



**Evaluation Report June 2025**



Changing lives through culture



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**1. Background**

Hampshire Cultural Trust (HCT) was established as a charity in 2014, managing and supporting visitor attractions, museums and galleries that were previously operated by Hampshire County Council and Winchester City Council.

HCT’s purpose is ‘changing lives through culture’ and the charity runs a huge variety of workshops, classes, events and programmes for both young and old, in schools and in communities, with particular emphasis on reaching people who are vulnerable or disadvantaged and would not normally be able to access culture or heritage.

Stepping Stones was generously supported by The Murray Parish Trust, founded by Sarah Parish and Jim Murray in memory of their late daughter Ella-Jayne, who died of congenital heart failure in 2009. The Murray Parish Trust believe in improving access to specialist, imaginative and empowering mental health support for children and their families across the UK, so that seriously ill children can go on to lead happy and fulfilling lives.

Stepping Stones continued a series of programmes at Hampshire Cultural Trust that have used creativity to help Hampshire’s most clinically vulnerable young people overcome mental health challenges, including the acclaimed [ICE](#) (2017-2020) and [ICE Heritage](#) projects (2021–2023).

The evaluations of these projects produced evidence that supportive creative programmes build young people’s confidence, self-awareness and self-expression, increasing their personal resources and inspiring them to take on new things.

**ICE Heritage Participant Outcome Summary**



## **2. Stepping Stones Overview**

Young people's services are stretched beyond their limits and waiting lists are increasing. This means that large numbers of young people cannot access timely medical or mental health care or receive little or no support after they are discharged.

Stepping Stones aimed to use creative activity as a stepping stone for young people, both before and after accessing services, to build their confidence and prepare them to tackle the ongoing difficulties they face.

Stepping Stones built on learning from the delivery of previous programmes, recognised that young people's needs would be complex and varied and adopted a range of approaches to enable meaningful long-term impact.

The programme:

- targeted 11-16 year olds in contact with NHS services, Hampshire County Council's Children's Services and education units and pastoral care teams at schools
- provided activities for young people in several locations across the county including Hampshire Cultural Trust's museums and galleries as well as educational, clinical and online settings
- provided opportunities to engage in new cultural experiences, aiming to use creating a piece of creative work as an outlet to channel emotions and grow a feeling of achievement
- worked with trained creative practitioners, support staff and session facilitators to deliver responsive programmes that enabled young people to engage and achieve at their own pace
- created an environment of calm and trust, where young people could meet, discuss ideas and collaborate or work alongside each other, to increase their creative and personal resources

### 3. Programme Delivery

Stepping Stones was designed to respond to the changing needs of young people and make available a range of support over a longer period to aid participants with their recovery and personal development.

It ran as a series of eight programmes across 2024 and 2025 and a total of 81 sessions were delivered. The programme provided in-depth individual support, small group activity and peer support within the sessions.

It was delivered in different venues including museums and galleries operated by Hampshire Cultural Trust, a Pupil Referral Unit, a children’s unit within University Hospital Southampton and as an online programme. Activities were also integrated into Hampshire Cultural Trust’s wider support infrastructure for young people, which provides a range of social impact, partner and volunteering programmes.

The programmes, in date order, were:

Location	Dates	Programme Sessions	Medium
Bursledon House, Southampton Children’s Hospital	February-April 2024	8	Mixed media
Allen Gallery, Alton	February-June 2024	10 plus celebration	Ceramics
Aldershot Military Museum	Easter, May half-term, Summer Holidays 2024	7 one-offs	Gardening
Basingstoke Pupil Referral Unit, including a visit to the Willis Museum	May-June 2024	2 x 6	Art journaling
Red House Museum and Gardens, Christchurch	September-December 2024	2 x 9	Mixed media
Online	September-October 2024	4	Printing
The Arc, Winchester	February-May 2025	10	Printing
Gosport Museum and Art Gallery	February-May 2025	10 plus celebration	Film-making and photography

In three of the HCT museums the programme was preceded by Inspire Days, where young people could meet the creative practitioners and get a taster of the programme, helping to recruit and acclimatise participants to the setting.

Celebration events were held at two of the venues, where the young people shared their work with their families, reinforcing the feelings of achievement. At other locations, the creative work was displayed or the young people received a certificate or completed a portfolio to take home. These exchanges provided a positive focus for enjoyment and sharing and raised awareness of the high-quality work created by the young people.

A variety of creative mediums were offered during Stepping Stones and work produced by the young people included ceramic mugs and pots, painted stones, drawings, screen prints, printed fabrics, flower posies, garden boxes, photographs and a short film.



The programme delivery responded to demand and opportunity to ensure that maximum value was delivered for local young people from the available funding:

- previous programmes that had been restricted to referrals through partner organisations, e.g. CAMHS, had experienced challenges in recruitment, therefore Stepping Stones was an open programme with referrals taken directly from parents
- the entry criteria was young people whose mental health could benefit from engaging in creative activity, assessed in dialogue with the referring parent
- Stepping Stones was advertised through partner organisations, schools, newsletters, home education networks, social prescribers and Facebook groups
- the first programmes struggled early on with recruitment, a planned programme at the Willis Museum in Basingstoke was cancelled and the Pupil Referral Unit at Basingstoke was approached as a partner instead, with a visit to the Karl Blossfeldt photography exhibition at the Willis Museum included in the sessions
- the increasing trend in young people being home educated has created parental demand for tailored resources, so the online, Christchurch and Winchester programmes were particularly targeted at this group and had entry criteria of young people who were being home educated or not attending school due to their mental health
- the original plan was for one programme for home educated young people at Christchurch but there were 22 referrals so it was increased to two programmes with additional signposting to the online option

