child began expressing preferences about colour, explaining their ideas and suggesting activities they wanted to try. Their foster carer independently described increasing confidence and willingness to participate.

In another case, a young person accessing Creative Connections during a period of school exclusion initially required reassurance and accessible routes into activity. Later sessions developed around their interests, and the young person subsequently chose to return specifically to create and sign a piece for the exhibition.



Image: *The Art Space turning into a jungle demonstrating creative work developed through repeated participation, with children increasingly contributing ideas and making decisions about their work.*

Evidence of engagement also extended beyond individual sessions. One foster carer reported:

“We’ve been chatting in the car on the way home from school this week about what we’d like to make in the next session.”

This indicates anticipation and continued interest beyond attendance itself. Similar examples were recorded where children requested particular techniques, discussed forthcoming sessions at home or suggested what they wanted to make next.

Local Authority reflections provide further examples of young people who initially found decision-making or conversation difficult but later worked more collaboratively or wanted to continue making after completing an initial activity.

Patterns of engagement varied between children and across sessions. Some children remained absorbed in creative activity for extended periods, while others moved between



making, conversation, games, movement and breaks. These different forms of participation were reflected across the programme. For some children, engagement developed over time where activity was repeated, connected to their interests and flexible enough to accommodate different ways of taking part.

Overall, the evidence indicates that engagement developed over time for a number of children, alongside signs of increasing confidence within Creative Connections.

6.2 Relationships and Connection

Relationships emerged as an important aspect of children's experiences of Creative Connections. The evidence indicates that relationships could both support participation and develop through shared creative activity.

Repeated provision provided opportunities for children to become familiar with creative practitioners within a context that was distinct from education, therapy or assessment. Foster-carer accounts provide examples of children becoming increasingly comfortable within these relationships.

One foster carer commented:

"The kids don't normally feel comfortable with strangers, especially so soon, but they already have opened up to you and are showing me they are comfortable in your company."

Another reported:

"I have never seen him be this relaxed in an adult's company before."

These accounts relate to children's experiences within particular relationships and settings. They do not demonstrate a generalised change in children's trust of adults, but provide evidence that individual children appeared increasingly comfortable within the relationships established through Creative Connections.

Creative activity also provided opportunities for positive interaction between children and foster carers. Family and Local Authority evidence includes examples of children and carers sharing materials, discussing creative decisions, helping one another and working collaboratively.



Image: Collaborative creative activity provided opportunities for children and carers to contribute to shared work and make creative decisions together.

One foster carer explained:

“When things have been hard it has given us a medium to connect with each other in a fun way to forget about the difficulties for a few hours.”

Another described how creative sessions had enabled them, during a difficult period, to see the child in their care “in a more positive way”.

The evidence therefore indicates that creative participation sometimes provided a different context for interaction between children and foster carers. Rather than establishing sustained improvement in family relationships, the findings demonstrate opportunities for positive shared experiences in which interaction could centre on creativity, curiosity and making.

This is consistent with Welsh research identifying interpersonal relationships and foster-carer involvement as relevant to young people’s experiences of arts participation (Mannay et al., 2022).

6.3 Creativity Provided a Different Context for Communication

Communication within Creative Connections did not depend on children being asked directly to discuss their feelings, histories or difficulties. Instead, communication frequently occurred through and around creative activity.

Social-worker observations from story-box activity provide one example. Children explained what help they needed, discussed characters and backgrounds and made decisions about



where animals and objects should be positioned. One child became particularly invested in deciding where different elements belonged within their scene.



Image: Story-box and model-making activities provided a shared focus for communicating ideas, requesting support and making creative decisions.

Similar patterns were recorded within individual provision. Children talked about colours, music, gaming, animals, space and what they wanted to create. One child described a colour as:

“This colour is like grey blue rain.”

Another noticed their breathing while painting and commented on being able to hear it. These observations are not interpreted psychologically; rather, they demonstrate children noticing and communicating aspects of their immediate experience while engaged in creative activity.



The evidence therefore indicates that creative activity could provide a shared focus around which communication occurred, without communication itself becoming a demand of participation.

This is consistent with wider research identifying communication and self-expression among the potential outcomes of creative participation, including for children and young people who may find conventional verbal approaches less accessible (Coram Institute for Children, 2025).

The evaluation did not assess whether communication skills changed beyond Creative Connections. Its findings relate specifically to the ways in which communication occurred within and around creative participation.

6.4 Positive Immediate Emotional Experience

Positive immediate emotional experience was one of the strongest areas of convergence across the evaluation. Children described enjoyment, relaxation and changes in how they felt during creative activity, with similar patterns evident in foster-carer accounts, practitioner reflections and the Local Authority start- and end-of-session measures.

Children's Voices



"I feel relaxed when we make art stuff."



"I like doing art with you, I feel like I do when I have a big stretch."



"I didn't want to come to this tonight, I felt angry, but now... I don't feel angry anymore. I'm happy we came."

Across the four-day Local Authority teen programme, all 13 recorded end-of-session responses were positive: 12 participants selected "I feel great" and one selected "I feel better than before". The family programme showed a similarly positive overall pattern, while also recording occasions when participation was more difficult.



Foster-carer accounts provided further evidence. One carer reported that creative activity appeared to improve a child's mood and was often followed by a "good evening", while another described reduced stress around bath and bedtime following sessions. Practitioner reflections similarly recorded children becoming absorbed in activities, appearing calmer during creative participation.

The recurrence of similar experiences across direct participant responses, foster-carer observations, practitioner records and repeated session measures strengthens this finding. Taken together, the evidence indicates that participation in Creative Connections was frequently associated with positive immediate experiences, particularly enjoyment, relaxation, absorption and positive changes in reported mood.

These findings relate to children's experiences during and shortly after participation. The start- and end-of-session measures were not designed to assess clinical wellbeing or sustained psychological change, and the evidence does not establish whether immediate experiences continued beyond the period surrounding individual sessions.

The evidence also suggests that these experiences occurred within a flexible approach to participation. Children could move, pause, change activity or return to making, while sessions could be adapted to individual circumstances. In one example, a planned activity was set aside following a difficult appointment and the demands of the session were reduced.

Positive emotional experience therefore appeared to occur within an interaction between creative activity and the conditions in which children were able to participate, rather than being attributable to creative activity alone.

6.5 Choice and Agency

Choice was embedded within different aspects of Creative Connections. Children could influence what they made, select materials, introduce their own interests, decide how they participated and, in some cases, influence subsequent sessions.

Interests including space, animals, nature, music, Minecraft, Fortnite and origami became starting points for creative activity. One foster family reported discussing origami during the week because the child had identified it as something they wanted to learn in a future session.



Image: Origami making



Image: Animal artwork



Image: Making animals using clay (The diversity of creative work reflects the different interests, choices and ideas children brought to Creative Connections).



Local Authority reflections similarly record children influencing workshop content, with one practitioner observing that this appeared to make participants more “invested and engaged”.

Agency was also evident through smaller decisions: choosing colours or materials, deciding where something should be positioned, requesting help, taking a break, continuing an activity or choosing what to make next.

These choices should be understood within the context of the programme rather than as evidence of broader personal empowerment. Within Creative Connections, however, children’s preferences had practical consequences: what children communicated could influence what happened next.

The evidence therefore supports understanding choice and agency as meaningful features of participation. Children were not simply recipients of predetermined activities but had opportunities to influence their own creative experiences.

