



Evaluation of CCE/NCB arts and cultural activities project with looked after children

Summary report to Creativity, Culture and Education

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1. Introduction

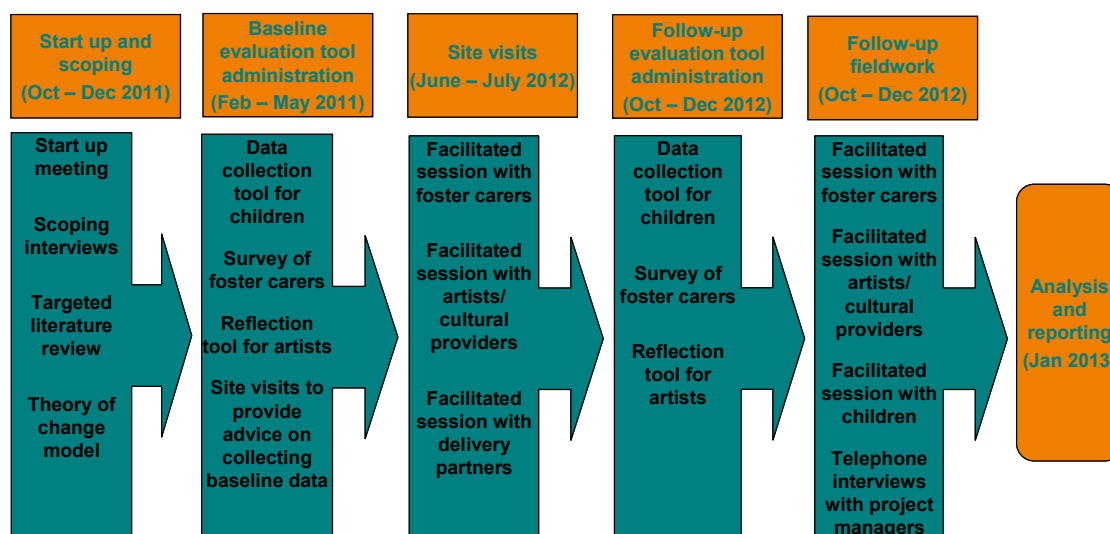
The Office for Public Management (OPM) were commissioned in October 2011 to conduct an evaluation of the arts and cultural activities project for looked after children (between 7-11 years), managed by the National Children's Bureau (NCB) and funded by Creativity, Culture and Education (CCE). The funding provided by CCE for the management, delivery and evaluation of the project was £76,973. This includes £11,000 for each of the three delivery sites, £30,000 for the evaluation and £13,973 for programme management by the NCB.

The project includes a series of arts and cultural activities being delivered by three different arts organisations across the UK:

- Customs House, based in South Shields, Tyne and Wear
- Pie Factory Music, based in Ramsgate, Kent
- Whitewood and Fleming, based in Ulverston, Cumbria

The design and delivery of the arts and cultural activities differed significantly across the three sites. For an overview of each of the sites' project plans please see the full report.

OPM adopted a theory of change approach to this evaluation which is widely used in theory based evaluations of policy programmes¹. The aim of the theory of change approach is to build a clear understanding of how a programme or policy works, its intended outcomes and the extent to which its inputs, outputs and activities contribute towards these outcomes. The diagram below illustrates the stages of and research methods employed for this evaluation:



¹ Goss, S, Gillanders, G (both OPM), Sullivan, H, Developing a 'Theory of Change' to Evaluate Local Public Service Agreements, Communities and local government, 2006

2. Evidencing impact

Our evaluation model hypothesised that four elements of the project – skilled artists, positive arts activities, involvement of foster carers and siblings in activities, and looked after children and foster carer focused planning and design - would, through a series of change mechanisms, result in the following outcomes:

- Increased self efficacy and empowerment
- Increased confidence and self esteem
- Strengthened relationships with carers, social workers, siblings and other looked after children
- The development of new creative, life and social skills (e.g. leadership, communication and teamwork)
- Increased and regular participation in arts opportunities

Increased self efficacy and empowerment

There is mixed evidence about the extent to which participating in the project has increased the self efficacy and empowerment of the children involved. On the one hand, there is strong qualitative evidence to indicate that many of the children had increasingly started to **‘talk excitedly’ about their achievements** and had become keen to demonstrate and **showcase their new creative skills**. Many were also more willing to **try new activities** and able to **master new skills**, for example writing songs, recording music and speaking in front of the group.

