

# Creative pathways to wellbeing

A synthesis of project case studies

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By Dr Helen MacIntyre and Ingrid Abreu Scherer

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Photo credit: Critical Mass



## The What Works Centre for Wellbeing

We are an independent collaborating centre and the aim of our work is to improve wellbeing and reduce misery in the UK. We believe that this is the ultimate goal of effective policy and community action.

## The Campaign to End Loneliness

The Campaign to End Loneliness believes that people of all ages need connections that matter. We work to support development of evidence on loneliness; convene and support all those working in this area; and make the case for action.

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We are grateful for the help and support of Margherita Musella from Counterpart Research, who advised on methods and contributed to the coding, quality assessment, synthesis, and analysis of quantitative data.

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## 1. Executive summary

We looked at a set of ten creative projects funded by Spirit of 2012 between 2015 and 2023, in England, Scotland and Wales. The activities included making music, creative writing, dance, film-making, singing, art-making and crafts. The projects targeted people who were at risk of low wellbeing and loneliness, and set out to deliver improvements in wellbeing and other outcomes.

The projects we looked at were:

1. **Bay Create** (Whitley Bay Big Local, 2021-23)
2. **Creative Minds** (Youth Cymru, 2018-20)
3. **Critical Mass** (Birmingham 2022 Organising Committee, 2021-22)
4. **MyMusic Northamptonshire** (Northamptonshire Carers, 2019-21)
5. **My Pockets Music** (My Pockets People CIC, 2018-22)
6. **Our Day Out** (Creative Arts East, 2016-22)
7. **Seafarers** (Stopgap Dance Company, 2016-19)
8. **Sound Out!** (Jack Drum Arts, 2019-21)
9. **Tàlaidhean Ura** (Fèis Rois, 2019-21)
10. **Viewfinder** (Beacon Films, 2015-21)

The projects all aimed to improve wellbeing, alongside other ambitions such as reducing loneliness and isolation, improving confidence, and increasing participation in arts, especially for excluded groups. We wanted to know which contexts and mechanisms were associated with these outcomes in these creative projects, so we could identify the pathways which could lead to wellbeing.

Using evidence from project evaluation and monitoring reports, we built a rich picture of carefully designed interventions which used inclusive approaches to give creative opportunities to people to support their wellbeing. It became clear when we looked across the body of case studies that there were eight distinct pathways to wellbeing in play.

## Wellbeing and other outcomes

All the projects reported improvement in wellbeing and other outcomes using qualitative approaches.

The outcomes that were most commonly reported include:

- **improved positive mood and emotions**, including joy and happiness, and peace of mind
- **increased confidence and self-esteem**, especially through a growing sense of personal achievement and new or improved skills. Some participants reported a decrease in confidence when the activities became more technically challenging
- **personal development and growth**, including improved aspirations for the future
- **increased social connection and friendship, and reduced loneliness**

Although the quantitative measurement of wellbeing wasn't the focus of this case study synthesis, ONS4 data from a selection of projects can strengthen the insights from the qualitative evidence. We analysed four of the case studies' quantitative data and found improvements in all four measures, with a slightly greater change in Anxiety and Life Worthwhile measures.

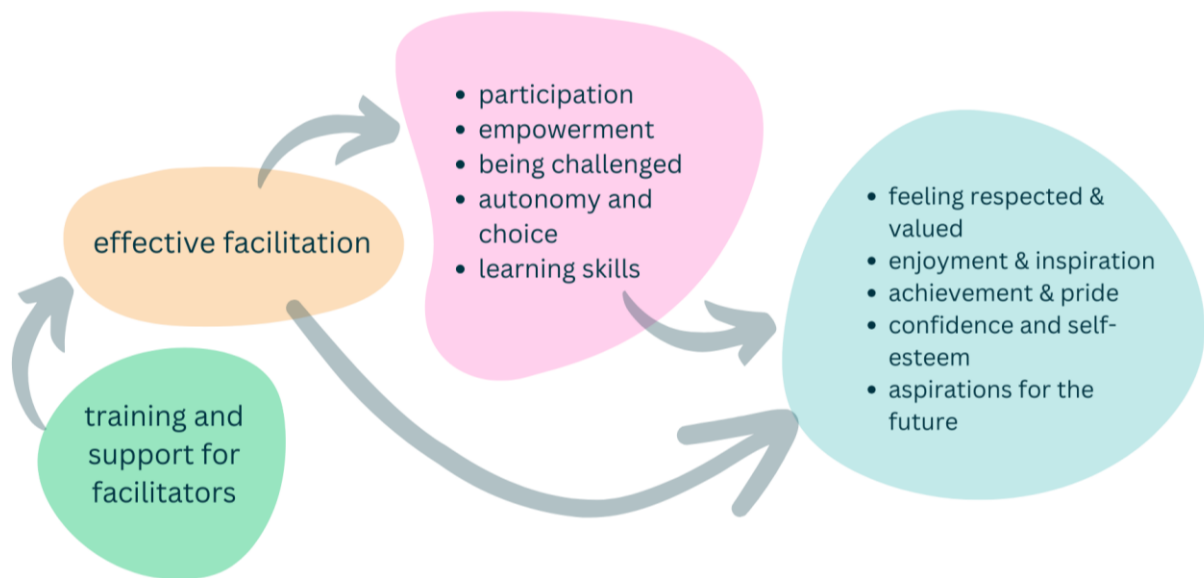
Many projects reported challenges in using the ONS4 and other quantitative measures in their learning. Several of them chose measures they considered more suitable for participants, or developed their own.

## Creative pathways to wellbeing

The contexts and mechanisms that enabled these creative projects to achieve wellbeing can be understood as 'creative pathways'. We found eight distinct pathways that cut across the case study evidence:

## 1. Skilled and supportive facilitation

Effective facilitation, mostly by artists, unlocked a range of other mechanisms that led to a number of important personal outcomes:

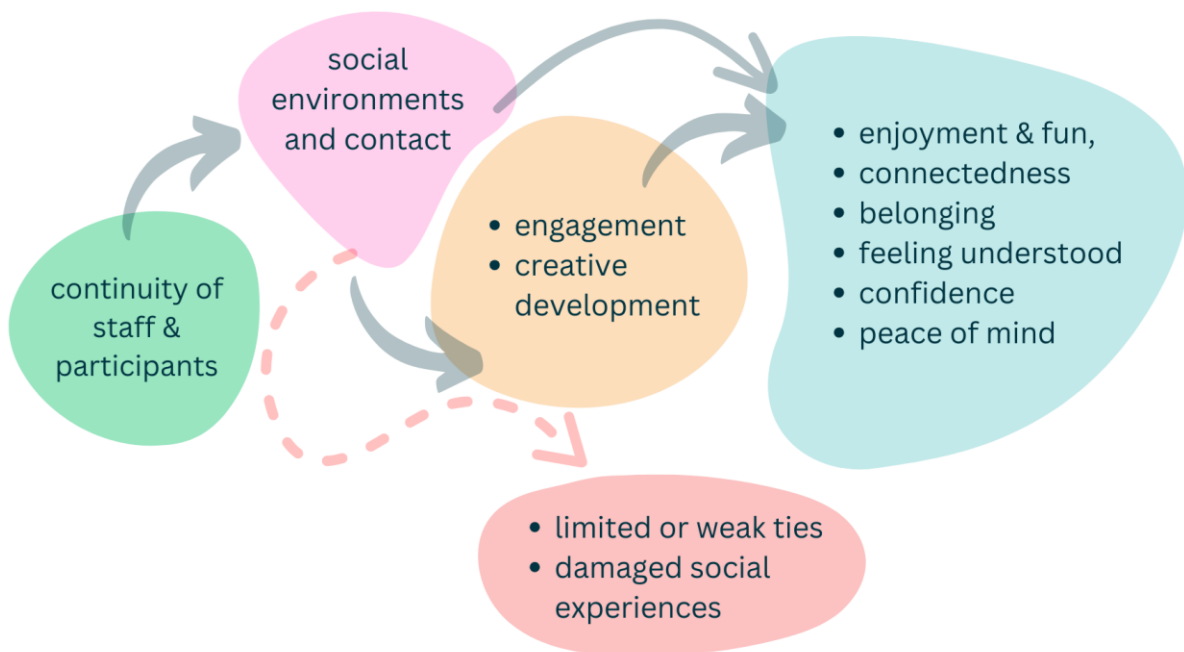


Elements associated with facilitation:

- It was **inclusive** (by respecting, encouraging and celebrating participants), and **responsive** (by providing structure but being flexible).
- It involved **respecting** participants, celebrating their work, and providing **flexibility and support** within appropriate structures
- **Over-focus** on participant problems during sessions may exacerbate them
- **Professional artist skills** enhanced experience of and outcomes from projects
- Training and support for delivery staff is important to ensure inclusive facilitation

## 2. Social environment and contact

Socially supportive environments and contact led to more engaged and creative people, and led to a number of outcomes. However, the type of social contact didn't always work for all participants.



Key elements of social environment and contact:

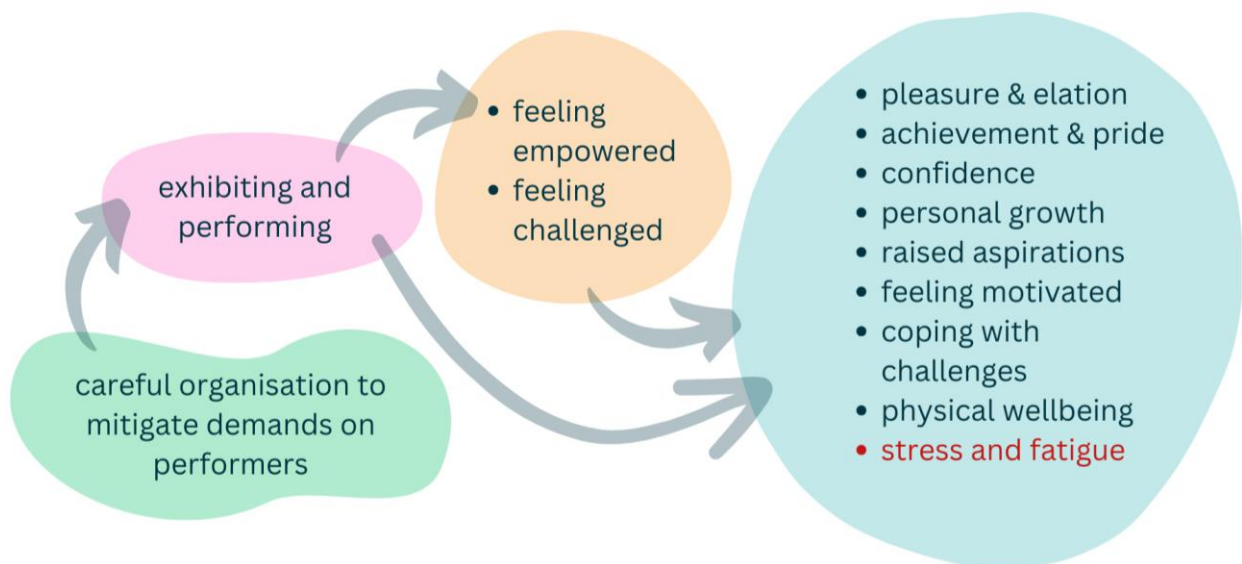
- Creating **welcoming and accepting spaces** which were empathetic and understanding facilitated social connection
- In turn, a **socially supportive environment** and social connection could motivate continued engagement and support creative development
- Spending time with **others 'like me'** led to feelings of being understood and being safe to share feelings and experiences
- **Continuity of people** and spending **enjoyable, fun time with others** fostered social connection and other personal outcomes.
- Creative practice supports **communication and connection**
- Social connections among participants may also be **limited to weak ties**



- Unsupportive social experience at projects may **harm sense of connectedness**

### 3. Exhibiting and performing

Exhibiting art or preparing and taking part in performances provides a pathway that is unique to creative activities. It led to participants feeling empowered and challenged, leading to a range of outcomes. Stress involved in preparing to perform may be mitigated by good organisation and communication.



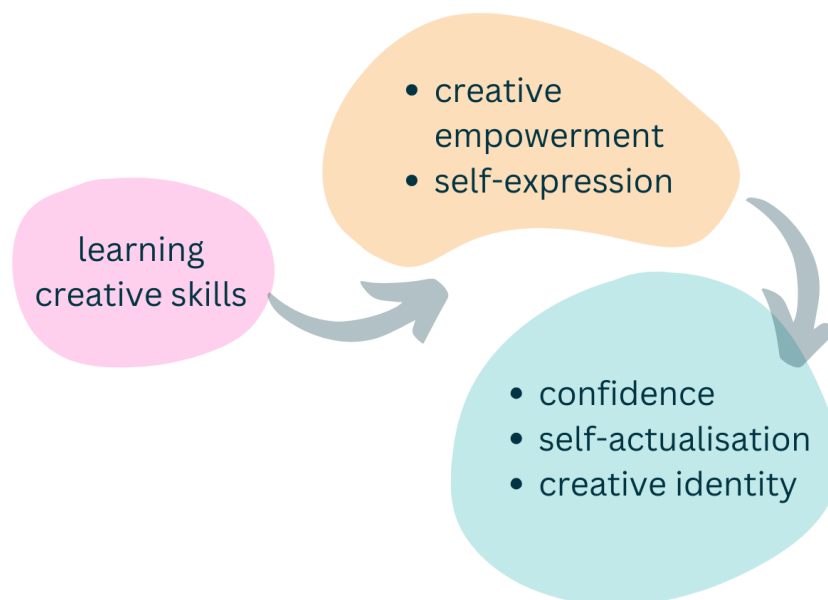
Key elements of pathways involving performances and exhibitions:

- Performance or sharing of creative outputs can be **challenging**, an opportunity for **achievement and for celebration** of that achievement.
- Performing can place demands on participants, risking that they may **opt out**, be put under physical and emotional **stress** or not cope on the day.
- Taking part in professional standard performances can lead to **elation** and **pleasure, pride** and sense of achievement; learning to **cope** with challenging situations and emotions; and raised **aspirations**.

- **Good organisation and communication** around events can mitigate stresses placed on performers.

#### 4. Learning creative skills

Learning creative skills increased supported creativity. As such, it allowed participants to express themselves, to fulfil their creative potential, and to develop or rekindle their creative identity.

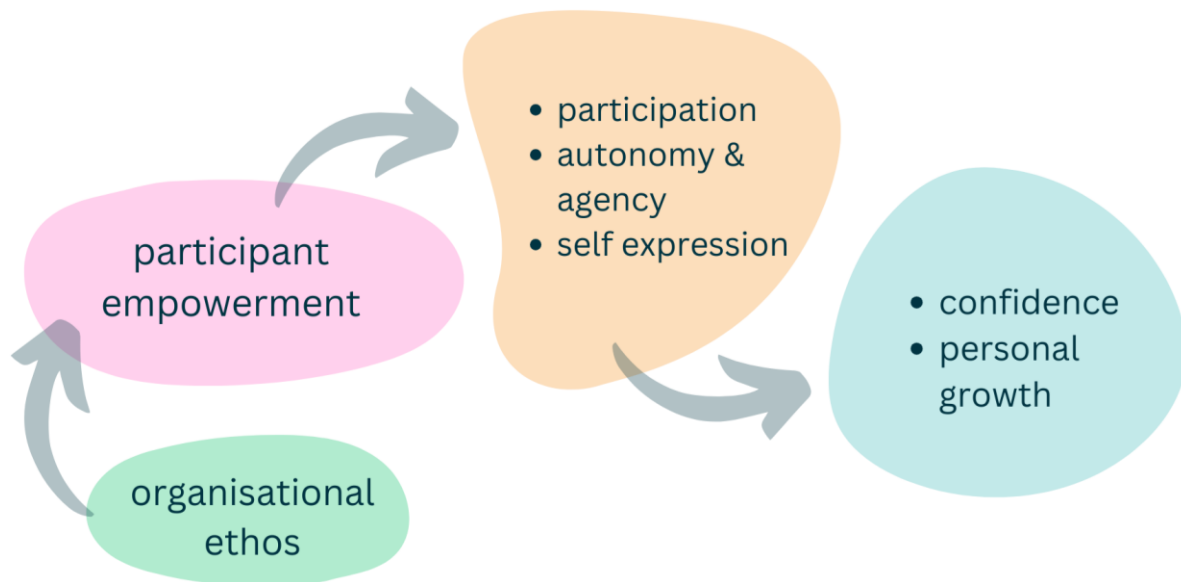


Key impacts of learning creative skills pathways:

- Learning creative skills led to increased **confidence** which, in turn, encouraged **creative use** of those skills.
- Learning creative skills enabled **self-expression** and underpinned creative self-actualisation

## 5. Participant empowerment

Projects empowered participants to exercise independence and leadership, shape their creative activity and to express themselves.