6.6 Achievement, Recognition and Pride

Achievement and pride generated some of the clearest direct evidence from children. Across different forms of provision, children expressed satisfaction and, at times, surprise at what they had created. Several actively sought opportunities to share their work with others.

Children’s responses included:

“Wow I made that! That is so cool!”

and:

“Ooooo look at that, I made that! I can’t believe it.”

For some children, achievement became a shared experience. Children wanted teachers, foster carers and other significant people to see what they had created. One child wanted to take their work into school; another created something as a teacher’s birthday gift; and another participant framed their work at home. Foster carers also described children taking pride in showing completed work to family members.

The exhibition at the Riverfront Theatre & Arts Centre extended these opportunities for recognition. 120 artworks produced through Creative Connections were displayed, with 44 people attending.

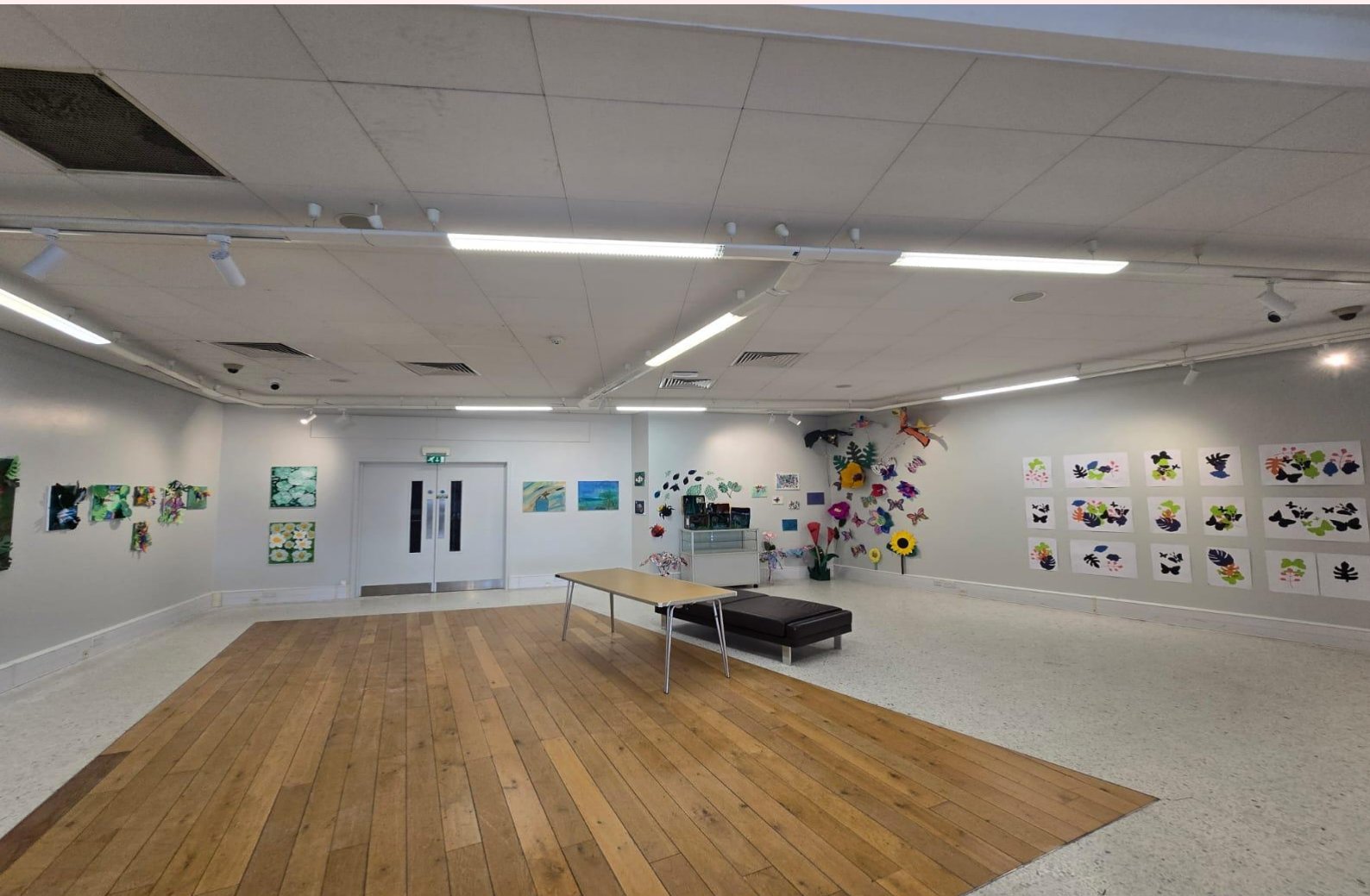


Image: The Creative Connections exhibition at the Riverfront Theatre, Newport that brought together 120 artworks from across the programme, providing a visible opportunity for children’s creative achievements to be recognised and celebrated.

These findings have parallels within the wider evidence base. Previous research has identified achievement and pride in developing creative skills, alongside confidence, among reported experiences associated with creative participation (Mannay et al., 2022; Coram Institute for Children, 2025).

The evidence from Creative Connections relates specifically to creative achievement, pride and recognition. Children recognised value in what they had created, wanted others to see their work and experienced their creative achievements being acknowledged by others.



6.7 Experiences of Foster Carers and the Wider Family

Although children and young people were the principal focus of Creative Connections, the evidence also identified positive experiences for foster carers and families.

Some carers valued participating in creative activity alongside children, while others valued opportunities to step back while a child was positively engaged. Foster-carer accounts also described shared creative activity as providing a different focus for time together, particularly during periods when family circumstances were more challenging.

There were examples of creative participation extending beyond the sessions themselves. One foster carer described rediscovering their enjoyment of baking and subsequently baking with the child in their care. Another suggested that creative opportunities could also be valuable for foster carers because of the relaxation they experienced while participating. Social-worker feedback similarly identified potential value in dedicated creative opportunities for carers.

These accounts indicate that Creative Connections had relevance beyond children's individual participation, particularly where creative activity provided opportunities for shared experiences, positive interaction and carers' own engagement with creativity.

The evidence relating specifically to foster-carer wellbeing is more limited. Creative Connections was not designed as a foster-carer wellbeing intervention and carer outcomes were not systematically measured. The findings therefore identify an emerging area of value rather than an established wellbeing outcome.

The experiences identified through the evaluation provide a basis for exploring the family dimension more deliberately in future delivery, including how shared creative participation may contribute to the experiences of both children and foster carers.

6.8 Conditions Supporting Delivery

The evaluation identified a number of conditions that supported the delivery of Creative Connections. These included practitioner skills, flexibility, clear professional boundaries and links with wider fostering, social work and therapeutic support.

Practitioner reflections indicate that delivery required more than artistic expertise. Training in trauma and attachment informed approaches to safety, choice and responsiveness, while the practitioner role remained clearly distinct from therapy. This distinction is consistent with wider research on trauma-aware arts practice, which emphasises creating informed and supportive conditions for creative participation rather than using creative activity to treat trauma (Sunderland et al., 2023).



Within Creative Connections, practitioners also worked alongside the Therapeutic Lead and social workers, contributed to referral processes and participated in mentoring and reflective practice. Activity could be adapted in response to children's circumstances while retaining a clear creative purpose and appropriate professional boundaries.

The evaluation was not designed to isolate the effect of individual practitioner skills, training or professional arrangements. It therefore cannot determine the extent to which any one of these elements contributed to the outcomes identified elsewhere in the findings.

