

Youth Arts Fund Artist Residencies

Wellbeing-focused evaluation report

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Executive Summary

This report, commissioned by Feis Rois, presents findings of a wellbeing-focused evaluation of the Youth Arts Fund Artist Residencies taking place across the Scottish Highlands in 2021. Following the residencies, the artists and young participants as well as parents and teachers were invited to share their experiences, reflect on any challenges and identify factors which contributed to the success of the project.

The findings are based on responses to bespoke online questionnaires, including multiple choice and open-ended questions, and feedback received from a sample of 22 individuals involved in the residencies: ten artists, four young participants, seven parents and one teacher. Quotes are presented verbatim with exception of gender identifying pronouns and any details which would reveal individual respondents' identity.

The report initially reflects on the artists' expectations of the residencies in relation to the actual experience. It then discusses wellbeing-related impacts reported by the respondents, including enjoyment, opportunity for new learning and experiences, relaxation, enhanced self-expression and self-discovery, increased confidence and strengthened connections with peers. Finally, the report discusses challenges and enabling factors in achieving wellbeing benefits as part of the outcomes of artist residencies.

Project Overview

Funded by the Youth Arts Fund, ten artists worked with children and young people across the nine Highland Council Community Planning Partnership areas over the course of weeks and months in 2021. The artist residencies aimed to support the recovery of youth arts provision in the region following pandemic-related restrictions affecting delivery and participation in arts activities. The residencies were supported by local arts organisations, youth services and schools. They offered a range of opportunities to engage in different art forms and in different setups, including group work and individual sessions with artists.

Each residency aimed to respond to unique local needs and interests, with artists working with children and young people of all ages from 5 to 25 (vast majority being between 10 and 17 years old) and, in some areas, with children with additional support needs. In addition to improving quality arts provision, it was expected that the residencies would have benefits for the young people's wellbeing, particularly important given the recent impacts of the Covid-19 pandemic and the focus of community-based initiatives on post-pandemic recovery.

Youth Arts Fund Artist Residencies	Art form used by the Artist(s)	Location of Residency	Setting	Young People Engaged
Residency 1	music	Caithness	community	young people with additional support needs (inc. care experienced, and with physical and mental health challenges)
Residency 2	music	Sutherland	community	young people experiencing rural disadvantage
Residency 3	music	East Ross	school	secondary school pupils
Residency 4	music	Mid Ross	school	secondary school pupils
Residency 5	visual arts	Inverness	school	secondary school pupils, SIMD deciles 1 and 2
Residency 6	drama	Nairn	community	young people identified as most in need
Residency 7	dance	Badenoch and Strathspey	school	secondary school pupils, some with additional support needs
Residency 8	visual arts	Lochaber	community	young people with additional support needs experiencing rural isolation / disadvantage
Residency 9	variety of art forms	Skye	community	young people of all abilities

Table 1: Description of the nine artist residencies supported by the Youth Arts Fund in 2021.

1 Expectations and the actual experience of the residencies: artists' perspective

Working to a high-level brief of increased arts provision and recovery from the pandemic supported by the arts, the artists envisioned more specific goals for their individual residencies, linked to own expertise and the needs of the communities they served. Providing the young people with opportunities for social interaction through artistic activity seemed to be a priority for many of the artists involved, recognising scarcity of group activities in the year prior to the project due to Covid-19-related restrictions.

...to provide an opportunity to (...) create and work together, to be inspired... (Artist)

...to offer participants the opportunity to develop and build confidence, social skills and friendships in response to the COVID 19 pandemic... (Artist)

One artist shared, however, that while they were hoping to encourage more group work "that would span across the residency", there was more demand for individual sessions, which they then decided to honour. Another artist shared that while they "hoped to establish a group of participants that would continue from beginning to end in order to build something new and shared within the group", they needed to adapt their approach due to having different participants throughout the lifetime of the project. One artist intended to provide activities that would be both engaging and offering a safe and welcomed routine for their young participants with additional support needs.