“One film had the lad flying as superman and we said he should take it into school and he said he already had. A number of them are proud of what they have done.” Artist, Whitewood and Fleming

On the other hand, the artists/project staff reflection tools also demonstrated that some children continued to demonstrate **low self efficacy and belief**. This was particularly the case at Pie Factory Music where there were some children with additional needs such as disabilities or challenging behaviour:

“As far as his self belief goes I'm not sure he really understands within himself how talented and able he is to learn new skills and showcase his talents as he doesn't speak highly of his own skills and ability at all.” Artist/project staff reflection tool, Pie Factory Music

Additionally, although there was an improvement in scores for both the questions relating to self efficacy and empowerment in the foster carers survey, further analysis indicated that this improvement was largely due to an improvement in scores by foster carers at Whitewood and Fleming, with scores at Customs House and Pie Factory Music improving only slightly or staying more or less the same.

Taking the evidence as a whole, it appears that there are differences in the extent to which the children demonstrated an increase in self efficacy and empowerment.

The evidence indicates that the particular **skills, knowledge and approach taken by the artists** had created a safe space for the children that was empowering and built self efficacy. More specifically, artists created a participatory learning environment and non-hierarchical space that was empowering. Foster carers at Pie Factory Music also felt that the artists

themselves had had been good at keeping the children to task, but also *'not talking down to them'*.

Two out of three sites, Pie Factory Music and Whitewood and Fleming, described the different ways in which they had provided the children with **opportunities to showcase their learning**, for example at celebratory events or through tangible creative outputs, which had contributed to a sense of achievement that was empowering for them.

"The key is a focused activity with an output...so they get the feeling that they have achieved something at the end of it." Artist, Pie Factory Music

All three sites reported that the **participation of foster carers** in activities provided opportunities for the children to showcase their learning which was also empowering.

Increased confidence and self-esteem

There is mixed evidence about the extent to which participating in the project has increased the confidence and self-esteem of the children involved in the project. There is also variation across sites with the evidence indicating that children at Whitewood and Fleming were most likely to have demonstrated an increase in confidence and self esteem.

On the one hand there is strong qualitative evidence that many children have developed the confidence to **take on lead roles or participate in activities** that they would not have done before, and that some now felt comfortable participating in activities **without the presence of their foster carer or sibling**.

"They are more likely to give things a try, they have taken what they did and gone on with it, e.g, keyboard or drama classes at school, which they wouldn't have joined before because they didn't have confidence." Project manager, Whitewood and Fleming

Additionally, many children who had been quite shy at first were also now much **more talkative** and willing to contribute their ideas and opinions. On the other hand, some children, particularly from Pie Factory Music and Customs House continued to demonstrate **low self esteem and confidence** or continued to hide their lack of confidence behind bravado and loudness:

"She lacks self esteem and often feels the need to act overly confident - something to work on." Artist / project staff reflection tool, Customs House

Additionally, although there was an improvement in scores for all three questions relating to confidence and self-esteem in the foster carers survey, further analysis indicated that whilst all three sites showed an improvement on one question, only Whitewood and Fleming showed an improvement with respect to the other two questions.

The evidence indicates that the artists **created a safe space** where the children felt listened to and valued and that this helped to build confidence. This included creating an encouraging and supportive environment and ensuring that they were patient and understanding about the behaviour of the children and that sessions were structured to whilst also being flexible and varied.

"While we re working with them, there's a lot of 'wow, look at what you've done, its fantastic." Artist, Whitewood and Fleming

The evidence also indicated that, to some extent, **opportunities to participate in creative endeavours** had helped the children build confidence and self esteem. For example, the artists at Pie Factory Music reported that the fact that in the creative arts *'there is no wrong way of doing things'* was reassuring for the children and motivated them to engage.

Additionally, at two out of three sites the **participation of foster carers in project activities** was encouraging and helped to build the confidence and self esteem of the children. For example, foster carers at Customs House reported that their involvement motivated the children to participate as they saw their carers participating:

“It was a family thing...they were laughing because we were doing it and it made them join, made them think ‘we can do this, we don’t have to be inhibited’” Foster carer, Customs House

Strengthened relationships with carers, social workers, siblings and other looked after children

There is some evidence to indicate that participation in the project strengthened the children’s relationships with their foster carers and other looked after children. Many of the children had **integrated well into the group** as the project had progressed across the three sites. Additionally, a few children, particularly at Pie Factory Music and Customs House, formed **close friendships** with each other.