However, the evidence indicates that responsiveness, professional judgement, relational skills and connections with wider professional support formed part of the context in which Creative Connections was delivered. This is consistent with wider evidence identifying practitioner qualities, skills and experience as relevant considerations within creative provision for children and young people (Coram Institute for Children, 2025).

Creative Connections is therefore more accurately understood as a supported model of creative provision, rather than a collection of standalone arts activities. The implications of these delivery conditions for future development are considered in Section 10.

6.9 Overall Interpretation of the Findings

The findings provide a coherent picture of children's and families' experiences of Creative Connections. Across different forms of provision, recurring evidence was identified around engagement and confidence, positive immediate emotional experience, relationships and communication, choice and agency, and creative achievement and pride.

These experiences were shaped by more than the creative activity itself. Relationships, time and continuity, children's interests and choices, flexibility, accessibility and the way creative opportunities were facilitated all formed part of the context in which children participated. For foster carers and families, creative activity also created opportunities for shared experiences and positive interaction.

This suggests that Creative Connections is best understood as a flexible, relationship-based approach to creative provision, in which creative opportunity interacts with the circumstances, interests and experiences of individual children and families.

The model below provides a visual synthesis of the key elements identified across the evaluation findings.

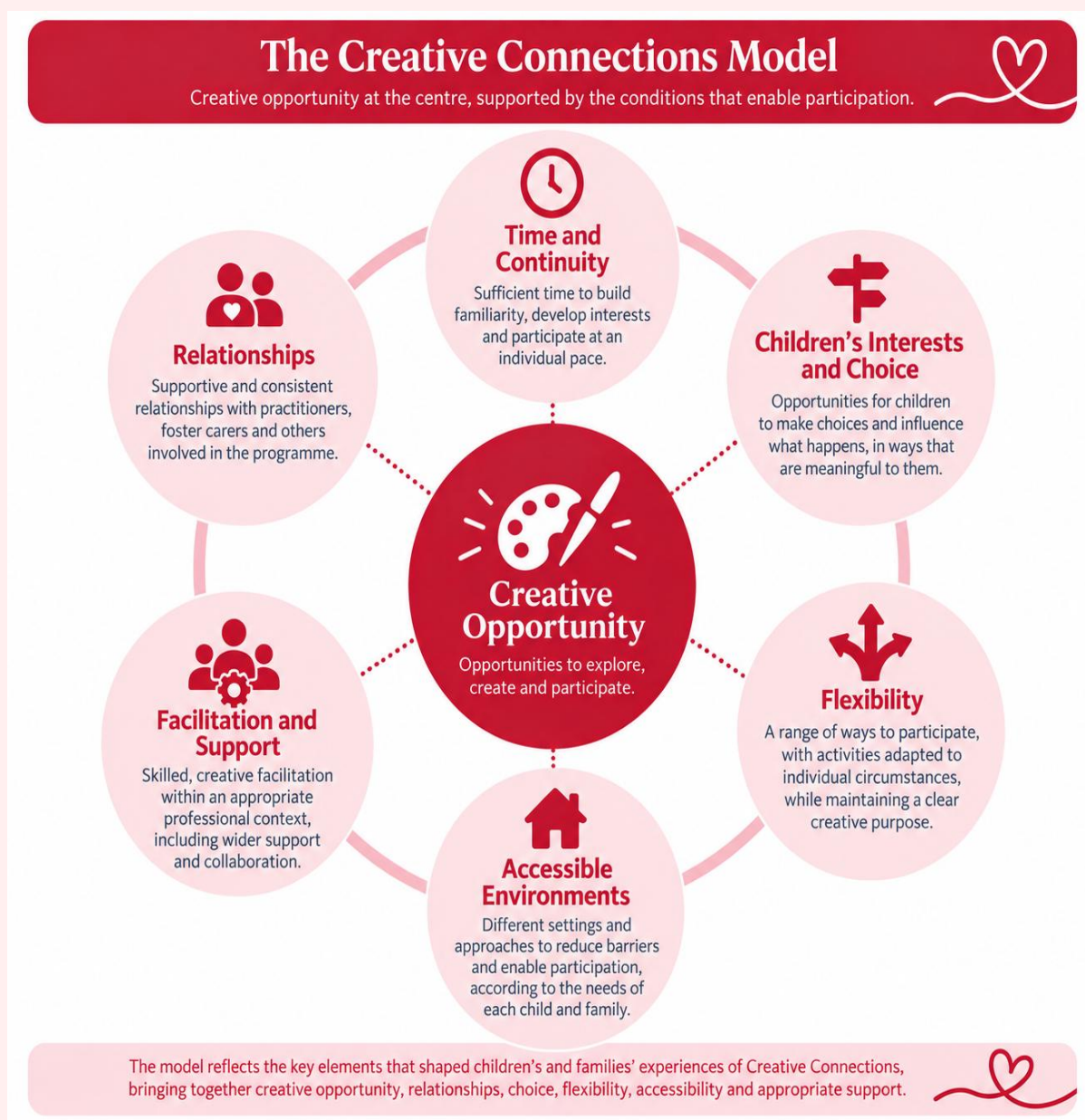


Figure 1: The Creative Connections Model



7. Case Study: K – Creativity, Connection and Achievement

K's experience provides a detailed example of how different elements of Creative Connections came together over time for one child and family. His involvement included regular 1:1 creative sessions, primarily delivered within the family home, with his foster carer involved in and around the sessions.

At the beginning of the work, K and his family were experiencing a difficult period, and there was some uncertainty about whether he would engage with the creative sessions. Home-based delivery was particularly important because his foster carer did not drive and the family lived some distance from Action for Children's Newport offices. Delivering sessions within the family home removed a practical barrier and enabled K to participate in a familiar environment.

Sessions developed around K's interests rather than following a predetermined sequence of activities. Space became a particularly important theme, alongside drawing, painting, model-making, spray painting and other creative activity. His interests provided familiar starting points while also creating opportunities to explore new materials, techniques and ideas.



Image: Creative activities were developed around K's interests, providing a personalised route into participation.



As the sessions became established, practitioner reflections recorded changes in K's participation. He became increasingly receptive to suggestions, made more creative decisions and showed greater confidence in exploring ideas. His foster carer also described improvements in his engagement, concentration and listening when activities connected with his interests and were presented in ways he enjoyed.

Creative activity also provided a context in which K's imagination, practical abilities and decision-making could be visible. His foster carer described him as artistic and creative while noting that aspects of academic learning could be more difficult for him. Within Creative Connections, his creative abilities could therefore be recognised on their own terms.

7.1 Achievement and Recognition

Achievement became particularly visible through K's responses to what he created. Practitioner reflections recorded occasions when he was pleased with completed work and wanted to show it to other members of the family. His foster carer independently described the same pattern.



Image: Completed work became something K wanted to share with others, providing opportunities for achievement to be recognised.



Achievement within the evaluation was not assessed through artistic quality or comparison with other children. For K, it was evident through his own responses to what he had made: completing work, recognising his contribution, showing it to others and taking pride in what he had created.

This pattern appeared across both practitioner observations and his foster carer's account, providing evidence of repeated opportunities for K to experience and communicate pride in his creative work.

7.2 Creativity and Connection Within Family Life

K's experience also illustrates how creative activity could become part of family life. His foster carer described sessions as providing a positive shared focus during periods when family circumstances were more challenging.

"When things have been hard it has given us a medium to connect with each other in a fun way to forget about the difficulties for a few hours."

Practitioner reflections recorded occasions when K and his foster carer participated alongside one another, shared materials, talked and responded to what was being created. His foster carer also described valuing opportunities to observe K positively engaged and reflected that creative activity could provide a different focus when family conversations had become dominated by difficulties.