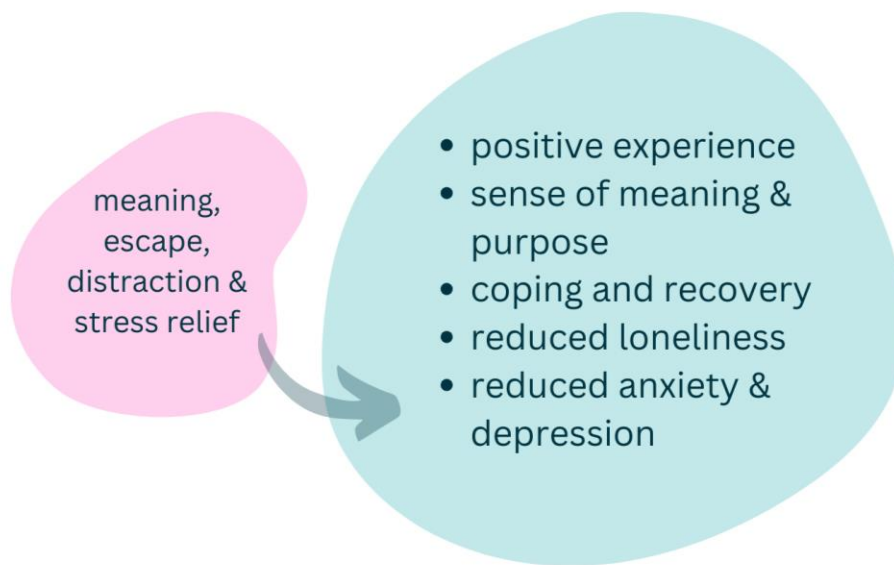


Key elements of empowerment:

- Individuals were empowered to participate in and **influence** creative activity and process and also to express themselves
- Individuals were empowered to take on **leadership** roles, gaining experience and understanding which increased their confidence.

## 6. Meaning, escape, distraction and stress relief

Meaningful activity provided restorative time away from responsibilities, and distraction and relief from worries leading to a number of outcomes.

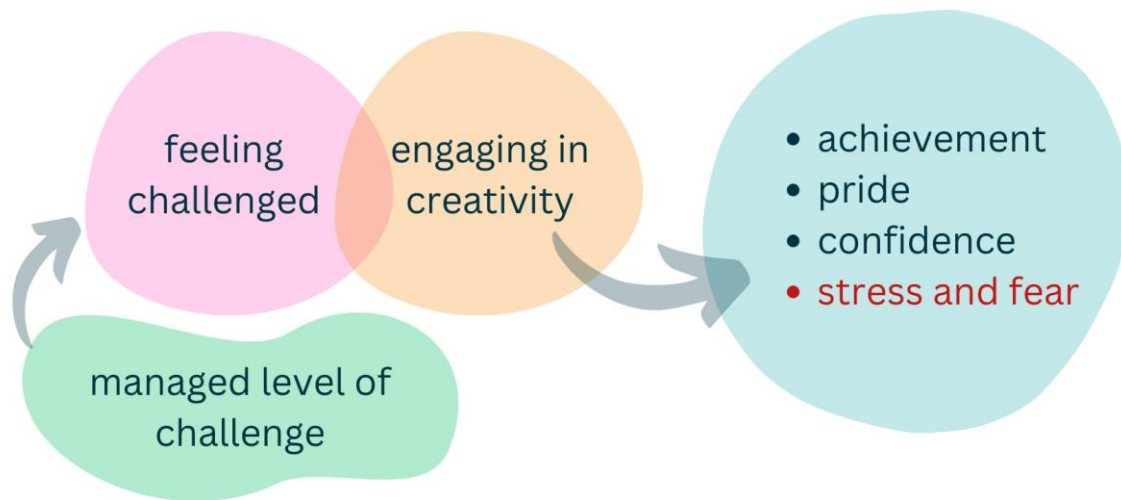


Key elements involved in this pathway:

- Participation in creative projects provided a positive, meaningful dimension to life which was an **antidote to boredom or to social isolation and loneliness**.
- Involvement provided carers with stimulating, **restorative** time away from caring responsibilities which could make it easier to **cope**.
- For some participants under stress or with mental health problems, creative engagement was **calming or immersing** and acted as a **distraction** from worries or provided relief through self-expression.

## 7. Feeling challenged

Feeling challenged at an appropriate level encouraged engagement in activity and meeting a challenge provided a sense of achievement and increased confidence. Feeling challenged could be accompanied by stress and fear.

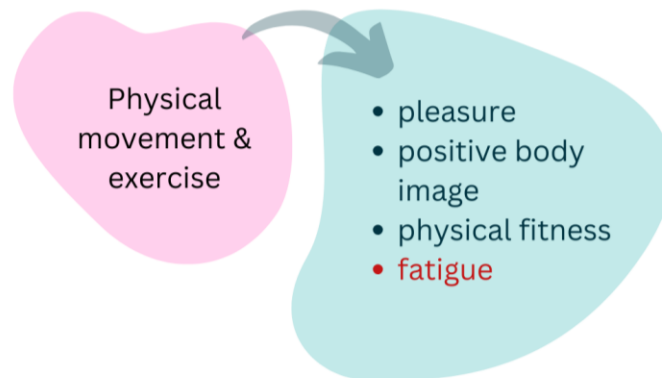


Key elements of this pathway:

- Meeting a challenge posed by creative activity - including to **overcome fear** - could lead to a sense of **achievement and pride** and to a **growth in confidence**.
- Challenge needed to be at the **right level**: not too much but participants may be underchallenged or avoid challenge altogether
- Facilitators had to **balance comfort/nurturing and challenge**

## 8. Physical movement and exercise

Physical movement was a feature of dance and music and movement activities, and was related to physical and mental outcomes.



- Physical activity within dance/movement projects was **fun**, increased **fitness** and could mitigate **body image** concerns
- It could also cause **fatigue**

## Different pathways for different people

The projects mostly targeted people whose personal circumstances put them at risk of low wellbeing and chronic loneliness, including **carers, disabled people**, people with **mental or physical health conditions**, as well as potentially **excluded groups**, such as those with housing insecurity or from economically disadvantaged areas.

Participants often had similar **barriers to participating** in creative activities (for example, physical isolation), though the reasons differed according to the context (lack of suitable transport, or caring responsibilities).

The project evidence suggests that some of the personal pathways to wellbeing may be particularly relevant to specific groups.

For example,

- **Meaning, escape, distraction and stress-relief** were discussed in relation to those with **caring responsibilities** and those with **mental health difficulties**.
- High levels of **physical challenge** leading to **pride, increased confidence and aspirations** in the context of dance projects were discussed in relation to **physically or learning disabled participants**.

## Conclusions

Personal wellbeing has provided common ground across Spirit's funding strands, and this consistency has allowed for cross-cutting analysis of Spirit's impact on wellbeing across different projects over time, especially using this common quantitative measure. But the evidence for 'how' and 'why' different projects achieved wellbeing outcomes is often hidden and isolated in the different project reports.

The synthesis approach allowed us to identify these multiple pathways to wellbeing and demonstrate the complex way in which the ten projects created benefit. We began to draw out how certain pathways are more relevant for specific populations (in particular carers and disabled people).

This approach to bringing together evidence from practice values the rich learnings of people who deliver activities in their own words. It adds depth and complexity to existing academic research and identifies how and why activities can lead to wellbeing. This makes this methodology a valuable tool for funders and policy makers to draw out valuable learnings from practice, so they can better support effective activities.

## 2. Introduction and approach

### Using evidence from project case studies

Project case studies are often overlooked in academic research or programme evaluations, despite the fact that they offer rich evidence of how and why activities make a difference in the words of the people who design and deliver them.

#### **What do we mean by case studies?**

The detailed description of an activity or project, including how the activity was developed and implemented, and the learning that emerged from the project, in the words of the people involved in delivering it.

We don't mean personal case studies of individual participants, academic case studies, or case studies that are used primarily for communications and promotional materials.

Case studies are most useful when they include information on:

- The organisation, the partners and the people who delivered and evaluated the project;
- The project activities, setting, and circumstances;
- The participants, including their motivations, recruitment and circumstances;
- The outcomes that were achieved, and what else was learned as a result of the project.

Crucially, case studies should include 'thick description'. This refers to explanations which go beyond the facts of what happened, and also include the context, interpretation and meaning attributed to events by those closest to them (see Geertz, 1973).



## What's the difference between 'thin' and 'thick' description?

**A 'thin' description** is factually accurate, but lacks context or detail to explain the significance of the facts.

An example of 'thin' description would be:

"A total of 15 older women attended the start of the 6-week exercise class, but by the end 5 had dropped out."

**A 'thick' description** doesn't just describe what happened, but also says what the context was, and tries to explain the significance of the facts.

The 'thick' description of the same facts might look like this instead:

"The project attracted a lot of interest from mainly retired older women who wanted to improve their fitness for a number of reasons, such as because they were referred by their GP, or because they were struggling to play with their grandchildren.

The 15-strong group started positively, with most of the women reporting that they were looking forward to feeling better after exercise. However, over the 6-week course, five women decided to stop attending the classes. Three of them had moved onto lighter exercise that was easier on their joints, and the others could not be contacted for feedback. It's possible that they felt that they weren't keeping up with the others, as they had reported this to the instructor earlier in the course."

Project case studies are a quick and proportionate way to share learning from real-world activities and delivery. They present complex findings in an accessible way, and provide practitioners' perspectives on how activities have made a difference to an organisation and people's lives. But for projects and funders their use is often limited to showcasing an isolated example or positive story of change. This provides a rich illustration of a project's impact, but does not allow for comparison to other projects in different contexts.

The real and usually untapped strength of case studies lies in what they tell us when we look at them as a body of evidence, and explore common and contrasting themes across them. Synthesising a set of case studies can draw out the processes and activities that work in real-life settings, providing transferable learning on project development, adaptation, implementation and learning for practitioners and funders.

## **Mining Spirit of 2012's evidence bank**

Since its inception, Spirit of 2012 [Spirit] has explored what works in leaving long term social legacies from events. As well as funding activity directly related to events, Spirit has funded projects that deploy the main mechanisms used in event legacy activity, arts and culture, physical activity and sport, and volunteering and youth social action to better understand the ways in which the activity, and the approach taken to delivery, those can contribute to personal wellbeing focussing on those most likely to be excluded or left behind.

Personal wellbeing has provided common ground across Spirit's funding strands, with funded projects asked to capture changes in personal wellbeing using the [ONS4 measures](#) at the start and end of participant journeys. This consistency has allowed for cross-cutting analysis of Spirit's impact on wellbeing across different projects over time, especially using this common quantitative measure (Williams et al, 2022). But the evidence for 'how' and 'why' different projects achieved wellbeing outcomes is often hidden and isolated in the different project reports.

In this research project we selected, analysed and synthesised a set of ten case studies from Spirit of 2012's funded projects to draw out the pathways by which they supported the wellbeing of participants.

We wanted to use the learning and reflections from projects themselves, and their reports to Spirit of 2012, to understand how and why they had an impact on wellbeing.

Spirit of 2012 has made 171 grant awards over ten years focusing on three activity types - Active, Connected, and Creative - as well as funding Incubation projects. To make our synthesis meaningful we needed to select projects which had elements in common so we could compare across them. We decided to focus on projects which involved creative activities and which had a sufficient amount of data for us to identify the contexts and draw out the mechanisms related to wellbeing outcomes.

## A framework for creativity and wellbeing

In order to help us develop clear and useful research questions, and select the most relevant case studies, we used a conceptual framework of creativity and

wellbeing developed for our [scoping review on creativity and wellbeing](#). The review provided an evidence-based model of the pathways through which creativity could lead to wellbeing (See [Appendix 1](#)). We wanted to use this model as a framework for our case study synthesis so we could identify evidence from practice which supported, added to or challenged it.



Photo credit: Creative Minds

## Our research questions

1. What contexts and circumstances were involved in the delivery of creative activities and projects?
2. What wellbeing outcomes were associated with creative activities and projects for different people?
3. What were the mechanisms and pathways that led to wellbeing outcomes in creative activities and projects?

## Our methods and approach

Our approach was guided by the methodology developed with Leeds Beckett University and University of Liverpool in [A Guide to Synthesising Case Study Evidence](#) (Hardoon, et. al. 2021). We adapted it to suit the data we had available and our research questions.

We took the following steps:

### **1. Searching for evidence**

Our evidence source was the body of project reporting materials for Spirit of 2012 projects. This included published project evaluation reports and unpublished end of grant monitoring forms. These were important because they sometimes included information that was additional to that included in the published reports, for example a breakdown of outcomes data and demographic details of participants, or learning from practice which had led to modifications to the project. We did not include interim monitoring reports submitted by the projects. All together we looked at 540 pages of evaluation reports and 303 pages of monitoring reports.

## **2. Selecting case studies**

Having decided to focus on the wellbeing impact of creative activities we searched through Spirit of 2012's evidence bank for suitable projects. We identified a long list of 43 projects, mostly from the Creative portfolio, and screened them against our inclusion criteria. To be eligible for our final selection the projects had to feature creative activities, explicitly talk about wellbeing as an outcome, and feature 'thick description' of the contexts or mechanisms that led to these outcomes, so we could identify pathways.

Our final set of 10 projects include a number which were part of the 'Carers' Music Fund' programme. This means that music activities and carers as a target population are overrepresented in the set.

## **3. Extracting data**

We extracted data from the project documents into a template based on our [Guide to effective case studies](#). This ensured that we had a comparable standardised set of information for each project. However, we made some adjustments to the template headings to help focus the extracted data on our areas of interest: the creative contexts and mechanisms that led to wellbeing outcomes. We extracted data first from the published evaluation reports, supplementing and filling gaps where needed from the monitoring reports.

We preserved the original voice and meaning as much as possible by including a combination of summaries of key points and raw data (text and quotes) in the extraction sheets.

## **4. Assessing quality**

We used an amended version of the quality assessment criteria to assess the quality of case study data in relation to integrity, completeness, transparency and format. This was not intended as an exercise in making judgement of

specific project evaluation materials but to highlight general areas of strength or weakness in data in the case studies.

## 5. Synthesis

Data from the extraction sheets was synthesised deductively and inductively using a framework analysis approach. We analysed data on outcomes, contexts, and each of the mechanism categories set out in the conceptual framework for creativity and wellbeing ([Appendix 1](#)). We coded the data inductively to describe subcategories within the framework, and refined them as new data was added. Finally, we re-examined the whole body of data to make sure we had included and coded everything fully and accurately.

You can find full details of our methods and approach in [Appendix 2](#) of this report.



Photo credit: Jack Drum / Jamie Sproates



### 3. Findings: the creative projects and their contexts

In this section, we describe where and when the projects took place, their activities and who took part. We set out findings about the contexts the projects operated in.

The projects included in our research took place between 2015 and 2023, in locations across England, Scotland and Wales, in both rural and urban settings. They involved one-off creative activities, courses and workshops, and performances and exhibitions, both in person and online. Seven of the ten projects were affected in their delivery by Covid-19 related restrictions.

The types of creative activities offered included music-making, creative writing, dance, film-making, singing, art-making and crafts. The people who took part included children, young people, adults and older people. And the people who planned and delivered the activities included artists, musicians, and community workers.

The projects all aimed to improve wellbeing, alongside other ambitions such as reducing loneliness and isolation, improving confidence, and increasing participation in arts, especially for excluded groups.

The breadth of activities, settings and participants, and the common element of creativity, makes this group of projects particularly suitable for our synthesis methodology. It allows us to dig into the contexts and mechanisms that cut across the group, as well as looking at evidence unique to individual projects.





