



Pioneering work in the Midlands seeks to open up the world of arts and culture to children and young people in care, nationally

Midland's based organisations, Arts Connect and The Mighty Creatives (TMC), are leading the way in England with a pioneering new partnership programme. *Collaborate & Innovate*, is supporting Virtual Schools and arts and cultural organisations in the West and East Midlands to make their activities, work and programming more attractive and accessible to children and young people in care and is researching barriers to their participation.

Over the past six months, *Collaborate & Innovate*, has worked with 28 Arts and Cultural organisations and eight Virtual Schools, all based in the Midlands.

Collaborate & Innovate focusses on developing the skills, knowledge and learning of those in the cultural and education sectors, strengthening their ability to work together and combining their expertise, in order to more effectively open up their organisations and work to children and young people in care.

The programme builds upon eight years of groundbreaking work and investment between Arts Connect, TMC, visionary leaders in the Midlands' Virtual Schools network and the 12,000 children and young people in care, in our region.

The genesis of *Collaborate & Innovate* was Arts Council England approaching Arts Connect and TMC in 2022 to run a pilot programme with the Midland's Virtual Schools to test and adapt Arts Council England's Artsmark Award (an accreditation for schools' arts and cultural provision) so that it could be expanded to Virtual Schools nationally. Following this, the Arts Council, who have a priority to grow creative opportunities for children and young people in care, commissioned Arts Connect and TMC to design a strategic programme that would provide new evidence and a range of solutions to the question: *how do we better engage children in care with arts and culture?*

Collaborate & Innovate started in April 2023 with 28 arts and cultural organisations taking part in the first stage of work. This first stage saw TMC deliver tailored training in trauma informed practice, inspired by their own training programme and long-standing work with care experienced children and young people. The training ensured participants developed the skills and expertise needed to work directly with Virtual Schools and children and young people in care.

The second stage of the programme is now underway with eight arts and cultural organisations, (such as Coventry Museums, Care to Dance and the Arena Theatre) partnered with a Virtual School. Together they are working on 9-month-long action research projects, investigating and generating new insights into a wide range of issues.

The research covers many areas including exploring how care experienced children and young people can access arts and culture and how they can be supported to develop careers in the creative industries.

The Institute of Community Research and Development (ICRD) at the University of Wolverhampton are leading research training and support for partners and the Arts Council has commissioned external evaluation of the programme.

The partnerships will present their findings at a national conference at the University of Wolverhampton in June 2025.

It is anticipated that evidence gathered by the *Collaborate & Innovate* programme will inform future policy and funding approaches at Arts Council England to children and young people in care.

Arts Connect are part of the School of Creative Industries at the University of Wolverhampton.

"Arts Connect are delighted to be leading this groundbreaking programme with our partners TMC, as it builds on so much of our previous pioneering work in the region to benefit children in care.

We have compelling evidence that the way you secure change over the long term is by growing the capacity, skills and connectivity of the key practitioners who actually work in the field. Through Collaborate & Innovate we are building our partners' confidence and expertise as researchers, who will then become experts on solving the problems they face. This approach is hugely powerful. Deeply working with partners from the Virtual Schools sector on a shared area of concern, swapping realities and bringing different ideas and ways of thinking, develops common strengths and leadership, multiplying the opportunities offered to children and young people in care in the arts and creative sectors.

We are very excited that Arts Connect and TMC have been given this opportunity to potentially shape national policy towards children and young people in care."

Rob Elkington – Director, Arts Connect

Emily York - Head of Programmes, The Mighty Creatives

"At The Mighty Creatives, we're really excited to be continuing our work with our Virtual School partners and cultural organisations, exploring how we can all best support children and young people with a social worker to engage in creative opportunities. Partnerships provide a vehicle for collaboration and constructive challenge, and we are really excited to see what findings come from the research conducted as a result of these partnerships."

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Editors Notes

Arts Connect

Who Are We and What Do We Do?

Arts Connect are a centre for cultural education working for children and young people. For over a decade we have run projects and programmes that improve opportunities and access for the creative development of young people and expand the skills and knowledge of the teachers, artists and arts organisations who work with them. We are part of the University of Wolverhampton and we focus our work in the Black Country and the wider West Midlands.

What are we trying to do?

To lead change for young people, especially those who face the highest barriers to access.

Our work is focused on expanding and improving creative and cultural opportunities for children and young people. We work to influence system change, where the arts and creativity are placed at the very heart of the curriculum and at the very heart of civic and community life.

How do we do this?

We work in partnership with teachers, schools, colleges and universities, artists, arts, cultural and heritage organisations and community organisations.

We deliver programmes that nurture, grow and impact positively upon children and young people's creativity, knowledge and skills.

Where do we work?

We focus the majority of our work around the University's geographical footprint, mainly in the areas of Dudley, Sandwell, Telford, Walsall and Wolverhampton and the wider West Midlands. But we're always interested in opportunities to work more widely with partners that share our ambitions.

University of Wolverhampton

Arts Connect are part of the School of Creative Industries at the University of Wolverhampton.

We also work as part of the Enterprise, Knowledge Exchange and Research Centre activity of the University and support its commitment to community development.

www.artsconnect.co.uk

The Mighty Creatives

The Mighty Creatives is an award-winning charity providing creative youth services for the most unheard and under-represented children and young people in society, including those who are care experienced, facing adversity, challenges or disadvantage. We exist to make social justice a reality for young people through arts, culture and creativity.

Our core programme, Creative Mentoring, is a tried-and-tested model of one-to-one creative intervention, based on a person-centred approach and informed by the principles of social pedagogy. Working directly with our young beneficiaries, our trained Creative Mentors use the medium of artistic practice, alongside access to arts and culture, to empower young people to discover their sense of self, purpose, belonging, and a world of opportunities during challenging or transitional times.