Image: Shared creative activity provided opportunities for children and carers to spend time together around a positive focus.



At other times, K became absorbed in an activity while his foster carer remained nearby without needing to participate directly. His carer described valuing the opportunity to see K positively engaged while also having some space to regroup.

K's experience therefore illustrates different forms of family participation: creating together, talking around an activity, observing and spending time alongside one another.

7.3 Flexibility and Responsiveness

K's participation varied between sessions. At times he was highly focused and absorbed in creative activity, while at others movement, breaks or changes in activity supported his participation. This variation was accommodated within the sessions rather than treated as unsuccessful engagement.

Activities and expectations could be adapted according to K's circumstances on a particular day. This included incorporating energy breaks, shortening or changing activities and allowing him to move between different forms of participation while retaining a clear creative focus.

One example followed a difficult hospital appointment. The activity originally planned for the session was set aside because K and his foster carer needed time to settle rather than further demands being introduced. The practitioner reflection recorded the importance of responding to the circumstances of the session rather than prioritising completion of the planned activity.

Across other sessions, practitioner reflections recorded occasions when K appeared calm, focused or absorbed in creative activity, and K himself described feeling calm while painting. These observations provide further context for how he experienced participation at particular points in the programme.

Flexibility therefore did not mean an absence of structure or purpose. It enabled the creative offer to respond to K's circumstances while maintaining continuity, a clear creative focus and appropriate professional boundaries.

7.4 Participation Beyond Individual Sessions

As K's involvement developed, there was evidence that his interest in creative activity extended beyond facilitated sessions. He and his foster carer began discussing ideas between visits and thinking about what they might make next.

His foster carer described conversations on the journey home from school about activities for the following session. K also became interested in learning origami after seeing work created by another child and viewing examples online. This interest was subsequently incorporated into his sessions.

These examples demonstrate how K increasingly influenced the direction of his own participation. His interests were not simply used to encourage engagement; ideas he introduced could shape what happened next.

Creative activity also appeared elsewhere within family life. His foster carer reported returning to baking after not doing so for some time, with K beginning to help:

“I’ve started baking. I haven’t baked in a long time. I’m really enjoying it again and K has even helped me in the kitchen. I’d forgotten how much I loved baking.”

This is one family’s account rather than evidence of a wider programme outcome, but it illustrates how creative interests could extend into everyday family activity.

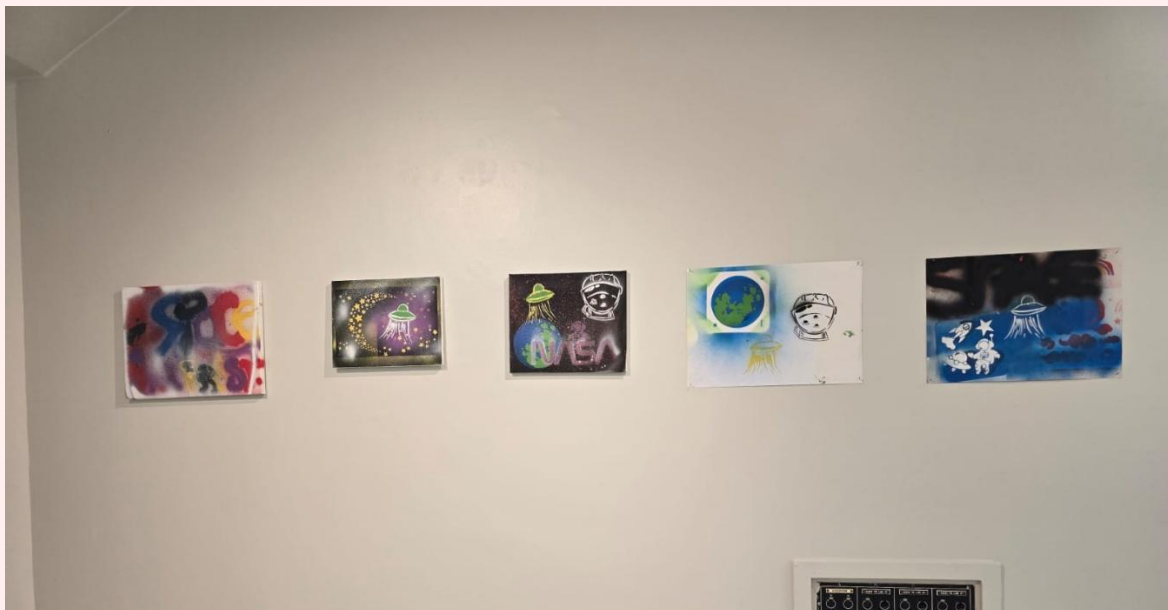


Image: K’s work displayed at the Exhibition at the Riverfront

7.5 What K’s Experience Helps Us Understand

K’s experience is individual and should not be treated as representative of every child who participated in Creative Connections. Its value lies in providing a detailed example of how several factors identified across the wider evaluation could operate together over time.

For K, home-based delivery made participation accessible. His interests provided a starting point for creative activity, while repeated sessions provided continuity across the period of

participation. Over time, he increasingly contributed ideas and influenced what he made. Flexible delivery enabled sessions to respond to changing circumstances, while creative activity provided opportunities for shared experiences with his foster carer and for his achievements to be recognised.

These elements were interconnected rather than operating in isolation. K's experience illustrates how accessibility, relationships, individual interests, meaningful choice, flexibility and recognition could combine to shape participation.

The patterns identified across the case study were often visible through everyday experiences: looking forward to sessions, suggesting activities, becoming absorbed in making, trying new approaches, sharing completed work with people important to him, participating alongside his foster carer and taking pride in what he had created.

Considered together, these experiences provide a detailed example of the engagement, agency, connection and achievement identified across the wider Creative Connections evidence.



8. Strength of Evidence and Future Learning

The evaluation generated a substantial body of practice-based evidence from across Creative Connections. Its principal strength lies in the range of perspectives and forms of evidence available, including children's and young people's comments, foster-carer accounts, practitioner reflections, social-worker feedback, structured start- and end-of-session responses, delivery records, creative outputs and evidence gathered across repeated participation.

Evidence was considered across sources rather than relying on any single measure or perspective. This enabled recurring patterns to be identified and compared across different forms of provision, while retaining differences between individual experiences. Where similar findings were evident through children's responses alongside foster-carer, practitioner or professional accounts, this strengthened confidence in the interpretation.

The evidence is strongest in relation to engagement, positive immediate emotional experience, choice and agency, and achievement and pride. These areas are supported by direct participant evidence and, in several cases, by additional observational or structured evidence. Relationships and communication are also supported by recurring qualitative evidence, particularly within sustained and family-based provision.

Repeated participation provided an additional source of evidence. In some cases, records captured changes in how children participated over time, including greater familiarity with creative activity, increased expression of preferences, initiation of ideas and anticipation of future sessions. These longitudinal observations add depth to evidence derived from individual sessions, although the amount and duration of provision differed between participants.

The structured start- and end-of-session responses used within the Local Authority provision provided repeated child-reported evidence of immediate emotional experience. Their strength lies in capturing participants' responses within individual sessions. They were not designed to assess longer-term wellbeing or psychological change and have therefore been interpreted within that specific scope.

The evaluation did not use a comparison group, and longer-term outcomes were not systematically measured. Children also received different forms and amounts of provision according to their circumstances. The findings therefore provide evidence of experiences and observed or reported changes within Creative Connections, but do not establish that participation alone caused those changes or that the same patterns occurred for every child.