1. **Bay Create** (Whitley Bay Big Local, 2021-23): brought together local people to co-produce and participate in artist-led visual arts projects relating to the Whitley Bay area.
2. **Creative Minds** (Youth Cymru, 2018-20): supported young people at risk of mental ill health in South Wales to deliver creative sessions to others in their community.
3. **Critical Mass** (Birmingham 2022 Organising Committee, 2021-22): an inclusive dance and physical activity project which engaged young people in the Midlands in the lead up to the Commonwealth Games.
4. **MyMusic Northamptonshire** (Northamptonshire Carers, 2019-21): worked with four cohorts of female carers across Northamptonshire in tailored music and singing workshops leading to a performance.
5. **My Pockets Music** (My Pockets People CIC, 2018-22): engaged children and young people who faced particular challenges in their lives in a programme of music-making and song-writing workshops and performances.
6. **Our Day Out** (Creative Arts East, 2016-22): provided fortnightly dementia-inclusive music, dance and visual arts sessions led by artists for older people and their carers in rural Norfolk.
7. **Seafarers** (Stopgap Dance Company, 2016-19): engaged disabled and non-disabled people in Norfolk in high quality inclusive dance classes and performances.
8. **Sound Out!** (Jack Drum Arts, 2019-21): engaged women and girls with caring responsibilities in County Durham in weekly music experiences led by musicians with teaching or facilitation experience.
9. **Tàlaidhean Ura** (Fèis Rois, 2019-21): worked with mothers of infants living in rural areas of the Scottish Highlands in singing, music-making, song writing, and social sessions delivered by professional musicians.
10. **Viewfinder** (Beacon Films, 2015-21): engaged adults with learning disabilities, autism or additional need in Newcastle-upon-Tyne in structured and supported film-making and talent-development activities.

You can find more information about each of the projects in [Appendix 5](#) of this report.

## The type and ethos of the organisations

The projects were delivered primarily by voluntary sector organisations, mostly those with a **creative arts** focus (Seafarers, Bay Create, Our Day Out, Viewfinder, Sound Out!, My Pockets Music). Some of the projects were led by organisations with **expertise in supporting a particular population**, such as **young people** (Creative Minds), or **carers** (MyMusic Northamptonshire). One project was led by the Birmingham 2022 Commonwealth Games organising committee (Critical Mass). All projects worked to a greater or lesser extent with local partners.

It was also clear that the specific **ethos** of some organisations had an important influence on the way a project was delivered or who the project was aimed at. While they all had a commitment to **being inclusive**, some began with an intention to bring different groups together. Bay Create was an intergenerational project, and Critical Mass and Seafarers, both dance projects, brought together disabled and non-disabled dancers. Stopgap who delivered Seafarers state that *'Difference is our means and our method'* and this commitment led to a particular approach to ensuring that dancers could maximise their potential. Bay Create and Viewfinder had a strong commitment to empowering their participants by involving them in **co-production** of projects.

## The people who took part

The projects mostly targeted people whose personal circumstances put them at risk of low wellbeing and chronic loneliness, including **carers** (MyMusic Northamptonshire, Our Day Out, Sound Out!, Tàlaidhean Ura), **disabled people** (Critical Mass, Seafarers, Viewfinder), **people with mental or physical health conditions** (Creative Minds, Critical Mass, Our Day Out), as well as **potentially**

**excluded groups**, such as those with housing insecurity or from economically disadvantaged areas (My Pockets, Bay Create).

Different personal motivations were sometimes seen between groups depending on their particular circumstances and wellbeing needs:

*Across all courses those with the greatest caring responsibilities and most in need of emotional support seem to have gained most benefit, experiencing the courses as caring, nurturing and supportive. Those with less demanding caring roles, and with a less obvious need for such emotional support recognised and respected the supportive element but for them the main motivation and outcome was the development of musical skills. (p7-8, Sound Out!)*<sup>1</sup>

Different **barriers** to participation were also identified across the projects. Even where the barrier was the same for different people, for example isolation, the reasons could be quite different. Several projects focused on isolated people who lacked the opportunity to attend creative activities due to **lack of suitable transport**, especially in rural areas (Our Day Out, Seafarers, Tàlaidhean Ura). Others targeted participants with **caring responsibilities** which meant they could not leave the house easily leading to isolation (Jack Drum Arts, MyMusic Northamptonshire, Sound Out!, Tàlaidhean Ura).

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<sup>1</sup> The quotes in this report are taken from a project's published evaluation report unless stated that they are from unpublished project monitoring forms.



Photo credit: Whitley Bay Big Local

## The wider context

### Partnerships and recruitment

Many of the projects worked with local partners to reach potential participants and made use of their venues to run activities in trusted spaces (Bay Create, Our Day Out, Seafarers, Sound Out!). These **trusted partnerships** proved crucial to recruitment and the success of activities, but had to be nurtured:

*Recruitment was most successful when it targeted local people who had previous engagement with a partner organisation. (Seafarers)*

*The project has now ended and we have learnt a lot in terms of recruitment and partnerships through our process evaluation. The most important thing we have taken away is the reflection time and communication with youth workers, being there to support them and creating an open space for them to support each other and share good practise. This has allowed us to adapt our methods as we go along to make sure young people are at the heart of our work and we can cater to their needs. (p10, Creative Minds monitoring document)*

## Covid-19 restrictions and changes in delivery

The outbreak of Covid-19 and the resulting **lockdown restrictions** and shielding advice affected seven out of the ten projects (Creative Minds, MyMusic Northamptonshire, My Pockets Music, Our Day Out, Sound Out!, Tàlaidhean Ura and Viewfinder), with two others taking part shortly after the end of the nationwide restrictions (Bay Create and Critical Mass). Only Seafarers, which ended in 2019 avoided the effects of Covid-19.

All of the projects expected to be able to deliver activities in person, mostly in community venues or outdoors. Consequently, these projects had to either delay their activities or move them online, usually to zoom sessions.

In terms of access to activities, the move to online delivery had mixed effects on delivery and participants' experiences. Several projects describe that offering online activities made them **more accessible to people in rural areas and those with caring responsibilities** (Sound Out!, Tàlaidhean Ura). However, projects for both older and younger people, and those with learning disabilities, felt that **lack of digital skills and confidence could exclude participants** (Bay Create, Creative Minds, Our Day Out, Sound Out!). There was also a perceived risk that projects lost their place-based identity (Sound Out!).

Organisations and facilitators had to adapt quickly and **learn new skills**, as did participants themselves. Recreating the conditions of in-person sessions online

was skilled and thoughtful work, and proved harder for some activities than others:

*Several interviewees commented on the value of (the co-ordinator) remaining on screen during the tea break, ready to chat once people returned and avoiding what one termed the 'tumble weed effect' of re entering an empty space. (p13, Sound Out!)*

*Whilst Zoom worked well for the teaching-based workshop sessions, it was noted that Zoom would have considerable drawbacks as a vehicle for live musical performance. (p6, MyMusic Northamptonshire)*

Photo credit: Jack Drum Arts



Some projects quickly **supplemented their original offer** with activities that complied with the Covid-19 restrictions. Sound Out! visited participants at home and held Doorstep Gigs (small, socially distanced performances) in their front gardens and streets. Our Day Out sent out 'Creative Packs' to participants which were delivered to their homes and included instructions for activities that

people could complete on their own (including making Christmas Decorations, drumming with wooden spoons, and creative writing prompts).

*'Oh when I see them arrive through the door, I'm instantly happy and I get to them quickly, and explore the contents.'; Packs gave the feeling of being connected to someone else during a time of isolation and loneliness. (p30, Our Day Out)*



## 4. Findings: the impact on wellbeing

In this section, we present findings on the wellbeing outcomes across the case studies for people taking part in creative projects. Improving personal wellbeing was an overarching aim for all the projects we looked at, evaluated both quantitatively and qualitatively to assess the effects of creative activity on a broad range of participant groups. Nonetheless, the majority of organisations defined wellbeing more broadly than the standardised definition adopted by the ONS<sup>4</sup> measures and captured valuable data on broader psychological wellbeing outcomes using qualitative techniques.

### Measuring personal wellbeing

Personal, or subjective, wellbeing is a measure of overall wellbeing and a key component of the [UK's National Wellbeing Framework](#). It is captured using the ONS4 measures<sup>2</sup> - an indicator that encompasses evaluations, emotions, and psychological functioning. It spans three outcome areas:

1. **Evaluative wellbeing**, which focuses on the cognitive evaluation of the conditions of one's life. The life satisfaction measure asks individuals to provide a global assessment of their life;
2. **Hedonic wellbeing**, which focuses on experiences of happiness, and the presence of positive and negative affect, asking participants to reflect on their levels of happiness and anxiety 'yesterday';
3. **Eudaimonic wellbeing** which sees individuals as possessing underlying psychological needs which include a sense of purpose in life, a sense of autonomy, and the presence of positive relationships. The sense of

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<https://www.ons.gov.uk/peoplepopulationandcommunity/wellbeing/methodologies/personalwellbeingsurveyuserguide>

purpose measure asks individuals about the extent to which the things they do in life are worthwhile.

While the ONS4 measures allow organisations to capture wellbeing changes in a standardised and comparable way, there are certain factors that can affect an organisation's ability to implement the questions, limiting the usefulness of the wellbeing data collected. As national survey measures, the ONS4 don't easily account for the dynamic and variable contexts in which wellbeing changes are recorded, or may be unsuitable for specific populations since they are standardised measures aimed at general populations and have not been tested, for example, with groups that have a disability or long-term health problem.

## Challenges to measuring wellbeing

Some of the key difficulties reported by organisations in relation to the quantitative measurement of wellbeing included:

- **The challenges that certain participant groups face** when interpreting concepts used in the measure, in particular 'satisfaction' and feeling like your life is 'worthwhile' or concepts that do not fit with a social model of disability.
- **The misleading nature of wellbeing scores** when samples are small and a radical change in circumstances for one or two participants has a large effect on average group scores before or after an intervention;
- **The effects of Covid-19 on data collection**, including low completion rates, particularly for participants with caring responsibilities, long-term physical and/or mental health conditions;
- **The perception of questionnaires** as 'tests' of an individual's ability or progress made, or an assessment of their continued eligibility to access the project.

Several of the projects tackled these challenges head-on, including approaching Spirit with an adapted model for measuring wellbeing for



learning-disabled participants (Seafarers, Viewfinder), or for adults with dementia or cognitive disabilities (Our Day Out). Two projects used the Canterbury Wellbeing Scale (Our Day Out, Seafarers). All of the projects supplemented a quantitative measure of wellbeing with qualitative data in the form of interviews, focus groups, or participant feedback.

## Improvements in wellbeing

While the quantitative measurement of wellbeing isn't the focus of this case study synthesis, ONS4 data from a selection of projects can strengthen the insights on the contexts and mechanisms that emerge from the qualitative data throughout the report.

Below, we present wellbeing scores for four projects that met minimum requirements for data collection and reporting (Charts 1-4)<sup>3</sup>. They varied in size, duration and grant size, and involved music-making (My Pockets, Sound Out!), dance (Critical Mass), and visual arts and crafts (Bay Create) delivered primarily to children and young people (Critical Mass, My Pockets, Sound Out!), and a mixed age group (Bay Create).

The mean group wellbeing scores for participants across the four projects at the start of the activities are lower than UK national scores for Life Satisfaction, Life Worthwhile, Happiness and Anxiety<sup>4</sup>. This suggests that the four organisations in question are targeting groups with persistently low wellbeing which include: female carers (Sound Out!), disabled people, and young people with mental health difficulties, and other vulnerabilities (Critical Mass, My Pockets).

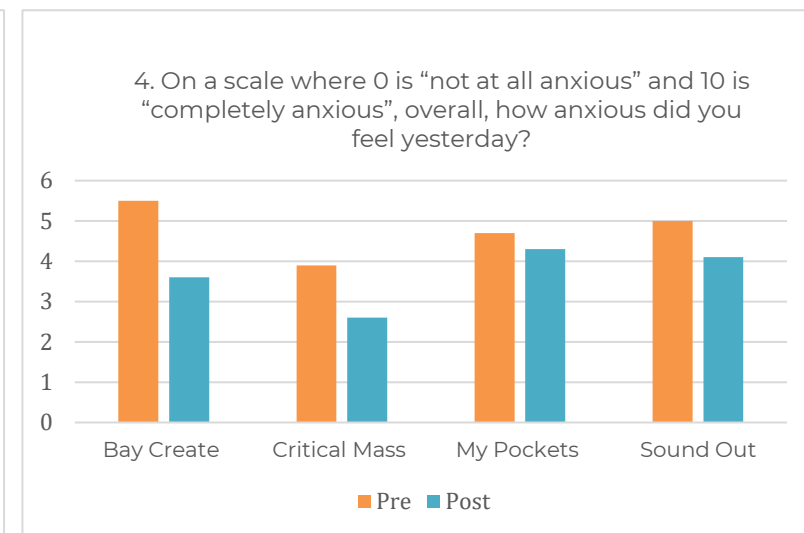
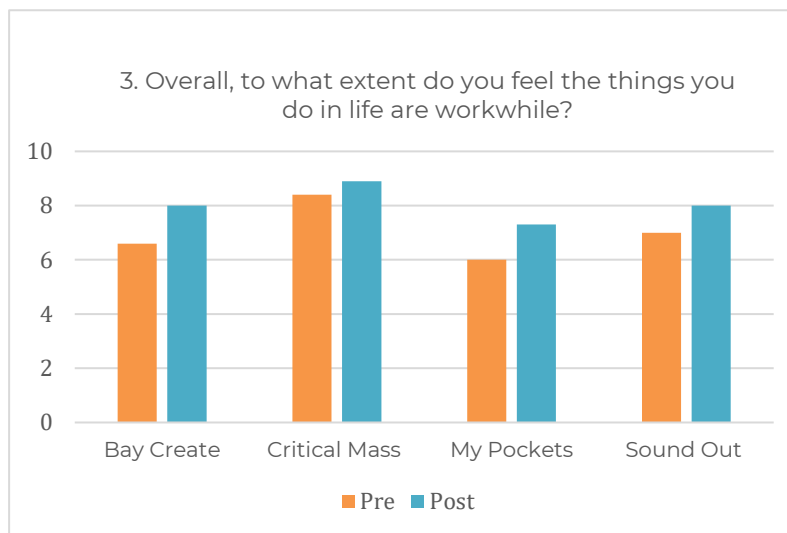
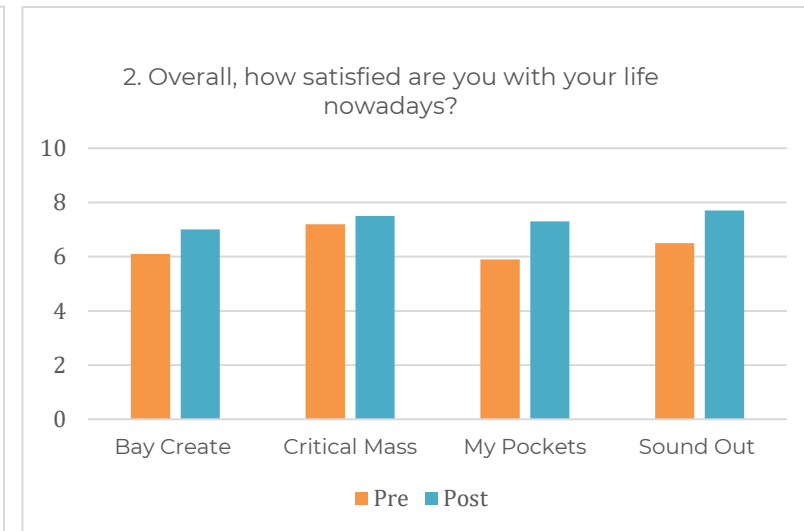
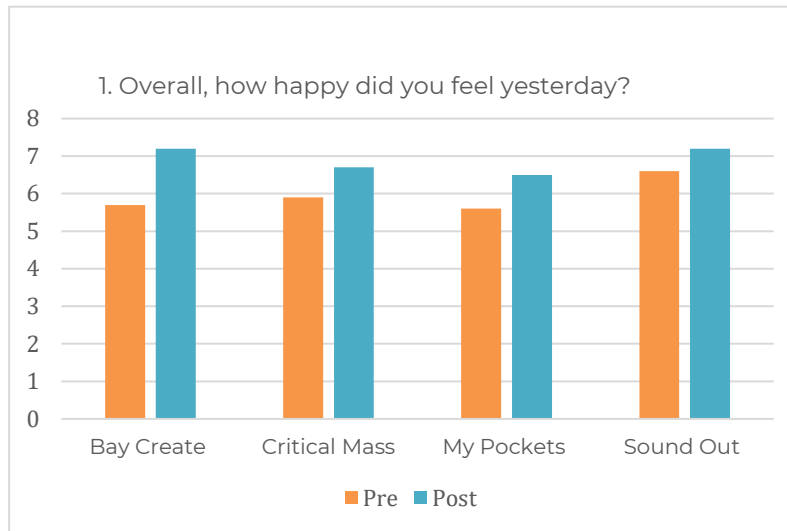
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<sup>3</sup> The criteria used for sample size and measures are based on the WWCW quality checklist for quantitative studies available here <https://whatworkswellbeing.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/02/WWCW-Methods-Guide-FINAL-APRIL-2019a.pdf>

<sup>4</sup>

<https://www.ons.gov.uk/peoplepopulationandcommunity/wellbeing/bulletins/measuringnationalwellbeing/april2022tomarch2023>

Charts 1-4: ONS4 indicators, pre- and post- mean scores for project participants



By the end of the projects, improvements were found for all ONS4 measures, with larger changes in Anxiety and Life Worthwhile. At the project-level, participants attending 12-week song-writing workshops designed to alleviate mental health difficulties experienced larger improvements across all four measures (My Pockets). The project that reported more modest improvements, particularly in relation to Life Satisfaction and Life Worthwhile, was a shorter-term dance project in which almost half of all participants were living with a disability or long-term health condition (Critical Mass).