Through our Creative Futures programme, we connect our young people with organisations and support them to create meaningful education, training and workplace opportunities together. By adopting creative approaches and listening to young voices, employers can inspire young people to take the next steps in their lives.

Everything we do as a charity is underpinned by the mighty voices of children and young people. Our Youth Voice programme sees us work with young people, other charities, organisations, youth services, and employers to support best practice, youth-led approaches which foster meaningful cultures by placing youth voice at the centre of decision-making.

www.themightycreatives.com

Arts Council England

About Arts Council England

Arts Council England is the national development agency for creativity and culture. We have set out our strategic vision in Let's Create that by 2030 we want England to be a country in which the creativity of each of us is valued and given the chance to flourish and where every one of us has access to a remarkable range of high-quality cultural experiences. From 2023 to 2026 we will invest over £467 million of public money from Government and an estimated £250 million from The National Lottery each year to help support the sector and to deliver this vision. This year the National Lottery will celebrate 30 years of supporting good causes in the United Kingdom through raising £49 billion and awarding over 690,000 individual grants since the first draw was held in 1994. Visit our website www.artscouncil.org.uk to learn more.

About Artsmark

Artsmark empowers teachers with the skills they need to embed arts, culture and creativity across the whole curriculum through CPD training from our partner, Goldsmiths, University of London. The programme recognises schools' exceptional commitment to creativity with the Artsmark Award - the only award for arts and cultural provision in England. The Artsmark Award is accredited by [Arts Council England](http://www.artscouncil.org.uk).

Artsmark is open to primary, secondary, special schools and hospital schools, as well as pupil referral units, youth offending teams and sixth form colleges in England. Artsmark is awarded at three levels; Silver, Gold and Platinum. As of September 2024, 51% of Artsmark schools have achieved Artsmark Silver, 40% Artsmark Gold and just 9% hold Artsmark Platinum – find out more about schools on their Artsmark journey [here](http://www.artsmark.org.uk).

www.artsmark.org.uk

Institute for Community Research and Development

The Institute for Community Research and Development (ICRD) works with and in local communities to deliver effective community-based transformational projects, drive policy developments and promote social mobility. ICRD uses interdisciplinary expertise to affect positive changes by working collaboratively with local communities and partnership networks.

ICRD is part of the Faculty of Arts, Business and Social Sciences at the University of Wolverhampton.

Arts Connect and Virtual Schools

Our journey with Virtual Schools started with a regional research and development programme in 2015, where we developed a strategic partnership with the 14 Virtual Schools in the West Midlands in order to make a positive difference to the cultural experiences and opportunities for the 12,000 children in care/care experienced children and young people in our region.

We've worked closely with our friends at The Mighty Creatives in this innovative programme of activity.

Artslink

The first phase of our work focused on setting the foundations through the Artslink programme, underpinned by a model of progression pathway, which provides a range of experiences and opportunities to enable children in care/care experienced children and young people to develop their interests and talents. Artslink is managed by the West Midlands' Virtual Schools Children in Care Foundation and was funded by the Virtual Schools (VS) with matched Partnership Investment from us.

As part of Artslink, Arts Connect supported the training of Virtual School staff in arts leadership, becoming Arts Ambassador Leads and developing new structures in their respective Virtual Schools.

All the VS work in collective geographical hubs to co-produce and deliver cultural opportunities for children in care/care experienced children and young people and their carers, in their local area as well as participating in a region wide programme across the West Midlands.

My Creative Track

We worked in collaboration with our colleagues The Mighty Creatives, to research, produce and develop My Creative Track a model for arts engagement and progression, that is used to plan, monitor and support each child and young person's experiences.

The West Midlands Children in Care Foundation

We helped found and co-invested in a new charity to ensure the continuation of this work – The West Midlands Children in Care Foundation who fundraise, run arts and sports programmes and training for professionals. They also measure and assess the impact of their arts programmes for the children and young people they work with.

The Foundation is active in advocating with Government on the needs of children in care/care experienced children and young people.

What are Virtual Schools?

Virtual Schools are statutory services based within every Local Authority, they exist to promote high aspirations for children and young people under the care of the Local Authority. They do not exist in real terms or as a building. Children and young people do not attend it, they still remain the responsibility of the school they're enrolled at.

The Virtual School is simply an organisation created for the effective co-ordination of education services at a strategic and operational level. Every care experienced child/young person will be registered with a Virtual School and each Virtual School works very differently.

Partners in Innovate & Collaborate

Stage One

- Adverse Camber productions
- Arena Theatre
- Attenborough Arts Centre
- Baby People
- Care to Dance
- COV CLOTH CIC
- Creative Alliance
- Culture Coventry Trust
- Derby Museums
- EMCCAN
- Haarlem Artspace CIC
- Inspire: Culture, Learning and Libraries
- Junction Arts
- Kakou CIC
- Mansfield Palace Theatre/Mansfield Museum
- Northamptonshire Music and Performing Arts Trust (NMPAT)
- Orchestras Live
- Royal & Derngate
- Rugby Art Gallery and Museum
- Sampad Associate Schools (Part of Sampad Arts and Heritage)
- Severn Arts
- Sleaford Hub
- Solihull/Coventry/Warwickshire Music Hubs
- The New Art Gallery Walsall
- The UP Creative Hub CIC
- Upstart Projects
- Wolverhampton Library

Stage Two

- Derbyshire VS & Junction Arts
- Dudley VS & Upstart Projects
- Leicestershire VS & Orchestras Live
- Lincolnshire VS & Adverse Camber
- Rutland VS & Northampton Music Trust
- Staffordshire VS & Care to Dance

- Warwickshire VS & Culture Coventry
- Wolverhampton VS & Arena Theatre