To provide some routine and continuity for young adults with additional support needs. The pandemic disrupted many of [the young people's] usual activities and patterns, so providing some stability and stimulating activity was a key goal. (Artist)

2 Wellbeing-related outcomes

For many of the young people, participation in the arts activities on offer was the first experience of this kind following the pandemic-related lockdowns and the opportunity was gratefully perceived as something special by some parents. Those artists who worked with movement/dance also mentioned that they could observe improvements in the children's fitness levels, particularly after a period of reduced physical activity.

I hope we can take part in similar again soon - this was about my ideal level of participation with Covid too, very relaxed and you could do this to suit (...) all on our doorstep too which was a huge bonus. (Parent)

...very special as we exited the starvation of this sort of thing with Covid... (Parent)

Many respondents felt that the residencies offered the young participants a chance to learn something new or increase skills and knowledge in an engaging and enjoyable way. One artist mentioned that the children who initially were anxious about taking part in activities, were eventually able to relax and enjoy the sessions with support from their peers.

This was something new and fun that they hadn't done before. (Artist)

Great fun to learn something new! (Young participant)

Having something more practical and artistic and having the one to one 'mentoring' I think has been a very positive experience for [my child]. (Parent)

The residencies not only provided an opportunity for new learning and development of artistic technique, but, perhaps more importantly, allowed for exploration of own creativity and self-expression commonly restricted by the limitations linked with the Covid-19 pandemic. Some artists observed the young people's passion for arts growing and felt that the invitation to create freely empowered them to express their ideas more openly.

...showing them that all of them have ideas, and are capable of creating... (Artist)

it was great to see their passion and enthusiasm for music grow across the residency. (Artist)

Participants had the opportunity to explore and express their creative voices. (Artist)

Feedback received from the artists, the young participants and their parents suggests that the residencies resulted in numerous positive impacts on the wellbeing of the young people involved. One artist felt that good attendance during optional sessions demonstrated "the positive impact on each participant". Increase of confidence was frequently observed by artists and parents, particularly linked with sharing own work and experience with the group and with wider audience(s).

Last night was amazing, to hear [my child] say [their] lines after [their] thinking [they] would freeze again was so heart-lifting. [They have] overcome [their] fears and it's largely down to [the artist], [their] hard work and commitment to these kids. (Parent)

Young people who did not have the confidence to share their work within the group during the summer project, were able to perform with confidence to the public during the final performance. (Artist)

I have noticed an increase in confidence socially, with conversation flowing more equally between us than at the start of the project. (Artist)

The young people's confidence, teamwork and performance skills had strengthened. (Artist)

It has really been fantastic for [my child] and [they have] grown so much in awareness and self-esteem. (Parent)

The social aspect of the residencies was recognised by the artists as particularly important and many highlighted the value of strengthened (and new) connections for the young people and also for themselves. The artists who worked with groups valued the opportunity this created for the children to

share their creative experience. Importantly, some artists also considered the experience inspiring and fulfilling for themselves and valued the relationships their built with the young people during their residencies.

Although I didn't manage to create a shared group trajectory, the connections we established within each group and workshop were exciting and generous and I was impressed by what was created by the participants on each occasion and found the experience extremely fulfilling. (Artist)

I feel that I had made a deeper impact than initially intended, due to how close of a personal connection I felt I had made to the pupils. (Artist)

Being that I'm from the surrounding area, I felt as though I could relate with the pupils more as we all had something in common. (Artist)

There has been also an indication of impact on one young participant's family, inspiring the parent to engage in music making with their child, which has presumably enriched their relationship by providing enjoyment of sharing a creative activity.

It's also made me get my own violin out for the first time in 20 years (I am a failed musician!) (...) I was amazed [my child] got to take a quarter fiddle home too! We've had lots of fun and made some videos playing together. (Parent)

Parents and teachers who took part in an online survey (n=8) indicated that they had observed a number of benefits for the young people's mental wellbeing in connection with their participation in the programme, including some of the impacts also reported by the artists (Figure 1) as well as an improved ability to concentrate.



Figure 1: Responses from parents/teachers (n=8) to questionnaire item: Which of the following benefits for the young people's mental wellbeing have you observed in connection with their participation in the programme?