## Broader wellbeing outcomes

### Positive mood and emotion

From the qualitative data, it is clear that the concept of wellbeing adopted by organisations to record and understand changes following participation in creative projects includes a broad range of outcomes, at the individual and group level. **Positive mood and emotions** emerge as important components of the concept of wellbeing following creative participation, and help participants deal with challenging personal circumstances:

*Many spoke of the course giving them time out from their concerns and their caring roles '... a bit of escapism for a couple of hours.'*  
(p8, Sound Out!)

acting as a '*distraction from low mood*' (My Pockets Music) and as a mood regulator or enhancer:

*'No matter what mood I turn up to the session in, I always leave with a smile on my face without fail.'* (p32, Critical Mass)

Other components of wellbeing that emerged in interviews with participants included:

- Having strong **psychological resources** to stay mentally alert, focused and having '*peace of mind*' (Our Day Out)

- Feeling a sense of **joy and happiness**, in particular, when connected to the excitement of performance (Bay Create)

## Confidence and self-esteem

There are two main outcome areas that emerge across cases, all of which are associated with subjective wellbeing in the broader literature: individual psychological wellbeing outcomes (self-esteem and confidence) and social connection.

At the individual level, **self-esteem** - broadly defined as a global evaluation of one's value or self-worth - and **confidence** - a person's sense of their own competence or skill and perceived capability to deal effectively with various situations - emerged as important cross-cutting outcomes following participation in creative activity. These two overlapping outcomes emerged in nine case studies, often as overlapping concepts and in conjunction with a range of wellbeing pathways.

Overall, self-esteem and confidence appear to improve together with set outcomes which include: improved **self-perception**, primarily through a growing sense of **personal achievement**, and an increase in **positive experiences**, through performance and the acquisition of **new skills**.

## Improved self-perception

Participants reported improvements in self-perception (Critical Mass, Sound Out!) and a sense of pride when they recognised their personal achievements. For some, this extended into their lives more broadly outside of the project:

*'It's something that comes home, it's part of the conversation with other people, the pride in what you're doing.'* (p19, Seafarers)

For new mothers, creative activity provided an opportunity to reflect on their **personal development and growth**, and **aspirations** for the future (Tàlaidhean Ura).

For participants who took part in regular contemporary dance sessions focused on promoting inclusion of people living with disabilities, participation allowed them to step into a '*new identity as a dancer*', although for some, progressing beyond a certain point became technically challenging and led to a **decrease in confidence** (Seafarers).

## Social contact, connection and loneliness

The **expansion of social networks** and improved **social connections** were cross-cutting wellbeing outcomes and also played a role in boosting confidence, self-esteem, and addressing loneliness, which is connected to worsening confidence:

*'...if you're feeling anxious or lonely, your confidence takes a massive knock.'* (p11, My Pockets Music)

**Friendship** is also a common theme throughout the case studies and provides mental relief. In the case of disabled young people and adults who took part in a filmmaking course, making friends leads to improvement in confidence:



*'Getting more involved in my community makes me happy. I have got more friends now, (this)..makes me more confident trying new things now that I have friends who are doing it too.'* (p13, Viewfinder)

Photo credit: Viewfinder

## 5. Findings: the pathways to wellbeing

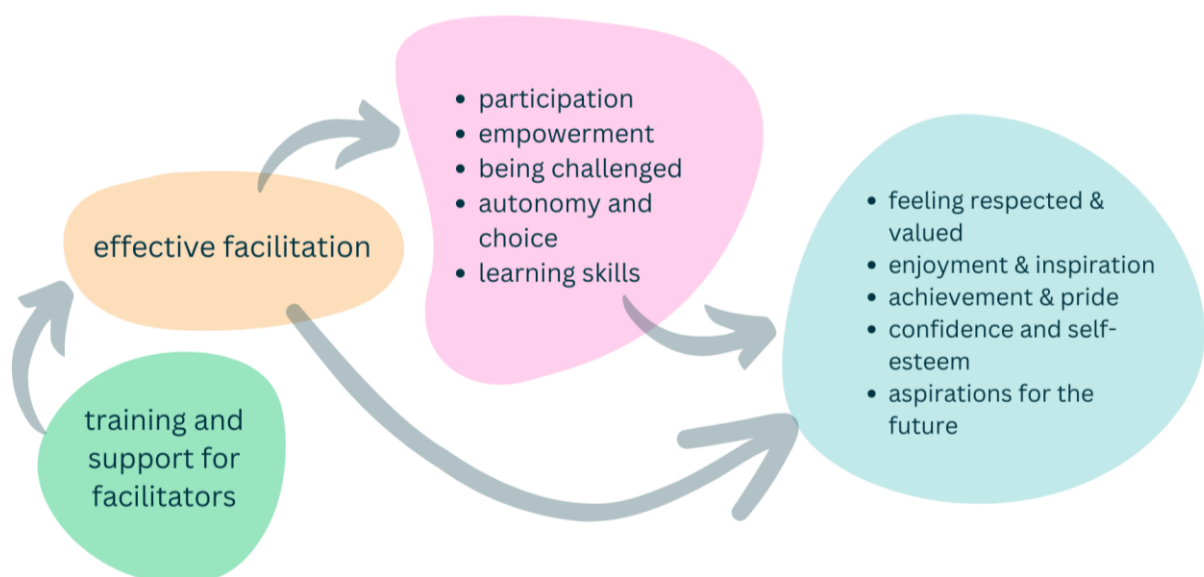
In this section, we present findings from the case studies on the pathways to wellbeing for people taking part in creative projects. Specifically, we trace how creative activity, along with some contextual features of that activity, ‘unlocked’ a range of mechanisms which were important for one or more wellbeing outcomes.

Following the [conceptual framework](#), we distinguish between **relational pathways** where interaction or engagement with others is central (such as social connection) and **personal pathways** where individual activity or experience is to the fore (such as learning skills).

Evidence from the projects showed that sometimes a single mechanism led directly to an outcome, while in other cases a combination or chain of contexts and mechanisms were involved in more complex pathways.

### Relational pathways

#### 1. Skilled and supportive facilitation or teaching



Pathway elements:

- Effective facilitation was inclusive and responsive.
- It involved respecting participants, celebrating their work, and providing flexibility and support within appropriate structures.

A key feature of effective facilitation was that it was inclusive, enabling all participants to engage and achieve in creative activities. Approaches to inclusion included **respecting participants** (e.g. treating them as artists in their own right, as having a valued contribution to make), and **encouraging and celebrating** their work to give them a sense of achievement and growing confidence (Bay Create, Our Day Out).

Creating a sense of **fun**, and building **support, responsiveness and flexibility** into activities was also important (Bay Create, Creative Minds, MyMusic Northamptonshire, Our Day Out, Tàlaidhean Ura, Seafarers, Sound Out!). Supportive and flexible approaches included **scaffolding** of involvement and of skills development as well as providing a familiar **framework or structure** within which participants were comfortable, confident and able to create and contribute in their own ways and/or at their own pace.

*The artist...pencilled an outline to follow and helped steady the participant's hand. (p12, Bay Create)*

*'the girls are very patient, if there's someone who can't play an instrument or bang it even and they sit next to them and help them, it's lovely yes' (p27, Our Day Out)*

*'The young people became depressed and lonely at the start of Lockdown, and some would not show their face on zoom or were despondent. When we did funny things they were at ease...'*  
(p8, Creative Minds monitoring form)

*There were group singing activities at the start (of the session), but the second half of the session, everyone moved to sit round a table, and mothers could chat, make their mobiles, write in their reflective journal, and work with the musicians. Mothers could get what they needed out of*

*this space, and didn't feel under pressure that writing the lullabies was the only thing they were allowed to do. If they wanted to chat and bond with other mothers, they could, or if they were too exhausted to chat, and wanted to use that time for quiet reflection, they could do that too.* (p16, Tàlaidhean Ura)

*Through observing the project over time, (positive impact) was evident through the queues at the door for people to come into sessions and the excitement around the different elements of the artistic activities. Seeing the group's jubilant return from their bus trip to the glass artist's studio was a real indication of the joy and confidence that was being instilled in the community members.* (p12, Bay Create)

For Our Day Out, session structure (e.g. the same start and end, use of the same props) provided important familiarity for participants with dementia. Thus, flexibility within a structure can create a relaxed, comfortable environment for creativity. This contrasts with Seafarers where there is more emphasis on combining structure and flexibility to allow dancers to maximise potential and achievement and avoiding setting limits on what they can do. This was particularly important for disabled participants who, in other contexts, sometimes faced low expectations.

*We have this idea of a baseline and...you could repeat that, but other people could start adding complex lifts over the top of it. That was planned over the course of teaching the material. If (participants have) learnt the baseline ...they keep building what they are and aren't prepared to do.* (p65, Seafarers)

Evidence from one project suggested that too little structure could lead to a loss of 'impetus' among participants (MyMusic Northamptonshire) and for several others, there was a sense that facilitators had to balance creating a relaxed environment with challenging participants so they could learn new skills and build confidence (Bay Create, Tàlaidhean Ura) (see also 'Challenge' below).



Pathway elements:

- Over-focus on participant problems during sessions may exacerbate them.

Creative Minds noted that an **over-focus on participant problems** during sessions can be counter-productive.

*We have learned that it can be dangerous to talk too in depth about mental health as it can trigger young people and lead them to self diagnosis of their mental health issues. Working with a variety of young people requires a balancing act – we have learnt that young people support their peers with the issues and you can delegate peer support during sessions and then talk to the young people afterwards.*  
(p11, Creative Minds monitoring form)

At My Pockets Music, staff also gave a sense of not wanting to pry into young peoples' problems but emphasised that they were there to discuss issues if necessary.

*'I try not to invade in their private life too much. But if they have got something going on, then we give them the best of our adult knowledge, because we've been through all this sort of thing ourselves.'*  
(p13, My Pockets Music)

And, indeed, including themes from their lives in song lyrics written at the sessions - often in a light-hearted way - helped some of their participants to process and cope with difficult experiences.

- Professional creative practitioner skills enhanced experience of and outcomes from projects

For some projects, high quality outcomes for participants were discussed in relation to professional artists being involved in the delivery of sessions. This could lead to **raising of aspirations**. For Viewfinder, work with industry professionals was specifically designed to support (mainly young) disabled, autistic or neurodivergent adults to develop professional standard filmmaking skills which would open up future opportunities. Evidence from Creative Minds

also suggested that working with creative professionals can have an impact on aspirations:

*The young people had the opportunity to try out to see what it's like to work in the music industry which resulted in them feeling more positive about their passions and dreams. (p8, Creative Minds monitoring form)*

Similarly, there was reflection from Critical Mass about whether involvement of professional musicians in the future could help participants into musical careers.

It was also noted that professional artists possessed skills that could improve experience of creative activities: they could enhance the aesthetic quality of creative activity and **inspire** others with their practice; and they were already skilled at **engaging others** and **communicating** using their art form (Our Day Out).

#### Pathway elements:

- Training and support for delivery staff is important to ensure inclusive facilitation.

However, delivery staff did not necessarily have a full set of inclusive facilitation skills simply because they were creative by profession. Several projects discussed the **key role of training and other support** that had been developed to ensure staff were skilled and confident to work with their particular groups and that they felt supported.

*Dance practitioners taking part in the training did sometimes find it difficult to take this initial training, absorb it fully and then enact it in their own teaching straight away without sometimes needing a bit of guidance and support to help the process run smoothly. This was more to do with how the 'embedding' process happened and not to do with quality of teaching or enthusiasm, but it is very important and so it was well worth providing support for new teachers in order to help them through that. (p66, Seafarers)*

Our Day Out invested substantially in developing the practice of artists involved in delivering the project. They scheduled artist training and networking days which covered the role of the artist in supporting participant wellbeing, as well as developing shared ways of working. Artists valued being trusted by having flexible briefs, continued engagement with artists, and listening to their needs.

*Artists stated that through attending the training day they had: “connected with inspirational people and can carry this forward” and had ‘discovered so much new information and confidence in developing new activities’. (p16, Our Day Out)*

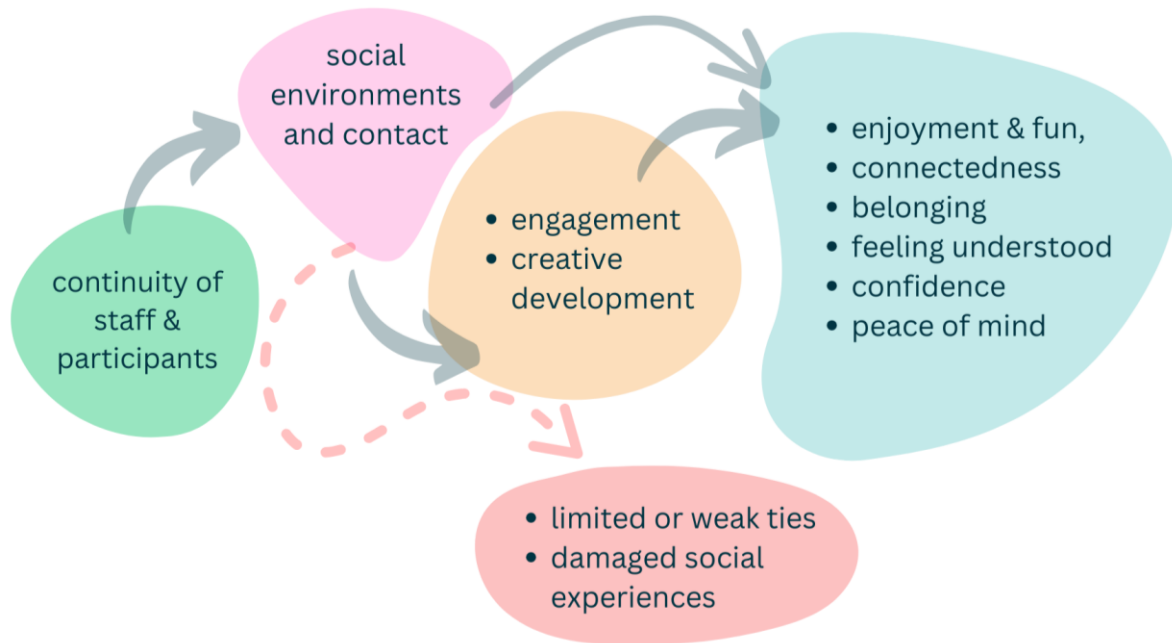
Creative practitioners and other delivery staff also developed facilitation skills and confidence in the course of their work on projects (Seafarers; Tàlaidhean Ura).

*‘Working with a group of adults like this has really boosted my own confidence and the realisation that I did and do have a lot to bring to groups like that from my own experience of working with other age groups.’ (p15, Tàlaidhean Ura)*



Photo credit: Northamptonshire Carers

## 2. Social environment and contact



Social environment and contact were discussed in relation to all the creative projects and resulted in group cohesion, individual friendships or meaningful connections between members of diverse groups.

*'I met Charlie through the group and he's funny...he makes me laugh, it's a nice social environment.'* (p13, My Pockets Music)

*We observed a culture of mutual regard and care across participants and staff which was key to changing perceptions (and self-perceptions) and developing understandings of disability and inclusion.*  
(p14, Critical Mass)

Several projects referred to friendships made that continued outside project sessions or that were likely to continue beyond its lifetime (Critical Mass, MyMusic Northamptonshire, Tàlaidhean Ura).

Pathway elements:

- Creating welcoming and accepting spaces supported social connection.
- In turn, a socially supportive environment and social connection could motivate continued engagement and support creative development.