These considerations do not diminish the value of the evidence; they define its scope. The combination of direct child responses, repeated observations and evidence from different perspectives provides a credible basis for understanding Creative Connections, while identifying areas where future evaluation could provide greater consistency and longer-term evidence.

8.1 Developing the Evidence Further

The evaluation identifies several opportunities to strengthen the evidence as Creative Connections develops.

Direct child voice should remain central. Spontaneous comments captured during creative activity provided valuable first-hand evidence and allowed children to communicate their experiences without requiring participation in a separate formal evaluation process. However, the amount of direct child feedback varied. A more consistent, accessible approach to gathering children's perspectives at different points in their participation would strengthen future analysis while retaining methods appropriate to the context.

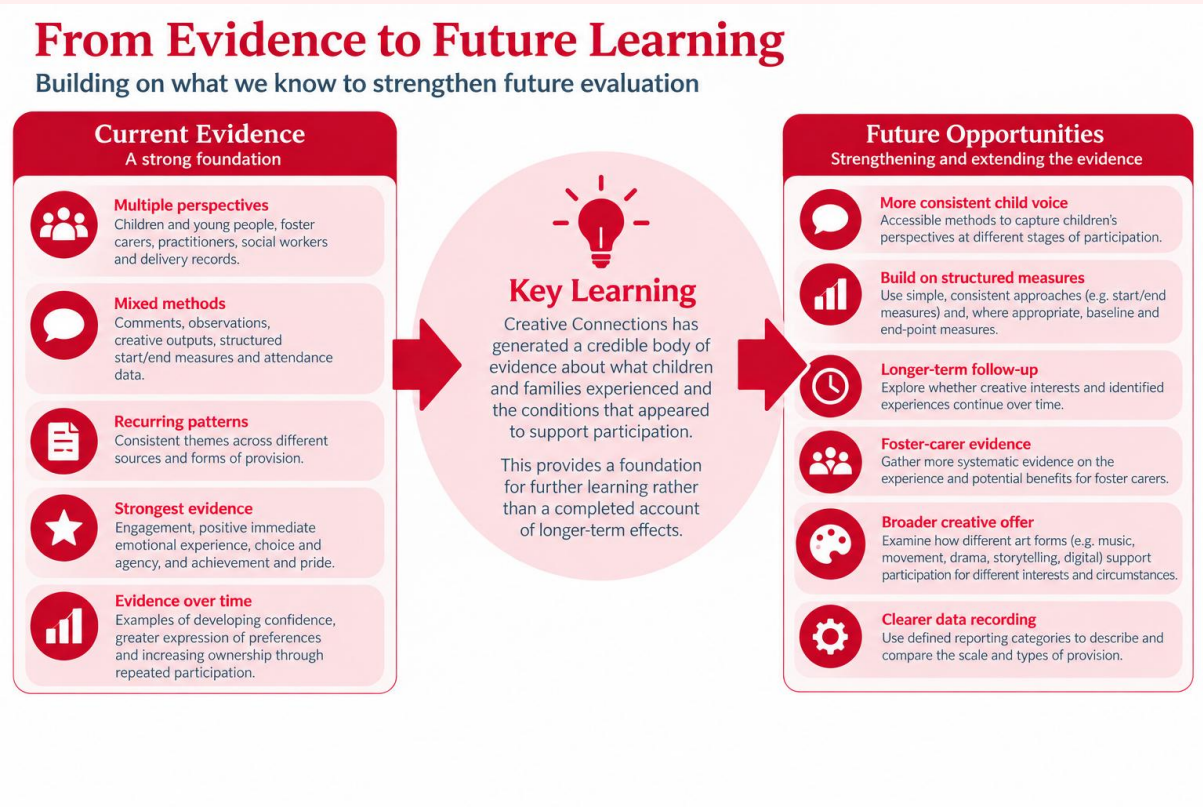
The visual start- and end-of-session measures used within the Local Authority provision provide one possible approach. Future evaluation could build on this through simple, consistent child-reported measures used at appropriate points across sustained provision. Where relevant and proportionate, baseline and end-point measures could also support examination of change over time.

Longer-term follow-up would address an important gap in the current evidence. Follow-up with children and foster carers could explore whether creative interests continued beyond participation, whether children remained involved in creative activity and whether experiences identified during the programme retained significance over time.

Foster-carer evidence could also be gathered more systematically. The current evaluation identified positive accounts relating to shared creative experiences, family interaction and carers' own engagement with creativity, but these were not consistently measured across the programme. A future evaluation could examine this dimension more deliberately without assuming that foster-carer outcomes will necessarily occur.

As the creative offer broadens, evaluation could also examine whether different creative forms provide different routes into participation for children with different interests and circumstances. This would be particularly relevant if future provision extends beyond the visual arts into areas such as music, movement, drama, storytelling, photography, film or digital creativity.

Greater consistency in delivery monitoring would also strengthen the quantitative evidence. Although **63 sessions** were recorded overall, some delivery categories overlap within the existing records. Establishing mutually defined reporting categories at the outset would enable future provision to be described and compared with greater precision.



8.2 Strengthening Future Evaluation

The priorities identified above provide a framework for strengthening future evaluation while retaining an approach that is proportionate, child-centred and appropriate to the nature of Creative Connections.

A future evaluation framework should retain the mixed-method approach while increasing consistency across participants and forms of provision. Combining clearly defined delivery data with accessible child-reported evidence, practitioner reflection, foster-carer and professional perspectives, creative evidence and appropriate follow-up would allow findings to be examined across different sources and over a longer period.

Greater consistency would also enable future evaluation to address questions arising from the current evidence. These include whether similar patterns are identified across a larger

group of children and families, how elements of the Creative Connections model interact in different forms of provision, whether different creative disciplines offer different routes into participation, and whether experiences identified during participation retain significance over time.

The current evaluation therefore provides a foundation for further learning rather than a completed account of longer-term outcomes. Future evaluation can build on this evidence by extending the timeframe and strengthening consistency in data collection, enabling a more detailed understanding of children’s and families’ experiences of Creative Connections, how these develop over time and the factors that may shape them.





9. Recommendations for Future Development and Investment

The evaluation provides a clear basis for the continued development of Creative Connections. The recommendations below are grounded in the findings and focus on strengthening the programme while retaining the features that were important to children's and families' experiences: time, relationships, accessibility, meaningful choice, flexibility and opportunities for creative achievement.

Future development should build on these foundations rather than move towards a standardised model of provision. Investment should support sustained and accessible creative opportunities, a broader range of art forms, appropriate professional support, continued involvement of foster carers and families, opportunities for progression and recognition, and evaluation embedded within delivery.

9.1 Continue the Programme Over a Sufficient Period

Future investment should enable Creative Connections to provide sustained opportunities for participation rather than relying predominantly on short-term or isolated activity.

The evaluation identified examples of engagement developing over time. For some children, repeated participation provided continuity and opportunities to become familiar with creative activity, express preferences, introduce ideas and participate with increasing confidence.

Future provision should therefore allow sufficient time for relationships and engagement to develop while retaining flexibility around the duration and intensity of support appropriate to individual children and families.

9.2 Retain Different Routes into Participation

Creative Connections should retain a flexible combination of individual, family and group provision. The evaluation does not indicate that one format or setting will be appropriate for every child or family.

Home-based delivery reduced practical barriers for some families and provided a familiar setting, while the Arts Space offered a dedicated environment with greater access to materials, techniques and physical space. Group and family provision created different opportunities for shared participation.

