

**CREATING A
CULTURE OF
INCLUSIVE
OPPORTUNITY:**

**THE ARTS AND
CREATIVITY CAN
MAKE THE
DIFFERENCE**

Creating a culture of inclusive opportunity: The arts and creativity can make the difference

This update highlights:

- New data, since the Child of the North report in 2024 [1], showing how **creativity can create a culture of inclusive opportunity** for young people and their families in education and healthcare.
- Increasing **pressure on funding for creative and arts-based education and play despite the evidence of its efficacy.**
- Creative opportunities provide children with support across multiple areas of their lives, yet **children in the most deprived areas have the fewest opportunities to access the arts in school** [2].
- In England, **primary schools spend less than £1.80 per pupil per year on creative opportunities** thereby removing culture from children's education. Since 2024, 53% of schools reported that their arts budgets were being reduced further [3].
- The **arts and creativity have benefits beyond education**, supporting the social and emotional wellbeing of children with complex health needs and helping them connect and form friendships in hospital [4].
- Some of the **lowest-cost options** to support children with the most complex health needs **continue to be underutilised**, despite more than 50% of budgets being spent on expensive healthcare [5].

Equality of cultural opportunities

The Government's focus on creating equal opportunities for all children is promising, but curriculum review reforms and the NHS 10-Year Plan must include a firmer commitment to equal access to the arts and creativity for young people [6].

Arts (including music, dance, and drama) are typically viewed as ‘added extras’ in schools and hospitals, but **the economic and social value of arts-based interventions must be considered in plans to create a culture of opportunity.**

A System Under Pressure

Schools are one of the main sites where all children, regardless of their background, have the opportunity to express themselves through the arts and creativity; yet changes in immigration patterns and declining birth rates are putting more pressure on our educational systems than ever before [7]. Reports from the North of England demonstrate that children are being impacted by these changes, with school closures becoming a quick response for resolving financial deficits across the region [8, 9, 10]. Fewer schools, bigger class sizes, and smaller budgets mean that **the creative arts are being marginalised further, at a time when children need them more than ever.**

The infographic below illustrates how young people view the arts and creativity as an essential support mechanism for their wellbeing [11]. The views captured within this picture came from members of the Great North Youth Forum, a group of young people with previous hospital experience who are committed to improving healthcare experiences and wellbeing for children and young people.



"Young people with long term illness don't live this perfect, organised life...it is very scattered"

- Great North Youth Forum member

Barriers can last a lifetime: A deep dive into health and wellbeing

Young people involved in a recent Youth Forum session in the North East have described how arts and creativity are essential to feeling well, connected, and understood while navigating long-term or complex medical conditions. Their experiences highlight the need to embed creative opportunities not as "extras" but as core components of health and education systems that aim to promote equitable access and wellbeing.

This early research, part of ***Sharing Stories for Wellbeing: Building Diverse Communities of Care for Children in Hospital***, is led by Dr Emily Murphy of Newcastle University [12] and has captured the insights of some 17-22 year olds in the Youth Forum, who spoke candidly about the benefits of arts and creativity (see infographic on preceding page).

One young person identified that **"the education gap is a big one"** when asked about the barriers to opportunity for children with long-term or complex medical conditions. The young people also suggested that in some cases **"no reasonable adjustments can make someone well enough to do things"**. The group identified a number of other barriers, including decreased opportunities to develop social skills, emotional and mental health impacts of being chronically ill, and lack of understanding from healthy peers and adults.

The young people consistently described the profound sense of disconnection that occurs during hospital stays or prolonged periods of ill health. As one participant explained, being in hospital **"I felt really disconnected from my friends because hospitals were scary to them and they couldn't relate"**. This loss of connection was closely linked to reduced confidence, social isolation, and challenges rebuilding identity after long-term absence: **"coming out as a shell of yourself... [it's] scary to see your own friends as you've changed"**.

Arts and creative activities were described as powerful tools for reducing isolation and restoring a sense of self. Creativity provided distraction, emotional expression, and a way to communicate experiences that felt too complex, tiring, or emotionally demanding to articulate verbally. Participants emphasised that creative expression can be especially valuable for younger children or those with speech difficulties, as **"drawing may be less mentally tolling than writing"** and can help staff better understand how children are feeling.

The arts and creativity can help

Creative methods were also seen as ways to create shared ground with peers, regardless of health status because **"all children can draw"**. This reinforces findings from ***Sharing Stories for Wellbeing***, where young people valued the infographic artwork that reflected their "scattered" experiences of living with illness- experiences that do not follow neat or linear narratives. This highlighted the young people's desire for creative spaces that enable connection across healthcare and education settings.

Importantly, young people were clear that wellbeing extends beyond medical care. They spoke about the importance of decorated, non-clinical spaces, access to fresh air, opportunities to maintain routines, festive activities, and therapeutic elements such as pets or "medicinema" screenings. These environmental and relational supports—many of which are low-cost—contribute directly to a culture of inclusion, comfort, and dignity in hospital settings.

The young people also highlighted gaps that could be bridged through creative or community-based approaches. These included help rebuilding physical confidence ("like a couch-to-5k for recovery"), support packs that ease the transition out of hospital, flexible appointments, better digital communication, and safe spaces to meet others with similar conditions or experience of long-term hospitalisation.

Creative interventions can form part of the transition between hospital and home by helping children tell their stories in ways that feel manageable and meaningful.

Across the session, one theme stood out: connection. As one facilitator noted, what ties together seemingly "scattered" experiences is the need to connect with people who understand, listen, and relate.

The voice of the young people align strongly with the continuing ***Child of the North*** recommendations to prioritise interagency working and embed creativity within schools, hospital services, and community settings. These insights reinforce that **creativity is not a luxury**.