Project staff, but also sometimes participants themselves, had an important role to play in **creating an accepting, safe space** such that individuals felt they were understood, they belonged and were valued (Bay Create, MyMusic Northamptonshire, Our Day Out, Sound Out!, Tàlaidhean Ura). These environments resulted from staff (or others) being **welcoming**, their **understanding and empathy, getting to know participants, facilitating interaction** between them; and from participants who developed **kind and supportive relationships** with others. This was also noted as important when sessions transferred online during Covid-19.

*Her presence was vital to the development of social bonds, she put people at their ease and facilitated conversation, ensuring that all were included...Knowledge of individuals' circumstances and emotional state was key. (p13, Sound Out!)*

*Volunteers and workshop assistants facilitate connections between participants and create a friendly accepting atmosphere. 'Yes, just the looking forward to it, you know, it's on the calendar, yes, the looking forward to something social and funny, and belonging, like everyone likes to belong don't they? They go oh hello M, they call me M, hello, come in, come in A, yes, the belonging, definitely.'* (p25, Our Day Out)

*"Everyone looks after each other. But not in an overbearing or stifling way. It's in a really supportive, loving and caring, and fun, positive, sisterly environment.'* (p16, Tàlaidhean Ura)

*We learned that what could seem like small unexpected incidents during the actual project, for example, connections or small acts of kindness between the participants meant a lot to individuals in terms of their own wellbeing. For example, being given a birthday card or someone praising their work. (p12, Bay Create)*

It was also mentioned that this supportive social environment and developing relationships could motivate continued participation or that it could support creative development.

*It was the non-judgemental and welcoming atmosphere that encouraged people to keep coming back and remain involved over a longer period regardless of the life experiences they were facing.*  
(p12, Bay Create)

*...young people started working with each other in the studio towards the end of the project after building more confidence to move from one-to-ones to groups. They would recognise different roles from artists to engineers and producers and feel good about working as a team...*  
(p8, Creative Minds monitoring form)

#### Pathway elements:

- Spending time with others 'like me' led to feelings of being understood and being safe to share feelings and experiences.

A common theme (Creative Minds, MyMusic Northamptonshire, My Pockets Music, Our Day Out, Sound Out!, Tàlaidhean Ura, Viewfinder) was that participants' sense of connection or reduced loneliness was, in part, the result of **spending time with others with similar life experiences or interests**. This could mean they felt understood and safe to share feelings or experiences with others.

*'I can communicate perfectly when I'm with Beacon Hill Arts. It's an environment where I have things in common with people. They understand what I'm looking for and what I want to do. It's more than just a school, a college or a university. Beacon Hill Arts is on top of the pyramid. It's the easiest place to go, to be with people who have similarities to me.'* (p9-10, Viewfinder)

*'It usually takes me about a year to get to know somebody before I can tell them about stuff in my life, but here I can talk to people'*  
(p13, My Pockets Music)



'I liked being in an environment where everyone knew my situation and they could get me.' (p42, MyMusic Northamptonshire)

*'Participants greatly valued being able to meet and interact with others with similar interests and found the groups to be inclusive and friendly with people willing to share and support each other. Being with other carers people felt understood, and that they would not be judged if they had to miss a session, or were feeling low.'* (p9, Sound Out!)

*'You don't feel so isolated especially if you meet people with the same illness yourself, or with the same problems.... Like memory loss and arthritis and things like that.'* (p24, Our Day Out)

#### Pathway elements:

- Continuity of people and spending enjoyable, fun time with others fostered social connection and other wellbeing outcomes.

**Continuity of staff members or group participants** across sessions was also mentioned as important for creating a welcoming atmosphere and allowing relationships to develop (Our Day Out, Tàlaidhean Ura).

**Having fun** or just **being together in a group** was noted as valuable for wellbeing outcomes. These outcomes included social connection (Critical Mass, Bay Create, My Pockets Music, Sound Out!) but social contact and developing relationships were also associated with increased confidence (Viewfinder) and with being mentally alert, having focus and having peace of mind (Our Day Out).

*'It (the 'Wonderful Wednesday' group) really does have an impact on wellbeing – we were laughing out loud last time' and 'Everyone has problems but at least they can come and enjoy themselves (with others). Places like this is how lonely people make new friends.'* (p11, Bay Create)

Pathway elements:

- Creative practice supported communication and connection.

In addition, creative activity itself was mentioned as enhancing sense of belonging and social connection. This could be because creative projects involved **working together** on **engaging** or **fun activities**.

*Music is quite complex – like, you’ve got to go through the process of making the beat, making the lyrics. And it’s the feeling of being in a group and working on something together, I guess... you’re not alone, you can communicate with someone else. This happened in the context of activities that were ‘fun’, ‘quirky’ and ‘spontaneous’.*  
(p7, p45-46, My Pockets Music)

*‘Working together with strangers, because remembering back on the first day when I was in a group of strangers but today I’ve recorded a whole song with all of them who are now my friends.’*  
(p43, MyMusic Northamptonshire)

But for individuals who faced limitations in their ability to communicate, the creative medium could serve to **physically orientate individuals to others** or provide **new modes of communication**. This was discussed in relation to some dance and music projects.

*“Progressively, she moved with more and more ease, more and more quickly, and by April she was running. And for her, everything about her opened! She lifted up her head to socialise with the others and really connected.”* (p18, Seafarers)

In Our Day Out, it was noted that music and movement activities could put participants with dementia on a more **equal footing** with fellow group members including their partners who were caring for them. As such this was valuable for their personal relationships.

*‘Rather than him follow me, because I have always taken the lead. So it was good for me to realise that you know, he can take the lead.’*  
(p9, Our Day Out, Monitoring form)



Findings from Sound Out! highlight the fact that **some creative forms are more conducive to social connection** than others.

*Some activities more naturally lend themselves to social interaction. Community singing is inherently social, even online, and whilst songwriting is intensely personal, sharing this with others creates a bond. But learning instrumental skills requires more of an internal focus, those learning ukulele spent much of the time visually focussed on their own hands and fingers rather than on the other faces on the screen and electronic music making required a similar focus on individuals.*  
(p10, Sound Out!)



Photo credit: Creative Arts East

Pathway elements:

- Social connections among participants can be limited.
- Unsupportive social experience at projects may harm sense of connectedness.

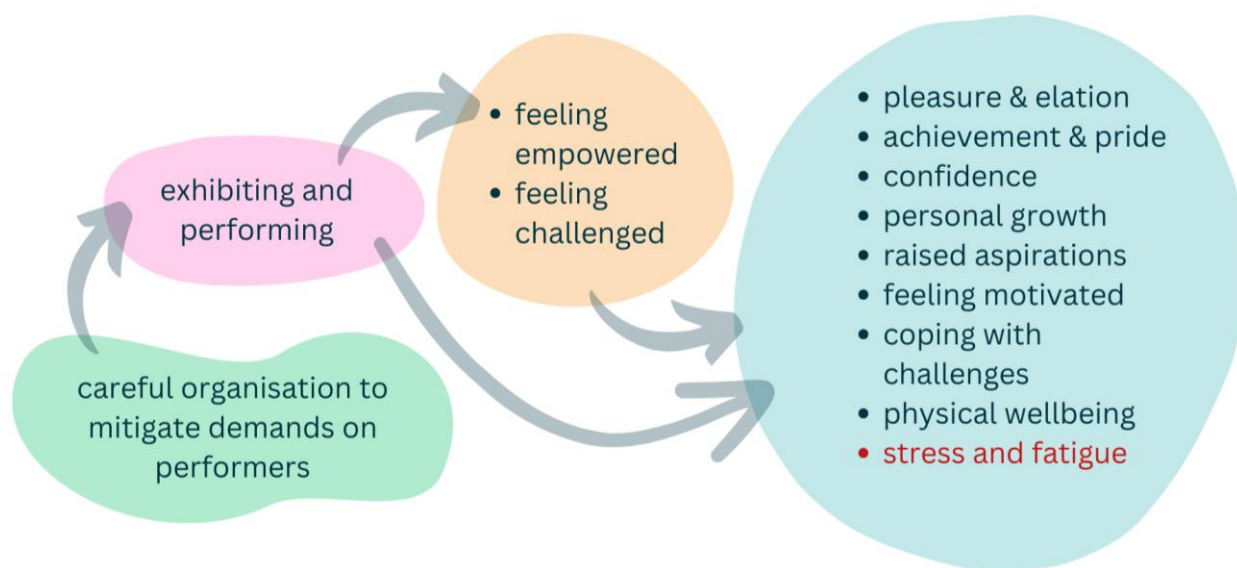
While much of the emphasis was on how project involvement led to new social connections, evidence from several projects made the important point that sometimes relationships formed were limited. Bay Create aimed to encourage intergenerational relationships but found that within-generation relationships were established more readily because those of a **similar age ‘flocked together’**. Sometimes, people were satisfied with **weak ties**.

*‘Perhaps I don’t want to know more about these people, it’s a particular relationship through music...let’s not spoil it by getting to know each other properly’ (p10, Sound Out!)*

And another example from Sound Out! showed that it is also possible for sense of connectedness and motivation to participate to be harmed by **unsupportive social experiences** at sessions:

*(One participant) described how, having shared something quite personal, she was met with silence and apparent indifference, possibly due simply to a poor connection and consequent delay, which affected her and her willingness to engage for several weeks. (p11, Sound Out!)*

### 3. Exhibiting and performing



#### Pathway elements:

- Performance or sharing of creative outputs can be challenging, an opportunity for achievement and for celebration of that achievement.
- Performing may demonstrate confidence developed during the project and itself increase confidence.
- Working towards creative outputs can be motivating.

Sharing of creative outputs was another significant relational mechanism. The type and scale of audience for these outputs varied across the projects. It might be that group members were each other's' main audience for ongoing activity or final outputs (Our Day Out; Tàlaidhean Ura) and that intended external audiences for creative pieces were small, for example the personal lullabies created by mothers for their infants (Tàlaidhean Ura). The majority of projects also included a showcase exhibition or performance for friends and family and sometimes for a wider local audience (Bay Create, Creative Minds, MyMusic Northamptonshire, My Pockets, Sound Out!, Viewfinder).

In either context, performing or exhibiting was seen as an opportunity to **celebrate performer efforts and work**. It could also be seen as a **challenge** and as an important achievement, as reflecting a growth in confidence, and as confidence building. And aiming to make creative outputs for sharing could be **motivating**.

*During the final zoom sessions, women who had previously been quiet and muted, shared their lullabies - singing songs to the group. This was a huge step for some, and was received with such love and respect from everyone on the zoom call. (p7, Tàlaidhean Ura monitoring form)*

*'There's one girl who's got a stunning singing voice but is also really shy. She's been able to do some performances....She might not be able to perform in front of anybody, but she did build that confidence up to be able to perform, which for her is a big step.'* (p11, My Pockets Music)

*The end-of-cohort event was a great success, with participants gaining increased confidence from performing live with contemporaries. It was noted that working towards tangible, achievable outputs would be important to incentivise participants in future sessions. (p5, MyMusic Northamptonshire)*

*'But I feel that the more we do it and the more they see the results, the more they're prepared to work for it. I think once I air that video online, young people are gonna say "I wish I'd have stuck at that."' (p19, My Pockets Music)*

#### Pathway elements:

- Performing can place demands on participants, risking that they may opt out, be put under physical and emotional stress or not cope on the day.
- Taking part in professional standard performances can lead to elation and pleasure, pride and sense of achievement; learning to cope with challenging situations and emotions; and raise aspirations.

The challenge provided by sharing work meant that there was **risk** involved.

*All three musicians felt these showcase events were in the right format. As Shane said: 'the pressure on the person is just right to not put them off turning up.'* (p52, My Pockets Music)

In some cases the stakes were high: two of the projects - both involving a mix of disabled and non-disabled dancers - were focused on preparing for professional standard, high profile dance performances (Critical Mass, Seafarers). Evidence from these projects showed that **demands of meeting high standards** required for these performances could create physical and emotional stress but the **rewards for participants of taking part** could also be high. Benefits included elation and pleasure in achievement, improving confidence to deal with challenges and associated emotions, and raising aspirations of what is possible.

*Critical Mass improved participants' physical health and wellbeing, however, intense moments within the project cycle resulted in feelings of fatigue and heightened stress levels.* (p31, Critical Mass)

*When she came back into the project the next year she just said 'Okay, I know I have this (performance) anxiety, I know it is going to wobble me but I can do it – and I'm ready for the next challenge.'* (p23, Seafarers)

*'The looks on ... (the participants') faces were just happy and so proud – I was really proud of them all. That was a huge thing to do in front of a crowd of people.'* (p18, Seafarers)

In one example school staff were concerned that a student would not cope with the demands of performing. *'He just rose to it, he absolutely loved it, and really went for it and did the best dancing we'd seen from him really. But that was just a really interesting lesson in preconception....'* (p48, Seafarers)

For some participants, taking part in a professional standard dance production *'opened their eyes...to a world that was outside their norm.* (p49, Seafarers)

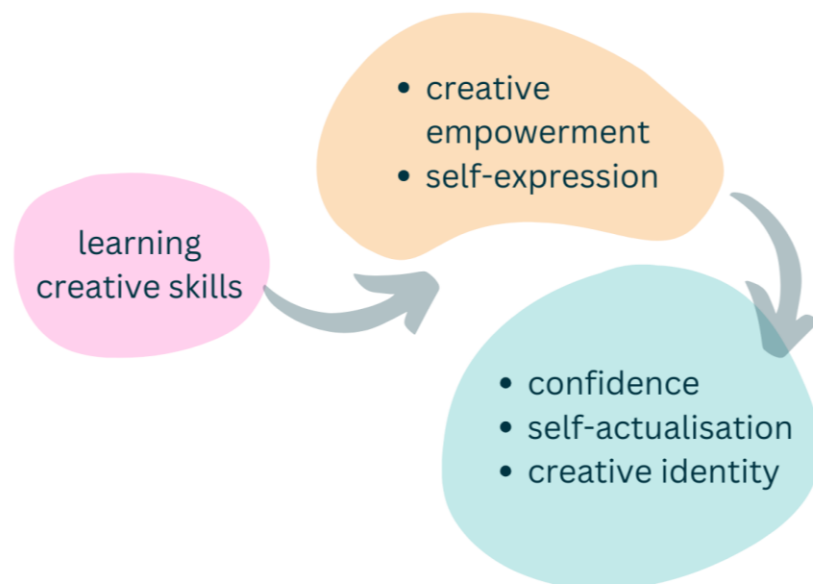
#### Pathway elements:

- Good organisation and communication around events can mitigate stresses placed on performers.

Evidence from these projects underlines the role of performance organisers in limiting demands on performers by ensuring: **adequate time** - a period of months - for participants to develop skills, confidence and practice choreography; a **manageable rehearsal schedule**; good **communication** about what is required, especially in the build up to performances. (Critical Mass, Seafarers).

### Personal pathways

#### 4. Learning creative skills



Pathway elements:

- Learning creative skills led to increased confidence which, in turn, encouraged creative use of those skills.

Learning of new skills was mentioned as important for wellbeing outcomes in relation to several of the projects and in one case developing skills was the feature of the project most cited by participants as having significant impact on them (Viewfinder).

Evidence suggested that learning new creative skills which **enabled participants to create work** led to increases in confidence.

*Participants reported improved self-confidence and growth linked to development of musical and social skills. (p8, Sound Out!)*

*The current phase of the project has been no different and the list of new skills has been expansive. Confidence has developed as people have realised that they are able to try new things and succeed. (p11, Bay Create monitoring form)*

*These developments in technical and performance skills were accompanied by raised levels of confidence, indicating the participants' growth and development as songwriters, musicians and performers. (p8, MyMusic Northamptonshire)*

*Mothers felt a sense of achievement, through skills development and having a tangible product they'd created. (p13, Tàlaidhean Ura)*

In turn, developing confidence might encourage creative application of new skills.

*I am trying to build a more confident spurt in me – I can use my new skills in other ways. (p10, Viewfinder)*

*Rehearsals were over a long period in order to build up skills, and other people involved witness the change in participants... 'The progression I saw in terms of their confidence and their creativity, in terms of how they were able to respond to us as artists, and in a way to see them in their*



*own artists' worlds as well growing over the months was quite inspiring.'*  
(p23, Seafarers)

Pathway elements:

- Learning new skills enabled self-expression and underpinned creative self-actualisation.

In several of the projects, learning new skills was mentioned as **enabling self-expression** or allowing **realisation of potential** which was tied to **creative identity** (self-actualisation).