My [child] loved the session, and hasn't stopped talking about it this afternoon. The first session was as good, and as long as I've seen [my child] participate in anything, it's unusual for [them] to concentrate so well and for so long. (Parent)

Four young people who took part in music activities shared their feelings in connection with their creative experience, indicating excitement, enjoyment, creativity and also feeling connected, confident and relaxed (Figures 2 and 3). All young respondents also agreed that they would like to take part in a similar programme in the future and parents expressed their hope that similar opportunities for their children would still be available. Some of the young participants continued their engagement in an artistic activity beyond the duration of the project on their own initiative, with examples of students who secured unconditional offers to art schools and a group of young people making a successful application for funding.

Doing the activity made me feel...

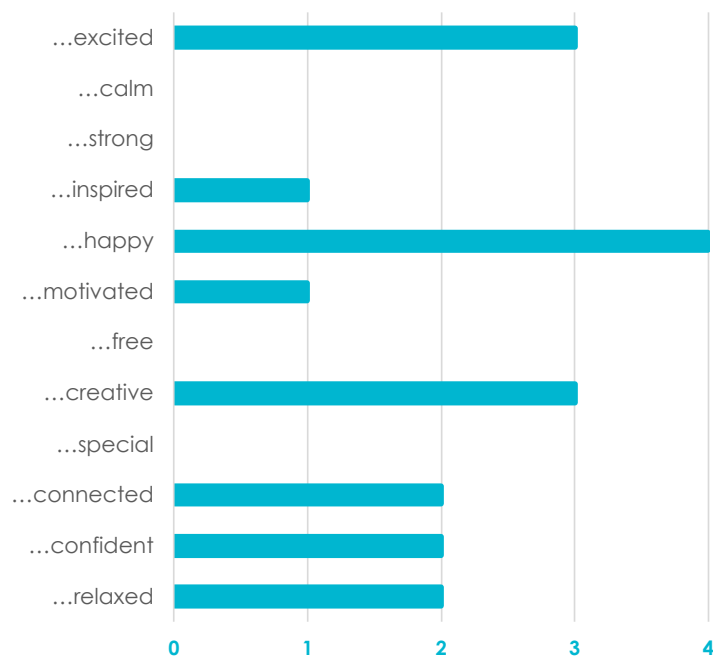


Figure 2: Responses from the young people taking part in music activities (n=4) to questionnaire item: Doing the activity made me feel... [multiple choice].

We still have videos of [my child] playing [their] borrowed quarter fiddle on my phone, [my child] still likes showing people this! (Parent)

It was great, I'd like to do it again. (Young participant)

It was an excellent programme, my [child] thoroughly enjoyed the fiddle sessions (...). It would be great if they could continue. (Parent)

[My child] has absolutely loved this week!! And [they have] already decided that [they] want to continue after the summer! (Parent)