Future delivery should therefore consider accessibility in relation to both format and environment, enabling children and families to access creative provision in ways appropriate to their circumstances.



9.3 Broaden the Creative Offer While Retaining Children's Choice

Future development should broaden the range of creative opportunities available through Creative Connections while retaining responsiveness to children's interests and choices.

Visual arts and making formed a substantial part of the current programme. Future provision could extend opportunities across music, singing and songwriting, dance and movement, drama, storytelling, photography, film, animation and digital creativity alongside existing visual arts activity.

The purpose of broadening the offer is not simply to provide more activities. Different creative forms may provide different routes into participation according to children's interests, strengths and preferred ways of expressing themselves.

Children should continue to have meaningful opportunities to influence their creative experiences, including what they explore, the materials or art forms they use and, where appropriate, the direction of subsequent activity.

9.4 Establish a Creative Connections Practitioner Framework

Future development should establish a clear practitioner framework to support consistency across an expanding range of creative provision.

The framework should recognise that effective delivery requires artistic expertise alongside the skills and knowledge needed to work appropriately with children and families in foster care. Core areas should include safeguarding; trauma and attachment awareness; relational and inclusive practice; child development and communication; meaningful choice and agency; professional boundaries; and appropriate responses when children require changes in pace, activity or expectation.

The framework should maintain a clear distinction between trauma-aware creative practice and therapy. Creative Connections is a creative programme, and practitioners should not be expected to undertake therapeutic roles outside their professional competence.

Training should be supported by reflective practice, mentoring and appropriate links with Action for Children/Foster Care Wales professionals. As the creative offer broadens, practitioners from different disciplines should work within these shared principles while retaining the distinctive qualities of their own creative practice.

Practitioner preparation and professional support should therefore be recognised within the core resources required for future delivery.



9.5 Develop the Family and Foster-Carer Dimension

Future provision should retain opportunities for children and foster carers to participate creatively together while developing the family dimension of Creative Connections more deliberately.

The evaluation identified positive experiences associated with shared creative activity, including opportunities for children and carers to create alongside one another, share positive experiences and interact around a focus that was not centred on difficulties or concerns. Some carers also expressed interest in creative opportunities for themselves.

The evidence relating specifically to foster-carer wellbeing remains less developed. Future provision could therefore explore both shared child-and-carer activity and appropriately designed opportunities for foster carers, while evaluating these experiences more systematically.

This would allow the family dimension to develop in response to the evidence without assuming outcomes that have not yet been established.

9.6 Build Progression and Recognition into the Programme

Future provision should retain opportunities for children's creativity to be recognised and celebrated while ensuring that decisions about sharing work remain voluntary and appropriate to each child.

The exhibition demonstrated one approach to recognition, bringing together 120 artworks from across Creative Connections. As the creative offer broadens, recognition could take different forms, including exhibitions, performances, recordings, screenings, publications or smaller informal opportunities to share work.

Recognition should not depend on conventional measures of artistic quality. Children should have opportunities to recognise what they have achieved, decide whether they wish to share their work and have their creative contribution taken seriously.

Progression should also extend beyond celebration. Where children develop a sustained interest in a particular creative form, partnerships with arts and cultural organisations could provide opportunities to continue that interest beyond Creative Connections.

The programme could therefore provide a route into wider creative and cultural opportunities where children choose to pursue them.



9.7 Embed Evaluation Within Future Development

Evaluation should continue to be resourced as an integral part of Creative Connections and incorporated from the beginning of future delivery.

The next phase should retain the strengths of the current mixed-method approach while improving consistency in data collection. This should include clearly defined delivery categories, accessible approaches to child voice, systematic practitioner reflection, foster-carer and professional feedback, appropriate measures across sustained participation and longer-term follow-up where feasible.

Children's perspectives should remain central. Evaluation methods should be sufficiently consistent to enable patterns to be examined across the programme while remaining proportionate and accessible to children and families.

Future evaluation should build progressively on the evidence already established, enabling a clearer understanding of children's and families' experiences, how these develop over time and the factors that may shape them.

Overall Direction

These recommendations provide a focused direction for the future development of Creative Connections. The priority is not simply to increase the amount of activity delivered, but to strengthen the programme while retaining the qualities identified through the evaluation.

Future development should provide sufficient time for engagement and relationships to develop; retain different routes into participation; broaden creative opportunities while preserving children's choice; establish a clear practitioner framework; develop the family and foster-carer dimension; create opportunities for recognition and progression; and embed evaluation from the outset.

This approach would enable Creative Connections to develop from the evidence already generated while maintaining a clear focus on accessible, responsive and meaningful creative experiences for children and young people in foster care.



10. Conclusion

Creative Connections provided children and young people living in foster care with opportunities to participate in creative activity through individual, family and group provision. The evaluation identified recurring evidence of engagement, positive immediate emotional experience, relationships and communication, choice and agency, and creative achievement and pride.

A central finding is that these experiences cannot be understood through creative activity alone. The evidence indicates that time, relationships, accessibility, children's interests and choices, flexibility, appropriate facilitation and opportunities for recognition all contributed to the context in which participation developed. Creative Connections was therefore not simply a programme of arts activities, but a flexible and relationship-based approach in which children could engage with creativity in ways responsive to their interests and circumstances.

The evaluation also demonstrates the importance of recognising different forms of participation. Children did not engage in the same ways or follow a common pathway. For some, participation developed gradually; for others, it was expressed through sustained making, conversation, shared activity, experimentation or decisions about what they wanted to create. Across these different experiences, children were given opportunities to influence their participation and have their creative contributions recognised.

The evidence provides a clear foundation for the continued development of Creative Connections. Future provision should retain the qualities identified through the evaluation while broadening creative opportunities, strengthening support for delivery, developing the involvement of foster carers and families, creating further opportunities for progression and recognition, and building longer-term evidence.

Creative Connections demonstrates the value of providing children and young people in foster care with accessible, responsive and meaningful opportunities to create. Its continued development offers an opportunity to build on the experiences identified through this evaluation while deepening understanding of how creative participation can contribute to children's and families' lives over time.



Creative Connections

Evaluation Report

Author: Dr Bethan Ryland





Creative Connections

Evaluation Report

Author: Dr Bethan Ryland





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Appendix 1 – Evaluation Evidence Base

The evaluation drew on evidence collected across the different strands of Creative Connections. The table below provides a summary of the material reviewed as part of the evaluation.

Evidence source	Material reviewed
Project records	Delivery, participation and session data
Practitioner reflections	Session reflections from 1:1, family and group provision
Children and young people	Comments and feedback captured during project activity
Local Authority family programme	Workshop reflections, participant feedback and start/end measures
Local Authority teen programme	Four-day evaluation records, participant comments and start/end measures
Foster carers	Feedback relating to children’s participation and family experiences
Social workers/professionals	Feedback and observations relating to delivery, participation and the exhibition
Creative evidence	Artwork and other creative outputs produced through the programme
Exhibition records	Exhibition information, including attendance and artworks displayed

Evidence was anonymised where appropriate and considered in accordance with the evaluation approach described in Section 4. Selected examples of the original evidence are included in Appendix 3.



Appendix 2 – Evaluation Matrix

The evaluation matrix below summarises how evidence from across Creative Connections was brought together to examine the principal areas of experience and change identified through the evaluation. Findings were informed by multiple sources wherever possible, including children and young people’s feedback, foster-carer accounts, practitioner reflections, social-worker feedback, Local Authority session measures, delivery records and creative outputs. The matrix also identifies the boundaries of the available evidence to ensure that conclusions remain proportionate to what was observed and reported.