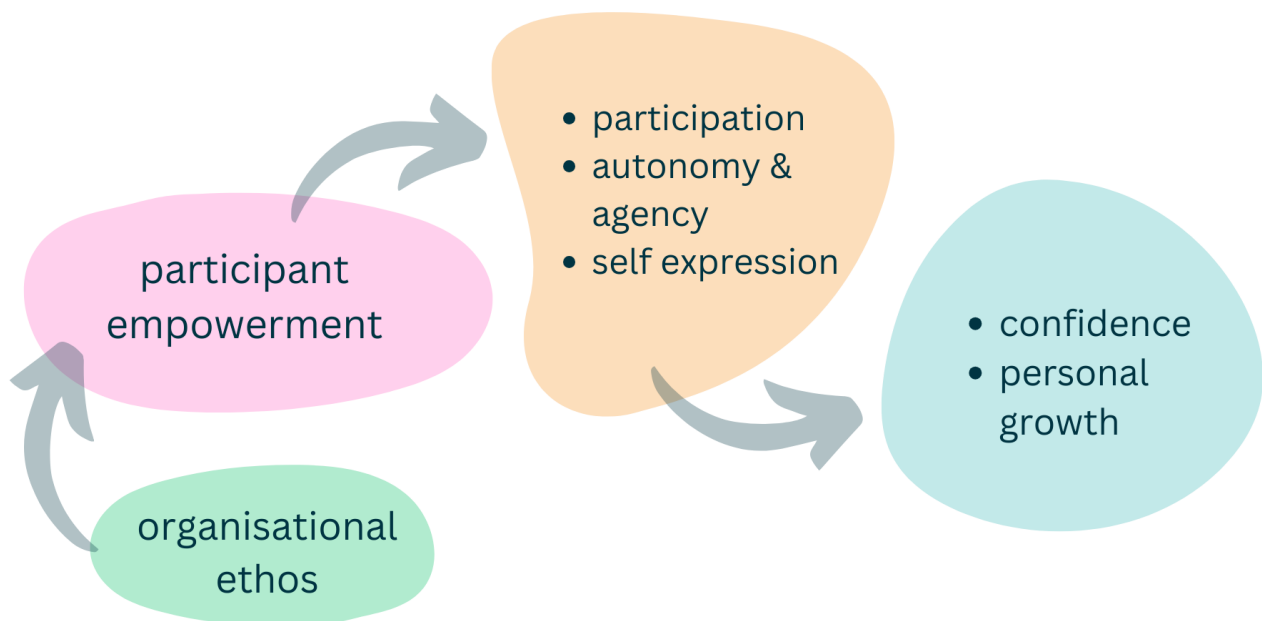
*(It was) evident that all participants were able to express themselves creatively through the processes of learning how to play a musical instrument, developing their singing voices, engaging in basic songwriting skills, and performing songs as a group.*  
(p5, MyMusic Northamptonshire)

*Dance training was brand new to Emily. She was from a special school and had never been in a dance class before. Straight away, her movement vocabulary grew more and more varied ...Once she had this opportunity to learn, she took it and ran with it. She picked up movement quickly, paid attention to detail, asked questions and was ready to rehearse again and again until it was right.* (p23, Seafarers)

*'So this was an opportunity to get into a rhythm again, I suppose, of making space for creativity...It's an important part of my identity to be creative.'* (p13, Tàlaidhean Ura)



## 5. Participant empowerment



### Pathway elements:

- Individuals were empowered to participate in and influence creative activity and process and to express themselves.

Connected to learning new skills and to development of confidence, evidence from several projects suggested that participants in the projects were empowered in various ways. This was explained in terms of increased **autonomy**: they had developed a **sense of agency** over the creative process, **independence** to engage, or acquired **confidence to assert influence** over the creative process.

*'.....I have a sense of agency that I can create things that are good for myself in life.' This emphasises that creativity offers a feeling of control and authorship. (p22, Our Day Out)*

*(Carers) expressed their appreciation that sessions involved their partners, who can still participate, thus maintaining their ability to retain some independence within the sessions. (p24, Our Day Out)*

*Participants appeared to be much more vocal (and in some cases demanding) of their (creativity-related) wants and needs. (p7, Critical Mass monitoring form)*

Participants valued how being able to take part in creative activities enabled them to **express themselves**, including when they were unable to do so in other contexts.

*'It's one way to express yourself...' ...'(I like how) every movement can have different emotion.'...'It is creative and even if you're shy you can become a different person while dancing.'* (p22, Seafarers)

*'I can't read or write, that's why I do my art, it's my outlet – my way of expressing myself'* (p14, Bay Create)

#### Pathway elements:

- Individuals were empowered to take on leadership roles, gaining experience and understanding which increased their confidence.



Empowerment of individuals was also described in relation to participants **emerging as leaders** or taking part in **co-production** of projects and activities, gaining important experience, understanding and confidence as a result.

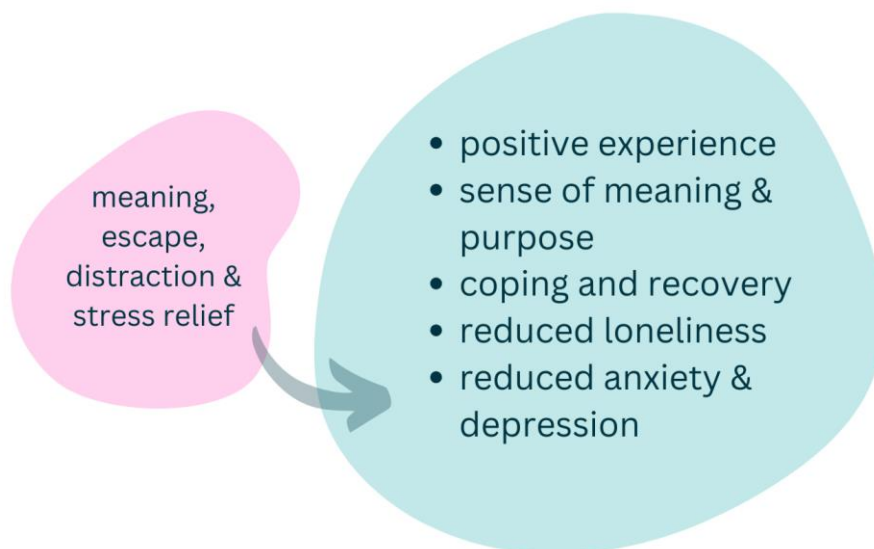
Viewfinder 'members' became increasingly involved in making decisions about projects and the

organisation set up a project design group to make decisions. Two members became company directors. And

*The model of the 'Legacy Group'... supported beneficiaries into emerging leadership. Participants increasingly took ownership of the group, determining session content and repertoire, and developing a shared, collaborative style of leadership. (p20, Sound Out! monitoring form)*

*D often found himself in the position of 'leading' some of the group and trying to inspire others in activities. He cited the example of when Pui (an artist) was helping someone with a specific part of an activity or showing a small group what to do, he would often take on the role of guiding others who might need help or encouragement.... Through his involvement with the project 'D' said he felt his confidence had gone through the roof, mainly due to having the Bay Create space and the opportunities to work together creatively with a great group of young people, developing different perspectives on things and seeing himself and others growing together in their levels of maturity. (p19, Bay Create)*

## 6. Meaning, escape, distraction and stress relief



Pathway elements:

- Participation in creative projects provided a positive, meaningful dimension to life which was an antidote to boredom or to social isolation and loneliness.

Involvement in creative projects was identified as providing a new, positive, **meaningful dimension to life**, an antidote to emptiness or boredom, social isolation and loneliness.

*'It gave me something to get out for, because you know it can be so easy to shut yourself away, and you know, not bother to do anything. You know you have got to have something to live for which I think is why these groups have been so, so brilliant. I can't really say much more than that, because it's, you know it's true it's meant an awful lot to my life.'*  
(p22, Our Day Out)

Music-making is seen as a distraction from boredom and day-to-day routines. *What would all the young people be doing instead...if they were not coming to the sessions? Their answers generally centred around boredom, predictability and being on screens.*  
(p4, My Pockets Music)

*The opportunities to try new arts activities, work with artists and produce artworks were an incentive to break from the lonely routines that some had found themselves in.* (p14, Bay Create)

Pathway elements:

- Involvement provided carers with stimulating, restorative time away from caring responsibilities which could make it easier to cope.

For carers, creative participation provided a **stimulating** alternative to and **time away** from everyday responsibilities which could be mundane and very demanding. It was described as restorative time for oneself and, as such, could make it easier to cope.

*'I feel refreshed – it's something new to do instead of being inside all day.'*  
(p43, MyMusic Northamptonshire)

*'It's difficult getting time to do something that's creative and not just something dull like painting, like ordinary toddler groups, but actually something that involves your mind and actually involves thinking and producing something really special.'* (p13, Tàlaidhean Ura)

*'...as you get older, there's less and less time for creativity, as work and caring responsibilities take over. So this was an opportunity to get into a rhythm again.'* (p13, Tàlaidhean Ura)

*'It's valuing you as an individual, it's not looking at you as the carer, wife, nurse, mother, whatever. It's looking at you and at your needs and abilities, your happiness. For carers to feel they are individuals in their own right, not just part of this package of care they're trapped in.... there's a feeling that you can't be yourself because you're part of somebody else's needs. I think it's good to have that turned over and you are you for this hour or two.'* (p15, Tàlaidhean Ura)

*'It's like you get something lifted off you, go out, feel you can do it all again now.'* (p8, Sound Out!)

#### Pathway elements:

- For some participants under stress or with mental health problems, creative engagement was calming or immersing and acted as a distraction from worries or provided relief through self-expression.

For those under stress or experiencing mental health difficulties, attending the projects and engaging in creative activities could be calming and improve mood by **distracting** participants from worries, relaxing them or enabling relief through **self-expression** which was a constructive alternative to more negative ways of thinking and responding.

*'But when we had the meetings, take your mind off yourself, so you're not thinking about yourself so much...'* (p19, Our Day Out)

*'When I'm really stressed out, I come here and instantly feel better – I forget about my worries.'* (p11, Bay Create)

*'And my depression – if you have depression this place is like a turntable – if you're having a bad day you can go one way or another...if you come here it gives you a task to go on – it's why I come here. Instead of chucking yourself off a bridge or hurting yourself, you come here and it takes your mind somewhere else and you can express yourself.'*  
(p14, Bay Create)

*'My problem sort of disappears when I come to the group, because it's distracting. It's stress relief. When I'm singing about my problem, like with the Maccy D's song, it reminds you about it a little bit, but it also helps you see the lighter side of it. Certain parts of the problem stay inside me, but bits of it go away.'* (p17, My Pockets Music)

*'It just makes me calm...I can just sit back, relax, I don't have to worry!...'It kind of helps me sleep, because it exhausts me. It's fun and it's after a school day, which is totally different and...just makes me feel relaxed.'*  
(p3, My Pockets Music)

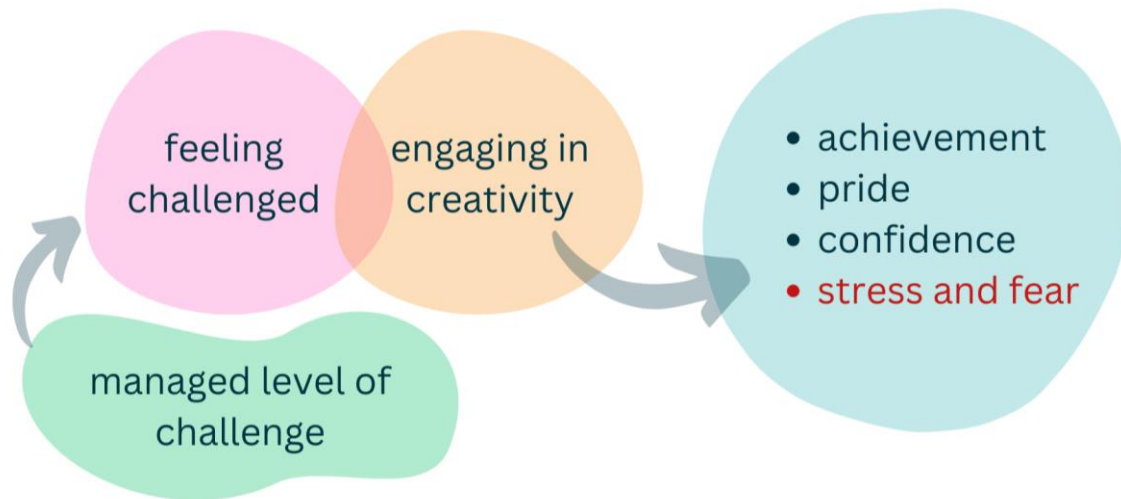
In the following case, it was the **'total focus'** and immersion demanded by musical activity that made it an effective distraction.

*'We've learnt lots of quite complicated melodies, songs, rounds, where you've really got to focus on it, you absolutely can't be thinking about anything else...and that for me is lovely.'...'If you're not thinking about drumming you're going wrong, you can't be thinking about the fact that your son needs to be somewhere, or what you're going to have for dinner, or that you've left loads of stuff in the washing machine'* (p8, Sound Out!).

Another quote from My Pockets Music suggests that music experienced at the project could alleviate stress in other contexts.

*'If I'm in a lot of stress with school and I just think about music or I just sing a song that I've got stuck in my head, that helps me forget all about the stress I've got at school.'* (p16, My Pockets Music)

## 7. Feeling challenged



### Pathway elements:

- Meeting a challenge posed by creative activity - including to overcome fear - could lead to sense of achievement and pride and to a growth in confidence.

Pride in creative achievement, growth in confidence and raised aspirations were achieved by **'doing'**.

*'I think I've learnt that I'm a pretty decent singer. It's helped my confidence, I think I'm not really good at things so now there's at least something. It's nice.'* (p42, MyMusic Northamptonshire)

However, challenge experienced by participants - **'being pushed out of my comfort zone'** (Sound Out!) - was an important factor in bringing about these positive wellbeing outcomes. It has already been described how taking part in performances was a challenge that could lead to feelings of achievement, pride and raised aspirations - as well as stress and anxiety in the lead up. Challenge

was also experienced in more everyday creative contexts and it was important for facilitators to **manage the level of that challenge** and to **encourage** participants to overcome fears involved:

*In relation to a participant who was nervous of using a woodburning tool: They were warmly encouraged to try it themselves and given additional time to talk through the safety equipment and have an additional demonstration...These additional measures to reassure the participant enabled them to complete the task independently. They were so pleased and proud of their achievements, they smiled and shouted, 'I did it!' Before calling everyone over to look at their achievement, saying, 'Oh, I'm really pleased with myself – look what I've done – tell Sarah'*  
(p12, Bay Create)

#### Pathway elements:

- Challenge needed to be at the right level: not too much, but participants may be underchallenged or avoid challenge altogether
- Facilitators had to balance comfort/nurturing and challenge.

Providing a comfortable level of challenge can encourage engagement.

*An inclusive contemporary dance approach is flexible and allowed participation at a comfortable level: '[With Stopgap sessions]it was nice and calm, it was nice and gentle, and I got into it straight away because it was nice and calm.'* (p50, Seafarers)

Yet there were unlikely to be maximum benefits when, as Viewfinder and Critical Mass report, participants felt there were times when they had been under-challenged. It could also be the case that people avoided challenge and, perhaps because they were facing stress in their lives, opted for easy activities or just for the more social or relaxing side of groups. Facilitators therefore had a balancing act to do.

*Getting the balance right between developing work that would positively impact on wellbeing whilst also encouraging people to do something that pushed them outside of their 'comfort zone' was an ongoing challenge, across the age ranges. Many older participants were happy to*



*keep the activities simple: e.g. colouring in, as they felt that they were being creative but could concentrate on the chat and social side of the get together. However, it was the more challenging activities that led to a boost in the confidence of participants. (p12, Bay Create)*

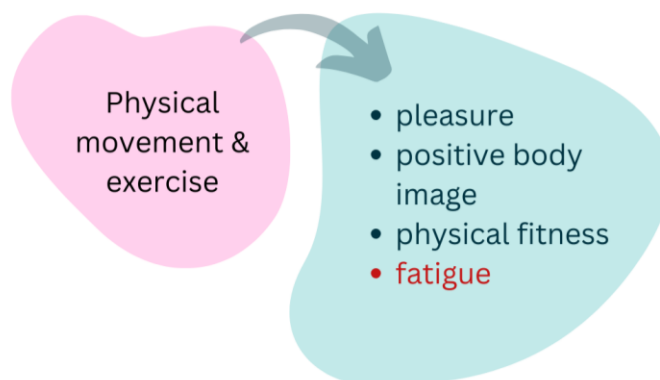
*'It's a funny thing because there's this aspect of nurturing in the whole experience and then there's kind of a product that we need to create by the end of the project, and then there's the reality of working with mothers of new babies who might be tired, and might show up twenty minutes late because, you know, their kid did a poo right at the door or whatever.'* (p14, Tàlaidhean Ura)

*'You're always walking that line in between being challenging and it being too much, but there's a really great place in the middle of that where people feel really, really satisfied at the end of sessions where they've been challenged. You have to find that point in each group and in each session. But the more you do it, the more you can predict what that challenging point will be'* (p15, Sound Out)



Photo credit: Dougie Evans / Seafarers

## 8. Physical movement and exercise



### Pathway elements:

- Physical activity within dance/movement projects was fun, increased fitness and could mitigate body image concerns.
- It could also cause fatigue.