For children and young people with long-term conditions, creativity is **an essential route to wellbeing, identity, agency, and equitable opportunity across both health and education**.

More on ***Sharing Stories for Wellbeing: Building Diverse Communities of Care for Children in Hospital*** here: www.sharingstoriesforwellbeing.org

More on ***Beyond School Gates: Children's Contribution to Community Integration*** (next page) here: www.beyondschoolgates.org

All children need creativity

Our deep dive into healthcare demonstrates the need for the arts and creativity for children with complex medical needs, but all children benefit from creativity— not only as a form of expression but as a way to foster community connection and belonging.

In our previous report [1], we emphasised the need to work effectively across public services, with one of our seven principles being to collaborate across “schools, local authorities, health services, and cultural organisations” to increase the impact of policies for children and young people.

One of our previous case studies, ***Beyond School Gates: Children's Contribution to Community Integration***, focused on this collaborative approach, and new data from this project reaffirms the effectiveness and need for creative methods when responding to and shaping policies for children and young people [13].

In a co-created animation, young people named the places that mattered most to them: while chief among these places was school, children also bridged spaces of education with those in healthcare, citing the hospital as another valued location where the arts improved their wellbeing.

The children's contributions to this animation enabled a more fluid joining-up of these different places in their lives, and allowed the children to discover new ways of viewing their lived experiences as part of a larger narrative about community belonging [13] - **a critical opportunity in the wake of anti-immigration protests and riots**.

But despite the value of these forms of creative interventions in schools, the national curriculum continues to focus on core subjects including Maths and English. This emphasis was not overturned in the recently published curriculum and assessment review led by Professor Becky Francis CBE, even as there was recognition that the ‘creative industries’ are the number one ‘priority occupation’ for 2025-2030 [14].

More positively, the curriculum review has recognised what we have highlighted in our **Child of the North** reports: creativity enables further inclusion for children of various backgrounds, including children with SEND.

Creativity empowers children

Children are the most underrepresented group when it comes to policy decisions [15]. **Developing methods for working with children and listening to their voices enables us to create a country that truly works for all children and young people.** Schools, hospitals, and other spaces where creative methods are already utilised provide a powerful means of collecting evidence-based research that reflects young people's views and experiences.

However, we need policymakers, practitioners, and researchers to work together on the best ways to preserve and make these data visible so they lead to the changes that young people are requesting. Initiatives, such as Dr Anna Basu's **SPACE CYP project**, which links young people with chronic complex medical conditions to creative arts activities and other community services, provides some potential solutions (see video below) but we need more approaches that work in diverse contexts.

Conclusion

The 2024 report presented evidence showing that cultural activities can provide fantastic opportunities to enrich children's educational experiences, rocket boosting creativity, and **nurturing the critical thinking skills that are so important to a modern economy**.

Young people must be included in discussions about integrating arts and creativity into the curriculum, and in other places where children need support, to build a country that works for all children and young people.

This basic right, outlined in Article 12 of the Convention on the Rights of the Child, advocates for the inclusion of young people in the decisions that impact their lives, with arts and creativity providing a valuable means of enabling these discussions.

The lesson is clear: arts and creativity matter. Cultural opportunities are an essential component of breaking the links between a child's background and their life chances and can help connect the health and education services supporting children.

Learn more about Ways to Wellness SPACE CYP pilot through this video:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=E5AKOdL71Nk>

"I like go to Art in the Garden. Sometimes we get to play in the hammocks and we got to see the chickens. We made tiles and some rings. I think we made some hats. It really helps me with emotions".

- Young Participant in SPACE CYP pilot, led by Dr Anna Basu (Newcastle University)

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This report is a collaborative programme of work between Child of the North and the Centre for Young Lives.

A note about language

Please note that this report often uses “schools” as shorthand for “schools, nurseries, and other educational settings such as pupil referral units and special schools.” One central message of this report is the need for a “whole system” approach that includes all relevant stakeholders, and this includes all parts of the education system. In this report, CYP is used to refer to children and young people. A ‘young person’ in this context is a person over compulsory school age (the end of the academic year in which they turn 16 years old) and under 25 years old. In keeping with this definition, we use the words ‘child’ and ‘children’ in this report to refer to individuals from birth to the end of compulsory school age.

About Child of the North

Child of the North is a partnership between the N8 Research Partnership and Health Equity North which aims to build a fairer future for children across the North of England by building a platform for collaboration, high quality research, and policy engagement. [@ChildoftheNort1](#) [@childofthenorth.bsky.social](#)

About the N8 Research Partnership

The N8 Research Partnership is a collaboration of the eight most research-intensive Universities in the North of England: Durham, Lancaster, Leeds, Liverpool, Manchester, Newcastle, Sheffield, and York. Working with partner universities, industry, and society (N8+), the N8 aims to maximise the impact of this research base by promoting collaboration, establishing innovative research capabilities and programmes of national and international prominence, and driving economic growth. www.n8research.org.uk [@N8research](#) [@n8research.bsky.social](#)

About the Centre for Young Lives

The Centre for Young Lives is a dynamic and highly experienced innovation organisation dedicated to improving the lives of children, young people, and families in the UK – particularly the most vulnerable. Led by former Children’s Commissioner, Baroness Anne Longfield CBE, who has been at the forefront of children’s issues for decades, the Centre’s agile team is highly skilled, experienced, and regarded. It is widely known and well respected across government departments, Parliament, local and regional government, academia, the voluntary sector, and national and local media. The Centre wants to see children and young people’s futures placed at the heart of policy making, a high priority for government and at the core of the drive for a future for our country which can be much stronger and more prosperous. www.centreforyounglives.org.uk [@CfYounglives](#)

Creating a culture of inclusive opportunity

Executive editor

Emily Murphy – Newcastle University

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