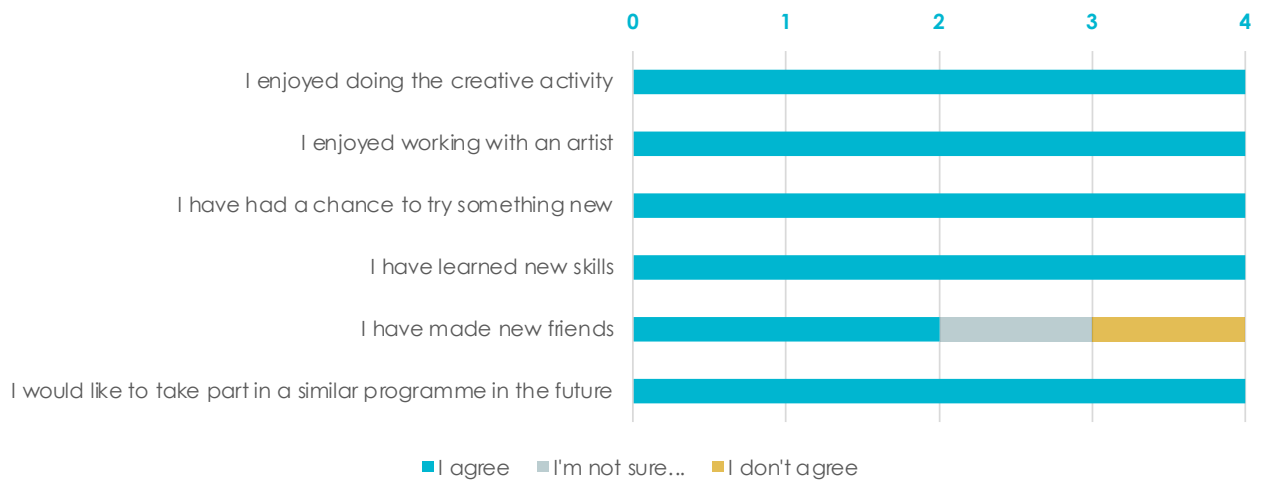


Figure 3: Responses from the young people taking part in music activities (n=4) to questionnaire item: Please tell us if you agree with these statements...

Highlights: Impact on wellbeing

Artists, parents and the young people reported positive impacts of the residencies on the following wellbeing-related outcomes:

- Enjoyment
- New learning and new experiences
- Relaxation
- Self-expression and self-discovery
- Increase of (social) confidence
- Strengthened connections with peers

There were accounts of the benefits extending to artists, for whom the experience was fulfilling and enriching, and to other family members inspired to share the creative experience with their child.

3 Challenges and enabling factors

The artists mentioned several challenges they encountered in their residencies, which in most cases they were able to address with no significant disruptions to the young participants' experience. One artist admitted being challenged by the children's lack of confidence at the beginning of their residency but said that they soon relaxed "as the sessions went along". Another artist mentioned that they initially intended to work with the young people towards creating a music play record, but soon realised that they had overestimated what was possible within the project boundaries and also their students' musical knowledge. The pandemic still in place at the time of the residencies limited attendance and one teacher shared that it was difficult "to fit [the sessions] in amongst covid restrictions". It was felt that group work was in particular affected by pandemic-related constraints.

The constant challenge of the changing face of Covid meant there was an ever-changing number of pupils and occasionally classes could not go ahead when a large proportion of a year group was absent due to Covid. (Artist)

In light of the difficulties with attendance, one artist reflected on the unique opportunity they had to work with an individual young person instead of a group, as initially intended, which they found to be a particularly meaningful and rewarding experience, enriching their creative practice and allowing them to offer a more person-centred guidance for the young participant.

Despite the difficulty in finding participants, when it came to actually delivering the workshops I found that the number of participants didn't matter. There was one workshop of three days long in which I worked with just one participant. It felt like a real honour to have this one to one time to really listen to what they were interested in/ wondering about/ wanted to create and mostly to hear about the world from their [x] year old perspective. This particularly was very inspiring. (Artist)

Artists generally felt that their relationship with the partner organisation was important, with one artist in particular highlighting it as a major factor in the success of their residency. Some artists, however, experienced challenges around communication with settings/schools and felt that roles and responsibilities could have been specified more clearly which could have improved commitment and enthusiasm of partners involved.

If a similar project were to run again, I feel a meeting with everyone involved would benefit so that the problems we encountered can be worked out together. (Artist)

Practical issues with finding suitable spaces for creative sessions and ensuring that the children's school work is not disturbed were also mentioned. One teacher and one artist agreed that activities which are spread over several short sessions within school time would be easier to accommodate in a school environment and more likely to be attended than longer after school sessions. However, the artist also observed that after school sessions were easier to arrange due to rooms available and no need for permissions for a child to leave the classroom.