Evidence from the dance/music and movement projects referred to the experience of **movement** and **exercise** as being important. Physical activity was discussed as a form of exercise, a source of fun and as mitigating body image concerns.

*'not just bending down to gardening or standing back up again, particularly in the heat and moving the whole body really, moving those muscles that don't get used and that.'* (p23, Our Day Out)

*Participants made many comments that show that movement was a key part of why they enjoyed the sessions. Dance teachers confirmed that they had loved the movement aspect of the sessions, and the games and moves involved.* (p19, Seafarers)

*'It makes me think I can achieve anything in dance, no matter what my body shape.'* (p20, Seafarers)

*'Throughout the year I've felt my strength increasing and I feel much fitter with stamina improved.'* (p11, Critical Mass monitoring form)

However, as already noted in relation to the build up to the performance for Critical Mass there were **intense periods** which could cause fatigue for those involved.

## 6. Overall quality of the case studies

In this section we describe our assessment of the quality of the case study data, and identify why some areas were stronger than others.

We used an amended version of the quality assessment criteria to assess the quality of case study data in relation to integrity, completeness, transparency and format (see Appendix 4). This was not intended as an exercise in making judgement of specific project evaluation materials but to highlight general areas of strength or weakness in data in the case studies. We made the following assessment of the set of case studies overall:

Area of quality	Components	Overall assessment
<b>Integrity</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Did the projects describe their evaluation method and use accurate and unbiased language?</li> <li>• Did they name the report authors, use external evaluators, or attribute the author of the reports?</li> <li>• Did they reference the wider evidence base?</li> </ul>	<p>Projects partially described their evaluation methods, and mostly used unbiased language.</p> <p>Most of the projects had an external evaluator, and stated who had written their reports.</p> <p>Practitioners don't have easy access to the wider evidence base so several of them did not refer to it in their reporting.</p>
<b>Completeness</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Was the setting, population, and intervention fully described?</li> <li>• Were the aims and objectives clear?</li> <li>• Were the outcomes achieved clear, and were results published regardless of outcome?</li> <li>• Was there 'thick description' of how and why the interventions had an impact?</li> <li>• Did the projects report learnings or make recommendations?</li> </ul>	<p>The projects clearly described the setting and population, as well as the interventions.</p> <p>They mostly described the aims and objectives, as well as the outcomes. They published the results regardless of outcomes, and most of them reported learnings and recommendations.</p> <p>The projects didn't all use thick description, although they all used quotes to illustrate complex mechanisms.</p>

<b>Transparency</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Are the funding sources clear?</li> <li>• Are the data made accessible?</li> <li>• Is there discussion of the limitations of the intervention and of the evaluation or research?</li> </ul>	<p>The funding for the projects was clearly reported on the monitoring forms, and the data for the ONS4 measures was reported in these too.</p> <p>There was very little discussion of the limitations of the evaluation, except for the usability of the ONS4 measures. This is very uncommon outside peer reviewed or formal evaluations.</p> <p>There was very little discussion of the limitations of the intervention and activities.</p>
<b>Format</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Was the content in a suitable format for other practitioners?</li> <li>• Was it clearly structured?</li> </ul>	<p>The projects mostly wrote in a way that was accessible to other practitioners, and several of them used a clear structure in their reporting.</p>

The quality of the project case studies were partly influenced by the relationship and approach of Spirit as a funder. For example, the case studies all reported and made available data on wellbeing (regardless of positive or negative results), but this is likely to have been because reporting these results was a mandatory element of Spirit's monitoring forms. Other funders can encourage projects to do this in a similar way, but this needs to be balanced against other expectations.

**'Completeness'** was the strongest domain of quality across the case studies, with most projects fully and clearly describing the circumstances and nature of their work, the people involved, and the difference they made. This is also the most important domain for our case study synthesis approach, since it required clear and complete description and

interpretation of contexts, mechanisms and outcomes. However, 'thick description' did not come easily to some projects, and may be an area that funders could support through training and by encouraging projects to reflect and interpret their output or outcome data more fully.

**'Integrity'** and **'Transparency'** were areas where improvements could be made, since projects did not fully describe their evaluation approaches or reflect on their limitations.

## 7. Discussion

### What contexts and circumstances were involved in the delivery of creative activities and projects?

Wellbeing impacts were achieved by organisations of different sizes, in rural and urban settings, through music, visual arts, dance and other creative activities. Although Covid-19 restrictions affected seven out of ten projects, most still reported wellbeing outcomes after adapting their activities.

Having inclusive values and approaches which sought to empower participants made a difference to how organisations designed and delivered activities, and by extension, to the pathways that people took to improved wellbeing. This was especially important as the majority of the projects targeted people at risk of low wellbeing, or those who were excluded from taking part in creative activities due to personal circumstances, geographical location, or lack of accessible opportunities. Several projects involved participants in the co-production of activities. A collaborative approach was also effective, as projects which built strong partnerships with other organisations found it easier to recruit participants.

#### **Recommendations to funders and policy makers:**

- Support a range of creative activities, especially those that are inclusive and empower participants.
- Support projects to develop strong partnerships, including giving time and resources where needed.

#### **Recommendations to practitioners:**

- Tailor projects to make sure people's differences are valued, that they feel included, and that they are able to make decisions about the activities.
- Continue to work in partnership to reach people who would otherwise not take part in creative activity, and whose wellbeing may be low.



## What wellbeing outcomes were associated with creative activities and projects for different people?

Initial quantitative evidence from four projects shows that participants had lower than average wellbeing when they started, which suggests that the projects had targeted the right populations. The ONS4 findings from these projects showed improvements in Anxiety and Life Worthwhile measures, with less change in Life Satisfaction and Happiness. This mirrors the qualitative findings from across the projects that creativity enabled a sense of purpose and helped to reduce stress.

However, many of the projects reported challenges in using the ONS4 measures in their evaluations, and several of them found adaptations or alternatives that suited their circumstances better. This was especially the case for participants with cognitive or learning disabilities and younger people, who found it difficult to answer the questions. Projects also struggled to gather a large enough sample of responses, and found interpreting results challenging, especially during Covid-19.

Positive outcomes were reported across all projects, especially through qualitative data. Many of these outcomes are strongly associated with personal wellbeing, for example: enjoyment, achievement and pride, confidence, personal growth and raised aspirations as well as outcomes related to social connection.

### **Recommendations to funders and policy makers:**

- Where appropriate, encourage projects to collect quantitative data on wellbeing using robust measures like the ONS4, so that learnings can be drawn together across activities and populations.
- Be flexible and support projects who find these measures challenging to use, and encourage proportionate alternative ways of understanding impact.

- Support the testing and development of quantitative and qualitative approaches which are suitable for a range of populations in community and creative settings.

**Recommendations to practitioners:**

- Explore what wellbeing means in your context, population and activity.
- Continue to use a range of approaches to understand the difference your project makes to people's wellbeing.

## What were the mechanisms and pathways that lead to wellbeing outcomes in creative activities and projects?

Findings showed that the creative projects had enabled multiple pathways to wellbeing by fostering environments, activities, and conditions that unlocked a range of mechanisms. Some of these pathways were relational, where interaction or engagement with others is central, others were personal, where individual activity or experience was more important. Singly or in combination, they led to a variety of wellbeing outcomes.

Some pathways involved sequences where a relational mechanism (supported facilitation, positive social contact, performance) unlocked a whole set of individual mechanisms. This in turn led to a range of outcomes. This underlines the importance of getting relational processes in creative projects right.

Notably, skilled facilitation was important. Components of effective facilitation - such as respecting participants, celebrating work, inspiring, making activities fun, being flexible and providing supportive frameworks - led to people enjoying themselves, feeling valued and inspired. It also made an indirect impact by unlocking individual mechanisms (better engagement in activities, learning new creative skills, sense of autonomy and choice, challenge and empowerment) which in turn supported wellbeing. Evidence from several projects highlighted the importance of involving professional creative

practitioners in delivering high quality, inspiring activities that can enhance outcomes. However, additional careful training and support for those delivering projects which was key to effective, inclusive facilitation.

Relational mechanisms could also be *direct* drivers of wellbeing. Social environment and contact (creating welcoming spaces, continuity of people, opportunities to spend time with others 'like me') impacted directly - unsurprisingly - on relational outcomes: social connectedness, sense of belonging, feeling understood as well as on several personal outcomes (enjoyment and confidence). Relationships with peers were important in many projects, but it's not clear from the evidence what 'good' peer support and relationships look like and how to support people to be good peers.

The project evidence suggests that some of the personal pathways to wellbeing may be particularly relevant to specific participant groups.

For example,

- Meaning, escape, distraction and stress-relief were discussed in relation to those with caring responsibilities for whom creative activity provided positive, meaningful experience and a chance to recover; and for those with mental health difficulties for whom activities helped them to be calm and less anxious or depressed.
- Experiencing high levels of physical challenge leading to pride, increased confidence and aspirations in the context of dance projects were discussed in relation to disabled participants. Being able to meet the right challenge was seen as important for this group because there were low expectations of them in other contexts in their lives.

This kind of relationship between specific population and pathway could be examined further in a larger sample of case studies.

Finally, recurring at several points in our findings was a theme of needing to achieve balance between providing a relaxed, supportive and nurturing

environment on the one hand; and a challenging, energetic, productive set of activities on the other. This balance was important for outcomes including confidence, achievement and personal growth. But imbalance could be damaging or limit the benefits of creative engagement: for example, too much challenge could cause stress; too little challenge could limit opportunities to experience pride in achievement.

#### **Recommendations to funders and policy makers:**

- Continue to support projects where professional artists deliver creative projects, and encourage training and other support to be put in place to support skilled facilitation
- Prioritise the provision for supportive social environments alongside creative activities
- Explore the role of peers in creating wellbeing outcomes, including researching what enables good peer support.
- Explore how participant progression and leadership can support wellbeing for different people.

#### **Recommendations to practitioners:**

- Use creative expertise and inclusive facilitation skills to maximise the wellbeing benefits of creative and social experiences
- Provide an appropriate balance between a relaxed, nurturing and a challenging, productive environment

### **‘Mining’ evaluation and monitoring materials using a case study synthesis approach**

Case study synthesis proved to be an effective approach for ‘mining’ the wealth of evaluation and monitoring materials produced by Spirit of 2012 projects. By bringing together practice findings from a set of projects with a creative common element we were able to gain substantial overall insight into *how* and *why* they achieve wellbeing impact. This collective evidence amplifies the rich learning from the original project-specific documents, and can be used to develop more meaningful quantitative evaluations.

The same synthesis methods could be applied to other sets of wellbeing projects with a different common focus (for example those focused on sport or physical activity) or to understand a cohort of projects in a place, or a set that was aimed at a specific population.

## Limitations of the research

The synthesis - and our findings - are limited in a number of ways. Firstly, once we had screened all the Spirit of 2012 creative projects against our inclusion criteria, our sample was small and music projects for carers were heavily represented. Evidence from a sample which included projects with a more balanced mix of creativity types may have uncovered different pathways to impact, or provided further evidence for those where we found less data. Indeed, the sample might explain why some of the mechanisms from the original creativity review framework ([Appendix 1](#)), for example 'Experimentation and curiosity' did not feature strongly in this data.

In addition, since projects did not complete a case study template, we constructed cases using data from evaluations and monitoring forms. This created some delays in the synthesis project and may have limited the integrity, transparency and completeness of the data used in this analysis. Had project staff or their evaluators completed the template themselves they may have placed more or less emphasis on specific findings which fed into the synthesis.

Asking projects to write a case study using a template would be highly beneficial to future synthesis for a number of reasons.

- It would provide a proportional and structured set of prompts to encourage full descriptions from projects.
- It would have speeded up the synthesis process.
- By using the complete set of template fields, a funder or commissioner could encourage high quality data by highlighting the need to include all the elements of information needed for integrity, transparency and completeness.

As in the Spirit of 2012 monitoring templates, including particular headings such as 'key learning' can be used to elicit information about challenging aspects of a project which may not always be volunteered.

**Recommendations to funders and policy makers:**

- Add to the findings from this synthesis on creativity and wellbeing by incorporating data from a broader sample of creative activities and populations.
- Use a case study synthesis approach to consolidate and amplify learning and evaluation data from a set of individual projects with a common focus
- Use a case study template to encourage manageable and rigorous data collection by projects

**Recommendations to practitioners:**

- Use a case study framework to support sharing of valuable data and learning from your project

## Conclusion

In this report we set out to synthesise a set of practice-based case studies of creativity projects funded by Spirit of 2012 to provide insight into how and why they impacted on wellbeing. We identified 10 projects which variously involved music, dance, visual arts and filmmaking activities and which included rich qualitative data needed to address our research questions. All of the projects reported improvements in wellbeing, but the pathways through which they did so varied.

The synthesis approach allowed us to identify these multiple pathways to wellbeing and demonstrate the complex way in which such projects create benefit. We began to draw out how certain pathways are more relevant for specific populations (in particular carers and disabled people).

Photo credit: Critical Mass



This approach to bringing together evidence from practice values the rich learnings of people who deliver activities in their own words. It adds depth and complexity to existing academic research and identifies how and why activities can lead to wellbeing. This makes this methodology a valuable tool for funders to draw out valuable learnings from practice.

## 8. How funders can use this methodology to learn from practice

This project showed the value that a body of case studies can provide in understanding how and why wellbeing outcomes can be achieved. Developing case studies is a proportional and structured way for projects to communicate their learning, which values their unique insights. Looking across a group of studies can help funders make sense of otherwise disconnected evidence.

However, this synthesis approach is not yet widely adopted by charity funders. We recommend that voluntary sector funders:

- **Use this case study synthesis methodology to understand their impact** across a set of projects, so that enabling contexts and mechanisms can be identified across very different projects.
- **Encourage the development of good-quality case study evidence from the projects they fund.** Provide training and support to projects to develop case studies for learning, including templates, webinars and troubleshooting.
- **Support a culture of peer learning through case studies**, including creating case study libraries and peer learning and sharing events.
- **Share the learning from case study synthesis widely**, especially with practitioners. Let them see that their evidence is valuable and valued, and support them to use this evidence to continue to improve their practice.

The What Works Centre for Wellbeing [Guide to effective case studies](#) (Abreu Scherer, 2021), and downloadable template, can help support projects in producing high quality case studies.



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## Appendix 1: Creative Pathways Model framework

This model of findings from Mansfield et. al. (2024) was used as the framework for our analysis.



## Appendix 2: Full methods and approach

We adapted the methodology developed with Leeds Beckett University and University of Liverpool in [A Guide to Synthesising Case Study Evidence](#) (2024).

### 1. Developing research questions

We developed the research questions in collaboration with Spirit of 2012, and referencing the evidence gaps and opportunities highlighted by the [Creativity and personal wellbeing – contexts, mechanisms and outcomes](#) (2024).

### 2. Searching for evidence

Our evidence source was the body of project reporting materials for Spirit of 2012 projects. This included published project evaluation reports and unpublished end of grant monitoring from projects for the funder. The monitoring reports were important because they sometimes included information that was additional to that included in the published reports, for example a breakdown of outcomes data and demographic details of participants or learning from practice which had led to modifications to the project. Time constraints did not allow us to include further monitoring reports which had been collected at three-monthly intervals throughout the project and which could also have been informative.

Once the decision had been made to focus on creative participation in creative projects, all 44 projects from the Spirit of 2012 creative funding portfolio were included in our initial long list of cases for potential inclusion in the synthesis. In addition, 12 projects from other portfolios were initially included because they were identified by Spirit as having a strong element of creativity. (Six were from the 'Incubation', four from the 'Active', and two from the 'Connected' streams.) The decision was then made only to include completed projects for which end of grant data would be available and not to include 'Incubation' projects where project learning might be less developed, and so finally our long list included 43 projects.