Evaluation area	What was explored	Evidence sources	Key indicators within the evidence	Interpretation / evidence boundary
Confidence and engagement	How children engaged with creative activity and whether participation developed over time	Practitioner reflections; foster-carer feedback; children’s comments; LA reflections; creative outputs	Increased participation; looking forward to sessions; initiating ideas; making decisions more readily; sustained or returning engagement	Strong qualitative evidence of developing engagement for some children. Changes should not be interpreted as evidence of generalised or long-term increases in confidence without follow-up.
Relationships and connection	The role of relationships in enabling participation and opportunities for positive shared experiences	Foster-carer feedback; practitioner reflections; social-worker feedback; LA family reflections	Familiarity and trust; shared making; children and carers talking and making decisions together; positive interaction; collaborative activity	Relationships appeared both to support engagement and, in some cases, to develop through shared creative activity. Evidence is strongest within 1:1 and family provision.
Communication	Whether creative activity provided opportunities for children to communicate ideas, preferences and experiences	Practitioner reflections; children’s comments; foster-carer feedback; social-worker observations	Talking while making; explaining creative choices; requesting help/materials; sharing interests; conversation developing around artwork	Evidence indicates that creative activity could provide a low-pressure focus for communication. It does not establish changes in communication ability outside the creative setting.



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Author: Dr Bethan Ryland

Immediate emotional experience	How children described or appeared to experience sessions emotionally	Child feedback; LA start/end measures; foster-carer accounts; practitioner observations	Enjoyment; relaxation; absorption; reports of feeling happier or calmer; positive end-of-session responses	Converging evidence supports positive immediate emotional experiences during or following many sessions. Measures were not designed to demonstrate clinical change, sustained emotional regulation or longer-term wellbeing outcomes.
Choice and agency	The extent to which children could influence their participation and creative activity	Practitioner reflections; LA reflections; children's comments; creative outputs	Choosing materials, colours and activities; introducing personal interests; suggesting future activities; deciding how and when to participate	Choice was a recurring feature of delivery and appeared to support engagement and ownership. No formal measure of agency was used.
Achievement, recognition and pride	How children responded to creating, completing and sharing their work	Children's comments; practitioner reflections; foster-carer feedback; exhibition evidence; creative outputs	Pride in completed work; wanting to show others; displaying work at home/school; making gifts; signing work; exhibition participation	Strong direct and observable evidence of achievement and pride within the creative context. This should not automatically be equated with longer-term changes in self-esteem.
Foster-carer and family experience	How shared creative participation was experienced by carers and families	Foster-carer feedback; practitioner reflections; social-worker feedback; LA family provision	Shared enjoyment; making together; positive interaction; carers engaging creatively; opportunities for connection and relaxation	Meaningful but emerging evidence. The evaluation does not establish a foster-carer wellbeing outcome; this is an area for further development and investigation.
Flexibility and accessibility	How format, setting and practitioner responsiveness influenced participation	Practitioner reflections; delivery records; foster-carer feedback; LA reflections	Home-based access; Arts Space provision; movement and breaks; changing activities; adapting expectations; different routes through 1:1, family and group provision	Flexibility appears to have been an important mechanism supporting participation rather than simply an operational feature of the programme.



Practitioner capability	What practitioner knowledge, skills and approaches appeared important to effective delivery	Practitioner reflections; foster-carer feedback; professional feedback; project learning	Relationship-building; responsiveness; safeguarding; professional boundaries; trauma and attachment awareness; meaningful choice; reflective practice	Evidence indicates that effective delivery required more than artistic expertise. The evaluation supports development of a clearer practitioner framework but does not assess individual practitioner performance.
Progression and recognition	Whether the programme created opportunities for creative work to be recognised beyond individual sessions	Exhibition records; creative outputs; practitioner reflections; child and carer feedback	120 artworks exhibited; 44 exhibition attendees; children sharing work with carers/teachers; interest in continuing particular activities	Recognition was a visible element of the pilot. Longer-term progression into sustained cultural or creative participation was not measured and remains an area for future evaluation.

Overall approach to interpretation

Evidence was considered strongest where similar patterns were identified across more than one source or perspective. Triangulation was therefore used to compare children and young people's accounts with foster-carer feedback, practitioner observations, professional perspectives, structured measures and creative evidence.

Variation was retained within the analysis rather than treating all participants as having the same experience. Individual examples and case studies were used to understand how Creative Connections was experienced, in particular circumstances but were not assumed to represent all children and families.

The evaluation therefore distinguishes between directly evidenced findings, emerging findings and areas requiring longer-term investigation. This approach was intended to recognise the positive evidence generated through the pilot while maintaining appropriate boundaries around what can be concluded from a practice-based evaluation.



Appendix 3 – Selected Anonymised Evaluation Evidence

This appendix presents a small selection of anonymised original material drawn from the Creative Connections evaluation evidence. The examples are included to provide transparency and illustrate the types of records that informed the evaluation findings. They represent only a sample of the wider evidence reviewed.

Identifying information has been removed where appropriate. Full project and evaluation records are retained separately and are not reproduced within this report.

A3.1 Practitioner Session Reflection:

Action for Children/ Foster Care Wales Arts Project Artists Reflection Framework NOTE: Please anonymise YP throughout reflections, assigning numbers / letters for tracking / development as appropriate.	
Date: 21/07/2026 At home, Llanharry	Venue:
Number of participants: 1 (L)	
Artist / facilitators present: (names) [REDACTED]	
Brief description of session content/ purpose / inspiration: (Please include group or 1:1 and therapeutic imperatives where appropriate) This was a catch-up session with L following his return to school since I last saw him end of April. L was aware we were having an exhibition at the Riverfront Theatre and Art Gallery in August. He was keen to make some artwork to be displayed. We used the theme Tropical Rainforest following the theme from other workshops. I took several different ideas and visual inspiration from animals, bugs, flora and fauna etc. I also had a mix of art materials for L to choose from.	
Observations of participant engagement & motivation: L really liked the theme and the visual inspiration I showed him. He decided upon a chameleon. Once he decided he was straight into drawing and designing his idea. He spent time creating his design and decided upon making it on a canvas using acrylic pens.	



Observations of connections & relationships between participants, if relevant:
N/A
Impact / changes observed (wellbeing/ communication/ developmental as relevant):
L took his time to come up with an idea, talking it through with me and trying out ideas. He enjoyed the entire process and the time to make it. He was excited to sign his work for the exhibition.
Challenges experienced:
None.
Learning points for future sessions:
Having a solid theme, visual inspiration and a choice of materials worked well for L.
Any other observations/ notes / thoughts:
None.

A3.2 Local Authority Family Session Reflection

The following anonymised practitioner reflection is included as an example of the original evidence reviewed as part of the evaluation. It relates to the Local Authority family provision and illustrates how engagement, participant responses and practitioner learning were recorded during delivery. Identifying and contact information has been redacted where appropriate.

Action for Children, Fostering Wales

Creative Connections Session Reflection Summary (Adults Only)




To be completed by facilitators/artists, support workers, or carers after each session

Date: 6.8.26
Facilitator(s)/Artist(s): [REDACTED]
Number of Carers Attending: 3
Number of Young People Attending: 5

1. Session Overview

Briefly describe the activities delivered during the session.

Art, crafts, games, painting & music

2. Engagement and Participation

How would you rate the overall engagement of the young people during the session?