“There were quite a lot of walls up in the first few weeks, but by the end they were describing each other as friends...for example when we were doing the song writing quite a few wanted to write about each other.” Artist, Pie Factory Music

The project also gave the foster carers the opportunity to **participate in something ‘fun’** with the children they care for: *‘it’s good to share experiences together.’ Foster carer, Whitewood and Fleming.* It also gave them *‘a new perspective’* on the children as they watched them achieve and master new skills.

“Some foster carers thought the children they care for weren’t able to do certain things and were surprised that they could actually do those things.” Artist, Whitewood and Fleming

However, the scores for all three questions relating to relationships in the foster carers survey rose only slightly or stayed largely the same between baseline and follow-up.

The evidence indicates that the **arts and cultural activities created a space** where relationships between the children developed through shared experiences, for example by working closely together on assigned tasks or by becoming more supportive of each other due to the encouraging environment created by artists.

The **participation of foster carers** in the project may have strengthened their relationships with the children because it gave them the opportunity to spend time together on shared activities and to see the children achieve, through demonstrating new skills and creating outputs and products: *“It gave them the space to work as a family unit” Artists, Pie Factory Music*

Development of new creative, life and social skills

There is good evidence to indicate that participation in the project helped the children develop new creative, life and social skills. The development of new life and social skills, such as **improved communication** and **behaviour** was noted in the qualitative evidence across the three sites.

“At the start of the course he didn’t have any awareness of people’s personal space and would often make inappropriate comments and would be too touchy feely with others and

he definitely improved with this over the course but without any negative impact on his relationships with other members of the group.” Artists, Pie Factory Music

Artists and foster carers also reported how many of the children had become **more understanding and supportive of each other**, often demonstrating an increase in empathy. One artist described how: *“certain people always wanted to have attention at first...but as the project went on, there was an awareness ‘that this is this person’s time, my time will come.’” Artist, Pie Factory Music*

Many of the children also demonstrated **greater focus and improved attention spans** as the project progressed. There is also qualitative evidence, to indicate that many of the children, particularly at Pie Factory Music and Whitewood and Fleming demonstrated new creative skills, including playing the keyboard, storytelling and craft making.

Additionally, the scores for both questions relating to creative and life and social skills in the foster carer survey improved between baseline and follow-up. However, further analysis indicates that this improvement was largely because of improved scores at Whitewood and Fleming, with scores at the other two sites improving very little or staying more or less the same. On the whole the evidence does in fact indicate an improvement in the life and social skills of many of the children across the three sites as well as the development of new creative skills for many children, particularly those at Whitewood and Fleming and Pie Factory Music.

The evidence suggests that the children have developed new creative and life skills through learning from **skilled artists** with a range of technical creative skills and who created a supportive and encouraging environment. . For example, artists at Pie Factory Music described how some of the children needed a little support and structure to help them harness their creativity:

“She struggles a bit if you give her a totally blank canvas....she seems much happier and we see more creativity if we set her a specific task.” Artist/project staff reflection tool, Pie Factory Music

Additionally, the fact that the **creative activities were enjoyable** for and of interest to the children, may also have encouraged and motivated them to listen and learn from the artists.

Increased and regular participation in arts opportunities

There is some evidence to indicate that the children involved in the project have started to participate in other arts opportunities, across the three sites, for example, guitar lessons and after school clubs. However, follow-up fieldwork three to six months after the project would provide a clearer indication of whether participation in the project has resulted in increased and regular participation in arts opportunities.

Additionally, this outcome may also have been limited by the fact that many of the children involved in the project already tended to get involved in creative and cultural opportunities before their involvement in this project.

Evidence indicates that having had a **positive experience** in this project had made the children want to continue to participate in creative and cultural opportunities. When asked whether they would like to take part in similar activities again the children tended to respond with a resounding ‘yes!’ and enthusiastic nods. One child from Whitewood and Fleming elaborated by saying: *‘because its fun, it’s exciting, you get to learn loads of stuff.’*

There is also some evidence that **foster carers have seen the benefits** of looked after children taking part in creative and cultural activities and project stakeholders are hopeful that this will translate into the foster carers being more supportive of future opportunities: *the foster carers that have supported them, will now finance these activities themselves.*" Project manager, Customs House

3. Project recruitment, design and support

In the sections below we highlight the key experiences of the different sites in project planning and delivery.