### 3. Selecting case studies

The 43 long list projects were screened to determine their inclusion in or exclusion from the synthesis. The process was designed to ensure that included projects were primarily focused on participants' creative participation in activities (rather than on effective project delivery or on people who were an audience for creative work). And we only included projects where evaluation materials had adequate specification of wellbeing outcomes and a degree of clear, 'thick description' of project contexts and mechanisms which could explain how and why participation impacted on wellbeing. Inclusion/exclusion criteria applied are shown in Table X.

Table X: Criteria for project inclusion and exclusion in the case study synthesis

Inclusion criteria	Exclusion criteria
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● The project involves creative participation in any kind/or several kinds of creative activity is the primary focus of the project. (Projects may be delivered in single or multiple sites; participants are from any age group or population in any geographic location).</li> <li>● Evaluation report and/or Spirit end of project reporting refer to primary or secondary subjective wellbeing outcomes of the project*</li> <li>● Evaluation report + Spirit end of project reporting include at least partial qualitative data on project content, context and/or mechanisms** leading to intermediate and/or final wellbeing outcomes (clear evidence of how/why the project had impact).</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Projects primarily involve 'umbrella' activity designed to support creative projects and participation</li> <li>● Projects are primarily focused on 'consumption' of art and creative artefacts/performances</li> <li>● Evaluation report and/or Spirit end of project reporting do not refer to primary or secondary subjective wellbeing outcomes of the project*</li> <li>● Evaluation report + Spirit end of project reporting do not include or include minimal qualitative data on project content, context and/or mechanisms** leading to intermediate and/or final wellbeing outcomes (little clear evidence of how and why the project had impact).</li> </ul>

Two members of the research team (HM, IAS) split initial reading and screening of the evaluation reports plus end of grant monitoring for the long list of projects. They discussed their include/exclude/unsure decisions to resolve any queries or doubts, finally arriving at a list of ten cases for inclusion in the synthesis.

We had originally anticipated that we could be left with a larger pool of projects after screening and that we could sample from this pool to ensure we were including projects involving diverse creativity types and target groups. Inclusion of only ten cases meant that there was no scope for this and our sample included a large number of music projects for carers. This reflected the fact that Spirit of 2012 had funded a large number of these projects via their 'Carers' Music Fund'. It should be noted that this may have influenced our findings and that it would be useful for similar future work on arts and creativity projects to focus on a broader sample.

#### 4. Extracting data

We extracted data from the project documents into a template based on the one provided in the What Works Centre for Wellbeing [guide to effective case studies](#). This ensured that we had a comparable standardised set of information for each project. However, we made some adjustments to the template headings to help focus the extracted data on our areas of interest: context of projects, wellbeing outcomes and mechanisms leading to outcomes. In particular, we added a section for inclusion of data detailing any mechanisms of change. See [Appendix 3](#) for all headings used in the extraction sheet.

Data was first extracted from published evaluation reports. Data from monitoring documents was then used to fill gaps in information in the evaluation report and to add additional information about context, mechanism or outcomes. We aimed to preserve original meanings of the document

evidence by including a balanced combination of summaries of key points and chunks of raw data (text and quotes) in the extraction templates.

## 5. Assessing quality

We used an amended version of the quality assessment criteria (see Appendix 4) to assess the quality of case study data in relation to integrity, completeness, transparency and format. This was not intended as an exercise in making judgement of specific project evaluation materials but to highlight general areas of strength or weakness in data in the case study templates which could be used to inform future advice about providing high quality practice-based case studies.

Two members of the team independently rated the data for each project according to the 21 criteria. Any differences in judgement were discussed and resolved between them.

## 6. Synthesis

Data from the extraction sheets was synthesised deductively and inductively using a framework analysis approach (see for example Gale et al., 2013).

Framework sheets were set up for data on project contexts, outcomes and for each of the mechanism categories in the Mansfield et al. (2024) creativity review framework. Data from the extraction templates was first categorised according to which of those sheets - or a new sheet - it belonged to. Data within each framework sheet was then inductively coded to describe key sub-categories within each framework category. For example, inductive categories within the framework sheet for 'Social Connection and Communication Skills' included 'Mutual peer support and empathy with others with similar life experience creates a comfortable context' and 'Varied degrees of social orientation result from different forms of creative practice'. Subcategories were refined as new data were added. Finally, the whole body of data was re-examined to make sure all relevant data had been included under the subcategories and that the sub-



categories and overarching categories from the original framework described that data fully and accurately.

For the quantitative data used in the analysis, pre-post mean ONS4 scores submitted by organisations were extracted from monitoring reports and presented in bar charts for the four cases that met minimum data requirements for sample size and measure used. The criteria used for sample size and measures are based on the What Works Centre for Wellbeing quality checklist for quantitative studies available [here](#).

## 7. Reporting synthesis findings, their quality and implications (see below

Synthesised findings from the projects are presented in narrative form in the following Sections 3 - 6.

## Appendix 3: Extraction table

OVERVIEW DETAILS	Name of project organisation
	Project name
	Link(s) to project documents
	Type of documents inspected
	Report date(s)*
	Creativity type(s)
	No. of sessions/time spent in creative engagement participants
	Participant target group(s)
	Age range of participants
	Overall screener comments and any notes
AUTHOR DETAILS	Author of document(s) and role in project- note if internal or external
OVERVIEW OF CASE STUDY	Overview description of case study from the documents
SETTING	Location of the project (geographical location; characteristics of the area etc)
	Description of the organisation(s) involved in running the project
PURPOSE OF PROJECT	Challenge/problem project has tried to address OR improvement project is trying to make*
	Stated aims, goals, objectives
PROJECT PROPERTIES	Project and/or funding start date
	Project and/or funding end date
	Covid period project?*
	Setting - specific venue(s) where the project takes place and any notable characteristics
	Who was involved in project delivery
	What funding has the project received and who funded it
	Other resources (e.g. staff or premises from other organisations)

	Additional project context/circumstances*
	What is the project and what does it do? (Broad description)
RATIONALE/ THEORY	Why was this approach taken? (Details of why set up in this way? Use of evidence or theory of change?)
PARTICIPANTS	Target group? Demographic details?
	Number of participants who took part
	Additional participant circumstances*
	How they came to join (E.g. outreach, referrals, word-of-mouth, existing relationships)
	Motives for taking part
EVALUATION METHODS	Details of who collected data
	Description of how data was collected
	Description of what data was collected
EVALUATION FINDINGS	Description of positive project impact and wellbeing outcomes (Include summary of quantified outcome data and outcomes which are referred to qualitatively)
	Description of any unexpected or negative wellbeing outcomes
	Description of evidence of sustainment - or non sustainment - of these positive or negative impacts
	Description of mechanisms of change leading from context and/or to wellbeing outcomes*
	Description of any enablers and barriers to positive impacts of the project? (e.g. amount and length of funding, staff skills, availability of volunteers, enthusiasm of participants, weather, scheduling)
PLUS LEARNING FROM THE PROJECT AND NEXT STEPS	Description of key learning from the project, [how the project evolved in response to ongoing learning (test and learn)]* and what this would mean for improving effectiveness of future iterations or similar projects
	Details of future plans, project sustainability and conditions/resources needed to continue
	Any outputs which can create impact (e.g. reports, guidance)

ADDITIONAL INFORMATION	Provides links to related resources (e.g. website, evaluation report etc)?
	Provides contact details for sharing learning etc
	Provide any additional info? Note details
OTHER	

Note: Extraction fields are mainly the same as information specified in the case study template in the 'Guide to effective case studies. Fields which have been added or where significant changes have been made are marked\*

## Appendix 4: Quality appraisal of case studies

Overall strengths and weaknesses of case studies using an adapted QA checklist.

Quality domain	Subdomains
Integrity	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Is a qualitative evaluation method described?</li> <li>• Is the writing accurate, balanced and objective?</li> <li>• Is the evidence base used? (Published papers &amp; work of relevance; evidence-informed theory)</li> <li>• Is there attribution of authorship and contribution</li> <li>• Is there an external evaluator</li> </ul>
Completeness	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Is the setting (i.e. organisation or sector) clearly fully described?</li> <li>• Is the population / community (e.g. socioeconomic factors) fully clearly described?</li> <li>• Is the geography or locality clearly defined (e.g. urban/rural)?</li> <li>• Is the intervention clearly described?</li> <li>• Are the aims/objectives of the intervention clear?</li> <li>• Are the outcomes of the intervention clear?</li> <li>• Is there thick description of how and why project has impact?*</li> <li>• Are all results published regardless of outcome?</li> <li>• Are the dates of when the project took place provided?</li> <li>• Do the case documents report key learning and/or make recommendations based on learning?</li> </ul>

Transparency	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Are the funding sources and sponsors described?</li><li>• Are the data collected made accessible? (e.g. link to empirical data)</li><li>• Is there discussion of any limitations of the intervention?</li><li>• Is there discussion of any limitations of the evaluation / research?</li></ul>
Format	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Is the content in a suitable format for other practitioners? (e.g. jargon free, could guide practice of others)</li><li>• Is there a clear structure?</li></ul>

## Appendix 5: Table of included projects

	Project	Lead organisation	Project summary	Who took part	Project aims	Funding from Spirit 2012
1	Bay Create	Whitley Bay Big Local	<p>Bay Create brought together a mixed-age group of local people to co-produce and participate in a set of arts projects relating to the local area between 2021 and 2023.</p> <p>The project was led by an Intergenerational Project Worker and support from a Community Involvement Coordinator. Seven artists were commissioned to deliver projects with a range of art forms including photography, collage, use of recycled materials, wood-working techniques, origami, mosaic, sculpture, crochet and glasswork ceramics. The project</p>	Initially designed as an intergenerational project, just over half of participants were under 25, with just over a third in middle age, and the remainder over 65.	<p>Improved wellbeing.</p> <p>Decreased loneliness.</p> <p>Improved intergenerational connectedness.</p> <p>Participants empowered to make decisions and shape the project.</p>	£100,000

			<p>worked with Barnardos at a local youth venue.</p> <p>Activities ranged from taster sessions, a programme of Summer events, and weekly workshops. There were two exhibitions of work.</p>			
2	Creative Minds	Youth Cymru	<p>Creative Minds supported young people across four Creative Wellbeing Hubs in South Wales to become Creative Wellbeing Champions between 2018 and 2020.</p> <p>The Champions worked with other young people in their local communities to deliver creative activities to improve understanding of their own, their peers, and their communities' experiences of mental health and wellbeing.</p>	Young people aged 14-25 at risk of mental health issues.	<p>Improved wellbeing, happiness and mental health.</p> <p>Improved confidence.</p> <p>Young people design and lead social action projects in their local area to improve understanding of mental health and wellbeing.</p>	£72,896
3	Critical Mass	Birmingham 2022	Critical Mass was a dance project that delivered inclusive sessions	Young people aged 16-30.	Create the conditions for	£1,113,350



		Organising Committee	<p>on dance and physical activity to young people in the Midlands in the lead up to the Commonwealth Games, between 2021 and 2022. Participants performed at the opening ceremony of the Games and at the Birmingham International Dance Festival.</p> <p>The organisers partnered with University of Wolverhampton Arts Connect programme, FABRIC, and the Dance Development Leaders Group to deliver dance and movement workshops and creative sessions across a 14-month period in the lead up to the Games.</p>	45% of participants identified as disabled, neurodiverse or with long-term health conditions.	<p>inclusive dance and creative participation</p> <p>Improved mental and physical health, sense of belonging and connectedness and self-perceptions of disability.</p>	
4	MyMusic Northamptonshire	Northamptonshire Carers	MyMusic Northamptonshire worked with four cohorts of carers in 12 to 16-week sessions of tailored and adaptive music workshops leading to a performance, between 2019 and 2021.	The project took a cohort approach, with four groups each targeting a different population of carers: carers over 50 in a choir, young carers aged 7-17, families where	<p>Improved mental health and wellbeing.</p> <p>Reduced isolation and loneliness.</p> <p>Improving resilience and</p>	£171,103

			Workshops included creative storytelling, Sign & Sing, songwriting, and playing ukulele. The sessions were led by musicians from Northamptonshire Music & Performing Arts Trust.	mothers and daughters split caring responsibilities, and women caring for a loved one with dementia.	coping with their caring roles.	
5	My Pockets Music	My Pockets People CIC	<p>My Pockets worked with young people in Hull and East Riding who faced particular challenges in their lives, such as mental health problems or housing insecurity between 2018 and 2022.</p> <p>Participants took part in a ten-week programme of workshops where they learned to play instruments, composed and recorded music, and learned video-making skills. The young people recorded their songs and performed for each other and their communities twice a year.</p> <p>designed to help them to express themselves and their</p>	<p>Children and young people between the ages of 8-14.</p> <p>Including young refugees, young people who have been bereaved of a parent, young carers, teenagers facing homelessness, LGBT youth groups, young people in care and from economically disadvantaged areas.</p>	Improved wellbeing.	£149,525

			<p>experiences, the organisation aims to improve their mental health and wellbeing.</p> <p>The workshops, events and training took place in a range of partner sites across Hull and East Yorkshire, including youth centres, MIND facilities, and on housing estates.</p>			
6	Our Day Out	Creative Arts East	<p>Our Day Out provided fortnightly dementia-inclusive music, dance and visual arts sessions for older people and their carers in rural Norfolk between 2016 and 2022.</p> <p>Activities took part in easily-accessible community venues and church halls, with the main session activities organised by a facilitator and led by professional artists. Structured sessions featured activities including belly dancing and samba as well as more conventional participatory music and dance, and visual arts.</p>	Older people facing barriers to engagement, including dementia, other limiting long-term illness, and isolation, and their carers.	<p>Improved wellbeing</p> <p>Increased social connections and decreased isolation and loneliness.</p> <p>Promote life-long learning.</p>	£431,014 across two grants

7	Seafarers	Stopgap Dance Company	<p>Seafarers set out to embed inclusive dance classes and performances in Norfolk and Suffolk between 2016 and 2019. The project engaged local disabled and non-disabled people in high quality inclusive dance classes and performances.</p> <p>Participants in the classes came together to take part in two large scale public dance performances which were performed as part of local arts festivals.</p> <p>The project also involved specialist training in inclusive dance for teachers who delivered the classes with the support of dance assistants.</p>	A mix of disabled and non-disabled people. Mostly adults up to age 65, and around a third children.	<p>Improved wellbeing and confidence in disabled dancers. More engagement by local people in inclusive dance classes and performances.</p> <p>Increased provision in high quality, specialised dance teacher training.</p> <p>Improved perceptions of disability.</p>	£206,995
8	Sound Out!	Jack Drum Arts	Sound Out! engaged women and girls with caring responsibilities in a 12-week group course of weekly music experiences led by musicians with teaching or facilitation	Women and girls from the age of 8 with caring responsibilities.	Increased wellbeing and reduced isolation and loneliness through active music making.	£149,251

			<p>experience. Activities took part in community venues in the south of County Durham, moving online later in the project.</p> <p>It took place between 2019 and 2021, and added an additional element of 'Doorstep Gigs' - socially distanced performances and delivery of craft packs - as a response to Covid-19 restrictions.</p>		<p>Increased self esteem and sense of potential.</p> <p>To support participants into music leadership.</p>	
9	Tàlaidhean Ura	Fèis Rois	<p>Tàlaidhean Ura worked with mothers of infants living in rural areas of the Scottish Highlands between 2019 and 2021.</p> <p>The project included singing, music-making, song writing, and social sessions for mothers of infants delivered by professional musicians.</p> <p>Mothers were supported to write personal lullabies for their infant with the possibility of recording at the end of the 12 week block. Children were looked after in a</p>	Mothers of infants and children under 3.	<p>Improved wellbeing and social isolation of new mothers.</p> <p>Increased parenting confidence and improved parental reflective functioning.</p>	£59,998

			creche and there was space for mothers to socialise or relax during sessions.			
10	Viewfinder (and follow on project Viewfinder Plus)	Beacon Films	<p>Viewfinder was a film-making and talent development programme which ran in Newcastle-upon-Tyne between 2015 and 2021.</p> <p>Filmmakers took part in structured training blocks and Masterclasses led by film professionals, created and showcased their own films and worked on commissions to external clients.</p> <p>The programme adapted over time, adding additional elements such as one-to-one mentoring.</p>	Adults with learning disabilities, autism or additional needs.	<p>Improved wellbeing and reduced isolation.</p> <p>Increased film-making and work skills.</p> <p>Increased confidence and independence.</p>	£219,000 across two grants