Taking pupils out of class for a substantial block of work but also ensuring they don't miss too much class time with other subjects is hard to manage. (...) Our work space in the school is also quite limited which proved a challenge at times to ensure [the artist] had enough space. (Teacher)

Having it in school time had its benefits as children are more likely to take part if they're there already. After school sessions would help with the finding a room and permission to leave class aspect but I don't know if they would be as well attended if the participants had to actively choose to come. (Artist)

Recognising young people's individual needs and tailoring creative sessions accordingly was mentioned as an important factor in ensuring enjoyment and wellbeing benefits. One artist said that for the young people they worked with "having their own choice of music was the best part", while another observed that all the children they worked with "had individual needs and likes". One teacher and one artist highlighted specific challenges in tailoring the creative sessions for children who might need additional support. They mentioned in particular the need for extra flexibility in providing activities in spaces in which the children feel safe and/or inviting carers to support.

For some pupils, particularly those with more complex additional support needs, it was too much change for them. [The artist] visited the pupils in their support base rather than them coming up (...), to work with the pupil in an environment they felt more secure in and this seemed to work better. (Teacher)

As many of the students had additional needs, I had to adapt the lesson plans quite a lot, to try and include everyone. (Artist)

The group had a greater range of needs and worked individually on different projects, with the support of carers. (Artist)

One artist highlighted that taking part in new activities might be challenging for some children and participation often requires effort and motivation ("despite this [dance] being new to a few students everyone tried hard and joined in"). Another artist observed that some young people might be reluctant to experiment and suggested that working in small groups helped them to start their creative journeys. Other artists seemed to agree that small groups enabled more meaningful work, providing a safe environment for creative practice and self-expression. Some artists chose to initially work with children on an individual basis, which, they felt, allowed the young participants to reach a suitable level of confidence and skills for an enjoyable participation in a group at a later stage. Some artists were able to offer 'taster sessions' to encourage participation in subsequent more established activities.

Some young people like to do what they already know and feel secure with and are reticent with new ideas. Working with small groups seems to alleviate those. (Artist)

As there was a small group of them, they felt confident to give it a go and loved it, they told me they might be more hesitant in a larger class environment. (Artist)

The key is working intensively with small groups over a sustained period. (Artist)

It was recognised that the inclusive and accessible character of the programme contributed to its success, particularly in some geographical areas. Parents appreciated free instrument hire and that the artists were able to work with children close to home. Some residencies provided access to professional studio spaces, which was noted by one artist as largely contributing to the participants' creative development.

The project was very accessible to everyone with instrument hire free and no commitments for those participating. (Artist)

It was a great programme, we were lucky that it was based locally and it was free. We'd love to see it back again. (Parent)

For a lot of participants buying instruments and lessons is just not an affordable option. (Artist)

The opportunity of them being able to access a professional space has had a significant impact on their creative development and maturity. (Artist)

Importantly, the artists highlighted the benefits of sharing artwork with the wider public for the young participants' newly found confidence in their artistic skills, and also as an opportunity to practice socialising and connecting with peers and the community.

We held an event to showcase the variety of their [young participants'] work to the community and show the young people that their work is valued and appreciated. (Artist)

We decided to organise interviews with local residents - this further developed the participants' opportunities to socialise and practise talking to members of the public. (Artist)

Highlights: **Enabling factors**

According to artists and parents, certain factors seemed to be contributing to the success of the residencies and were helpful in overcoming unavoidable challenges. These factors included:

- Working in small groups or with individuals
- Supporting young people to make their own choices
- Offering activity accessible to everyone
- Tailoring activity to individual needs
- Being able to use a quiet and safe space
- Sharing artwork with the community/public
- Time for developing relationships and building trust
- Good communication with partner organisations

On a final note...

One artist captured well many of the above discussed aspects of the project in a single response. They recognised that the residencies allowed for creative freedom for themselves and an opportunity to engage on a long-term basis, which in effect contributed to them being able to form meaningful relationships with the young people and truly support them in their creative journeys.

Having non-prescriptive, long-term project from the start has allowed me as an artist to develop the work in response to the young people, build up a strong relationship with each person and form a little creative community. (Artist)



My [child] loved being part of this. (Parent)

This is the best thing by far that [my child] has been doing. (Parent)

[My child] has been talking about this all week to other people. (Parent)

Loved hearing all the stories and memories. All the children involved did a fabulous job. Hoping the drama classes can continue to allow more stories to be told and to further allow young people to develop their confidence and performing skills. Well done everyone.