Recruitment and involvement of foster carers and children

Foster carers across the three sites provided a range of reasons about **why they chose to get involved** in the project. At Customs House, a number of foster carers reported that they were always on the look out for new activities that they could get the children in their care involved with. They had heard about the project through letters and then follow-up calls the project team at Customs House, The Place and through South Tyneside Fostering Services. At Pie Factory Music, the foster carers reported that all of them were already aware of the work of Pie Factory Music and that some of the children had already been involved in other activities at the site. Most of them had heard about the project through the children's schools. At Whitewood and Fleming, the foster carers had gotten involved in the project to give the children that they care for the opportunity to 'try new things', and 'to see what they could achieve'. They had heard about the project through attending a coffee morning where the project manager from Whitewood and Fleming talked to them about the project.

The three sites have also had varying experiences of and **approaches to recruiting foster carers** to be part of the project. At Customs House, recruitment has been through The Place and South Tyneside Fostering Services – the looked after children's education service - coupled with information days, follow-up meetings and calls from the project manager. Recruitment resulted in the involvement of a core group of about 7 foster carers and 11 looked after children regularly attending the activities, which is under their target recruitment number of 15 children.

At Pie Factory Music, recruitment for the first cohort was through social workers at Kent County Council, schools and follow-up phone calls, whereas recruitment for the second cohort was through word of mouth '*so we kind of cut out the middle man*'. There were approximately 8 children involved in the first cohort, many of whom had complex needs and 7 in the second (one boy dropped out) which the project manager described as 'disappointing' as they could have taken on 10-15 children. At Whitewood and Fleming recruitment, for both the Barrow and Maryport cohorts, was through the fostering team at children's services and through independent fostering services. Whereas recruitment in Maryport resulted in significant enrolment in activities (approximately 17 children), this proved more difficult in Barrow with only 6 children enrolling. However, Whitewood and Fleming did in fact meet its recruitment target of 20 looked after children.

Factors that informed project design and delivery

The artists and project managers at each of the sites identified a number of factors and considerations that have guided their approach to design and delivery on this project. . At Customs House, the artists reported that it was important for them, as practitioners, to be

aware that looked after children may have attachment issues and/or behaviour problems. They also think it is important to give the children the freedom and flexibility to focus on whatever they wanted and to involve foster carers, for example, even in simple communications, as this ensures that *'if the parents/carers are also involved they are more likely to support them.'*

At Pie Factory Music, the artists described how they had designed the hour and a half sessions to include approximately 4-5 multiple and varied activities as they recognised that some of the children may have short attention spans. The artists also encouraged the children to be reflective during the sessions and work in small groups as this would ensure that the artists *'were able to facilitate those who were less confident than others in a larger group.'* At Whitewood and Fleming an important factor that guided both design and delivery was the emphasis the artists placed on 'finding the key', that is, focusing their efforts on identifying what each child is interested in. The artists also ensured that they took a 'non hierarchical' approach with the children and felt it was important for the sessions to allow them to create outputs simply and quickly.

Training and support for artists and project managers

The artists and project managers across the three sites identified a range of sources of support that they felt had helped them over the course of the project. At Customs House, the artists reported that the training provided at the start of the programme and Customs House's role as a brokering *'agent'* had been important. The project manager at Customs House reported that the positive working relationship between the delivery partners had been key in ensuring take up of activities by foster carers.

At Pie Factory Music, the artists reported that the fact that they worked together regularly meant that they could share their worries and concerns as and when these occurred to them. Additionally, the project manager reported that regular updates and conversations with the project director were also helpful. At Whitewood and Fleming, the artists felt that debrief sessions at the end of every session had been a helpful way for the artists to share their worries and concerns and get feedback and advice from each other. The project manager reported that support from the project director had been helpful as had been support from one of the social workers who had been proactive about calling foster carers to ensure their attendance at sessions. All three sites also felt that the support offered by the NCB programme manager was also helpful.

4. Summary and conclusions

Summary of impact of project

In general the evidence indicates that the arts and cultural activities project has had a positive impact on the looked after children that participated at each site. In particular, the project has resulted in a marked improvement in the self efficacy and empowerment of many of the children involved. Similarly, the project has also resulted in an increase in the confidence and self esteem of many of the children, particularly at Whitewood and Fleming. On the other hand, some of the children continue to demonstrate low self efficacy, belief and confidence across the three sites.