☐ Very High
☐ High
☐ Moderate
☒ Low

Additional Comments:

Too much choice and distraction.

3. Observed Wellbeing Outcomes

Based on your observations, did participants demonstrate any of the following during the session?

Outcome	Not Observed	Some Evidence	Strong Evidence
Feeling calm and regulated	☐	☒	☐
Feeling connected to others	☐	☒	☐
Increased self-expression	☐	☐	☒
Increased confidence	☐	☒	☐
Needed Support	☒	☐	☐
Curiosity and engagement	☐	☒	☐
Positive emotional expression	☐	☒	☐



4. Notable Observations

Were there any significant moments, changes, or achievements observed?

[redacted] engaged initially well but was easily distracted by too much choice.

5. Reflection

What appeared to work particularly well?

Group work.

What could be developed or adapted in future sessions?

Less distraction. Clear boundaries.

6. Since the Session Reflection for Carers, Support Workers

Has the young person talked about or shared anything from the arts session?

- Yes / No If yes, please briefly say

Yes, talked about enjoying it & going next week.

Has the young person used any creative tools, techniques or activities explored from the session, outside of the sessions?

- Yes / No If yes, please describe:

No

Has the young person shown new or increased interest in creative activity since attending the session?

- Yes / No If yes, please describe:

No

Has the young person displayed or expressed any positive behavioural changes since the session (mood, wellbeing, emotional expression, confidence, communication or others)?

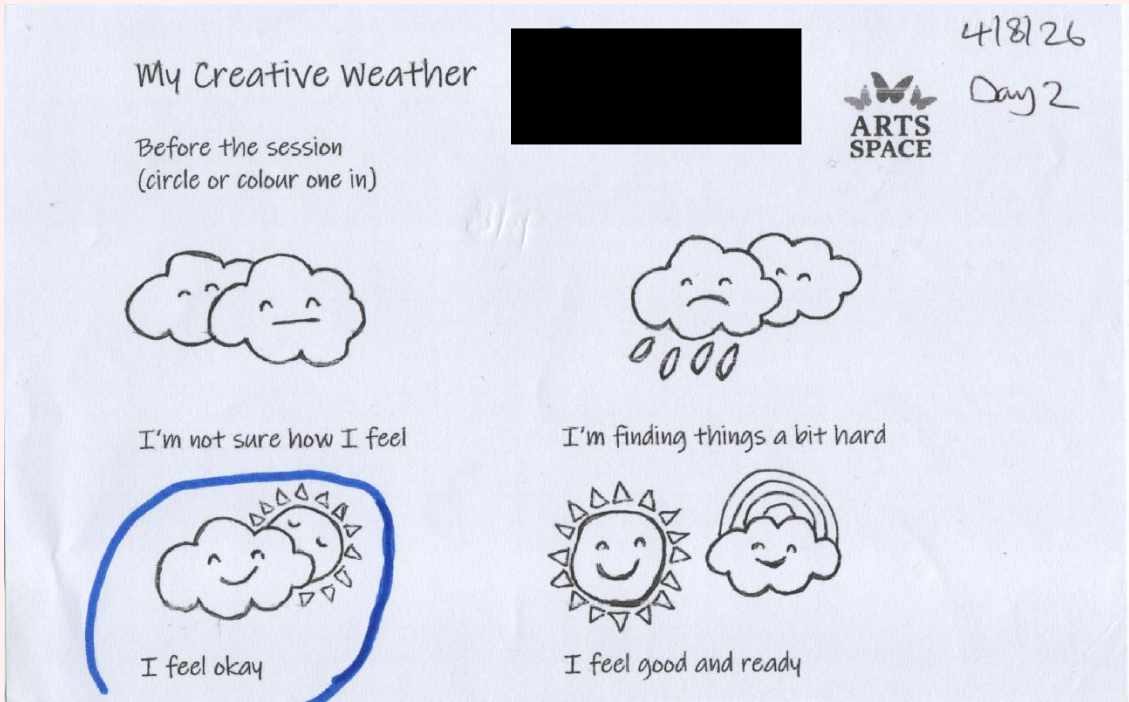
- Yes / No If yes, please describe:

No

Source: Creative Connections project evaluation records, 2026.

A3.3 Example of Young Person Before-and-After Session Evaluation

This original evaluation sheet shows an example of the Creative Weather measure used with young people during the Local Authority teen programme. Participants recorded how they felt at the beginning and end of the session, alongside brief feedback about their creative experience.



Before the session

My Creative Weather

After the session
(circle or colour one in)

418126
Day 2
ARTS SPACE

I'm still unsure

I found something tricky

I feel better than before

I feel great

You can draw or write here.

One thing I enjoyed today:

Finishing my dragonfly Painting

One thing I'd like to try next time:

Clay ☺

Thank you.



After the session

This example illustrates the start/end approach used during the Local Authority teen programme to capture young people's immediate experience of creative participation. The measures were designed to record responses within individual sessions and should not be interpreted as evidence of longer-term wellbeing change.



A3.4 Foster-Carer Feedback

The following anonymised feedback was provided by a foster carer following their family's involvement in Creative Connections. The original feedback was supplied by email and provides a first-hand account of accessibility, engagement, creative achievement and the family's experience of the programme. Identifying and contact information has been removed.

Anonymised Foster-Carer Feedback

Original feedback supplied by email • 2026

[Creative Practitioner] has been working with our family since March 26. We found it particularly useful that we had 1:1 sessions at our home as I don't drive and live some distance from the AFC offices in Newport. This meant we were able to access the sessions. When we started the sessions our YP was going through a difficult time and we didn't know if he would engage or enjoy the sessions. [Creative Practitioner] was patient and got to know K by making the sessions fun. Some sessions were harder than others, depending on what had happened at school or home before the sessions. But [Creative Practitioner] made an effort to get to know K and she tapped into his interests, especially an interest in Space and they soon built a rapport and K would tell us he looked forward to the sessions and ask when [Creative Practitioner] was coming next.

I noticed that K's engagement and concentration and listening skills improved as the sessions were designed around K's interests and he found this fun. It also gave his self confidence and esteem a boost. K is naturally artistic and creative, but can sometimes struggle academically. The art sessions allowed him to demonstrate his abilities in this area and use his imagination to create things in a positive way. K couldn't wait to show my partner when he came home from work what he had created in the sessions with [Creative Practitioner] and was very proud to show off his creations.



Anonymised Foster-Carer Feedback (continued)

I think as a foster family we have really benefitted from the art sessions. When things have been hard it has given us a medium to connect with each other in a fun way to forget about the difficulties for a few hours and during hard times allowed me to see K in a more positive way. At other occasions it has also given me some space to re group my thoughts when I needed a break, as where K and [Creative Practitioner] would do a session when I felt unable to participate. I found that usually time spent creating the art improved K's mood, so we would usually have a good evening. The sessions have been invaluable to us all and I feel that it has been really beneficial to our family's wellbeing. I really hope that these sessions can continue as people don't realise fostering is stressful at times and a few hours of joy and fun are really important and help recharge us and reconnect to carry on and allow children to be proud of themselves and their creations and forget their worries for a while.

The evidence reproduced in this appendix represents a small selection of the material reviewed as part of the evaluation. The findings presented throughout this report draw on the wider evidence base described in Appendix 1, including participant feedback, foster-carer and professional perspectives, practitioner reflections, project records and creative evidence.



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Evaluation Report 2025–2026

Written by Dr Bethan Ryland
Independent Evaluation