Some children have also developed close friendships with each other, particularly at Pie Factory Music and Customs House. Children across the three sites have also developed new technical creative skills and demonstrated new life and social skills, including an

improvement in communication abilities and behaviour. Follow-up fieldwork three to six months after the project would provide a clearer indication of whether participation in the project has resulted in increased participation in arts opportunities.

This positive impact has largely been a result of the safe space created by the skilled artists coupled with the use of positive arts activities. To a comparatively lesser extent, the involvement of foster carers in activities has also contributed to positive impact. On the whole, the project has inevitably had more of a positive impact on some children compared to others. There has also been some variation across the sites which is inevitable as the project was an ambitious one where sites had to choose where to focus their efforts.

Success factors

A number of factors have contributed to the success of the project as a whole:

- The **safe space created by a team of skilled artists** has been a key strength of the project. This included artists being encouraging and supportive and creating a participatory learning environment. It also includes having the right mix of the artists who work well.
- The **involvement of foster families** in project activities, through ongoing communication throughout the project, and in the planning phase of the project has also contributed to its success.
- The **role of positive arts opportunities**, which allowed the children to have fun as well as learn new skills and showcase their learning was important because it had an impact on their belief in their abilities and self esteem.
- The **size and composition of the group** worked particularly well. A mix of age groups meant that the older children were able to act as role models for the younger ones, and the small size of the group fostered a shared sense of achievement and meant more one on one time with artists.
- The fact that the project had included **only looked after children and their families** meant that the activities could be tailored to the needs of the families and the children.
- The availability of **multiple and varied activities** meant the children were more likely to engage.

Challenges and limitations

There were a range of challenges and limitations which may potentially have limited the impact of the project. Some of these were similar across the sites whereas others were specific to each site.

- Across the sites, and particularly at Customs House, the **recruitment of foster carers** was a difficult process which highlights the importance of exploring different avenues of recruitment, in case one avenue fails.
- Many stakeholders felt that **delivery was too short** and that a longer term project would have been helpful in facilitating even greater impact.
- The **difficult behaviour of some of the children** involved in the project was a little challenging at some of the sites which could suggest the need for additional training and support for deliverers.

- At some sites the artists reported having some trouble or were **disappointed with their venue** where the activities were delivered.
- At Customs House:
 - Cultural visits to institutions worked better than arts activities led by practitioners. Some foster carers also felt that the arts activities may have worked better if they had been held at Customs House, as the children felt comfortable at the venue which highlights the importance of projects such as these to be run at a well known local arts venue.
 - There was also not enough variety of arts activities arranged which meant that some children couldn't find an activity they enjoyed. The variety of activities delivered were necessarily limited by the types of providers that chose to participate in the project.
- At Pie Factory Music, greater engagement with foster carers would have helped the carers appreciate how participating in the project was beneficial for the children.
- At Whitewood and Fleming, the foster carers reported that full day sessions could be too long for some children, particularly the younger ones with shorter attention spans.

Recommendations

- Practitioners delivering arts and cultural activities to looked after children should create a **“participative learning environment”** where the children must be given the power to choose different activities that they want to engage with, and the freedom and space to test out their skills rather than following a strictly prescribed programme.
- Find opportunities in projects like these to **celebrate the achievement of participants**, for example through celebration events and reflection sessions.
- Ensure that there are a **broad range of activities** in place that will enable the young people to find something that excites and interests them.
- Practitioners should create a **supportive and encouraging environment**, including assessing the specific needs and behaviour of the children at the start and ensuring that there are many opportunities for positive feedback.
- Project leads/artists should build in mechanisms for the **involvement of foster carers**. This includes ongoing communication with foster carers throughout the project and creating opportunities for foster carers to take part in sessions as this can help strengthen relationships and build the children's confidence.
- Project design should include **a number of approaches to recruitment** of foster carers and looked after children to ensure participation including involving social workers and recruitment through schools.
- Artists and project leads should **involve participants in the design and planning** at the start of the project, both in terms of the content, but also in terms of practical decisions, such as when and where the young people meet.
- Artists should be **trained and supported** to work with looked after children and young people. Opportunities for artists and project leads to **meet and share learning** should be included, for example through project debrief meetings. Managers should provide **ongoing supervision** and support.
- The learning and tools developed through this project should be **captured in a guide** that can be picked up and used by others running similar projects.

- **Data collection could be widened** to a much larger group of looked after children involved in arts-based projects to establish a statistically significant assessment of the overall impact of the project.