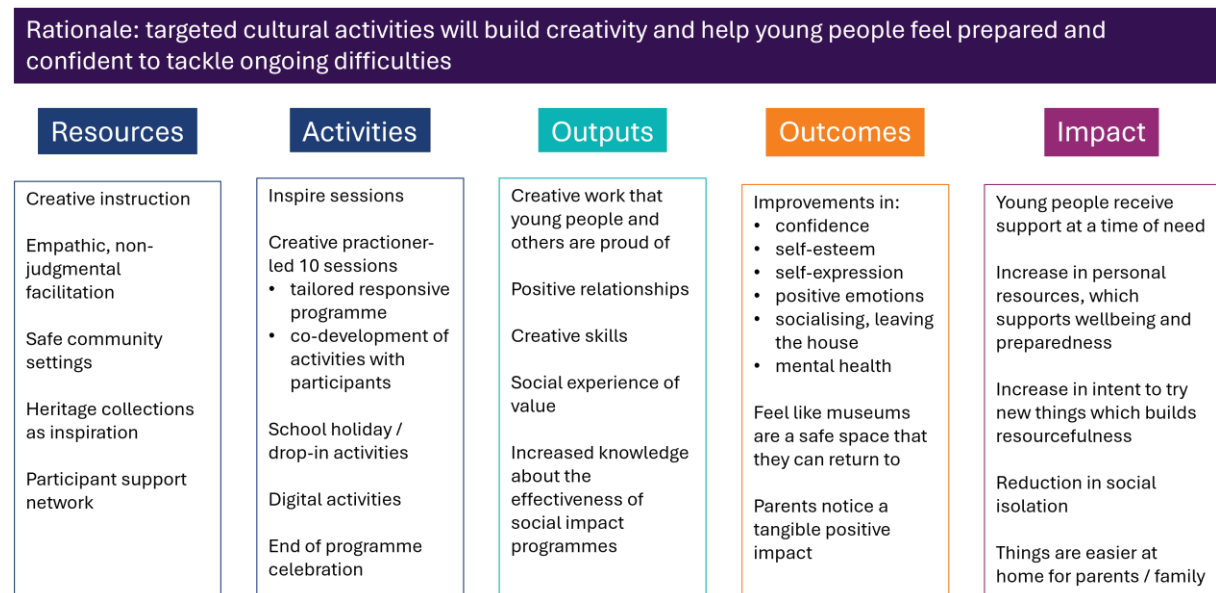
#### 4. Evaluation Framework

The Stepping Stones evaluation was designed and carried out in-house by Hampshire Cultural Trust’s Monitoring and Impact Manager and its Community and Impact Team. Its purposes were:

- to explore the effectiveness of the delivery approach and identify any opportunities to refine HCT’s young people’s programmes
- to build on the evidence from previous projects, further interrogating how targeted cultural activities may support young people with long-term needs
- to capture any wider impact of the activities, for example on the families

There was no funder requirement to evaluate and the evaluation process forms part of Hampshire Cultural Trust’s ongoing commitment to ambition and quality in its work.

The following theory of change was developed to describe the planned impact:



The evaluation framework was developed in line with the Centre for Cultural Value’s evaluation principles, aiming to be open-minded, many-voiced and applicable. A dynamic approach was taken with tools created and adapted in tandem with the varied delivery formats and settings.

The evaluation uses evidence gathered from both structured and informal sources including:

- participant questionnaires at the start and end of programmes
- parent surveys at the mid-point and end of programmes
- creative practitioner and facilitator surveys at the end of programmes
- follow up interviews with creative practitioners, parents and participants
- ad hoc and email feedback gathered during delivery

### 5. Programme Attendance

The Stepping Stones programme targeted working with 60 young people face-to-face. 14 young people attended Inspire days, and 63 came to sessions at the full programme, giving a total of 77 young people who participated in Stepping Stones.

The attendance by location is tabled below:

Location	Medium	Attended Inspire day only	Attended full programme
Allen Gallery, Alton	Ceramics	3	7
Bursledon House, Southampton Children’s Hospital	Mixed media	-	5
Basingstoke Pupil Referral Unit	Art journaling	-	3
Aldershot Military Museum	Gardening	-	19
Red House Museum and Gardens, Christchurch	Mixed media	8	10
Online	Printing	-	6
The Arc, Winchester	Printing	-	7
Gosport Museum and Art Gallery	Film-making and photography	3	6
<b>Total</b>		<b>14</b>	<b>77</b>

The Inspire days were offered as both a stand-alone engagement and as a taster experience to support recruitment for the full programmes. 86% of attendees rated the day a 4 or 5 out of 5. Participants enjoyed being creative and talking with others in a friendly, calm environment.

62% of those who came to an Inspire day went on to join a Stepping Stones programme. Those that attended Inspire days only were asked for feedback; reasons for not continuing included not: wanting to commit to 10 weeks, being able to make the dates, liking that creative medium, being in the right state of mind, or wanting to do the course on their own. As in previous programmes the team found that young people were more likely to attend if a sibling was also participating. 16% of referrals had heard about Stepping Stones from a friend.

There were 103 enquiries overall about joining Stepping Stones programmes, showing that the team did a good job of converting enquiries to attendance. Feedback as to why people enquired but did not attend included: a difficulty in making the dates or committing to the full programme, that the young person was not ready to attend a face to face programme or that the creative medium was not the one they would have chosen.

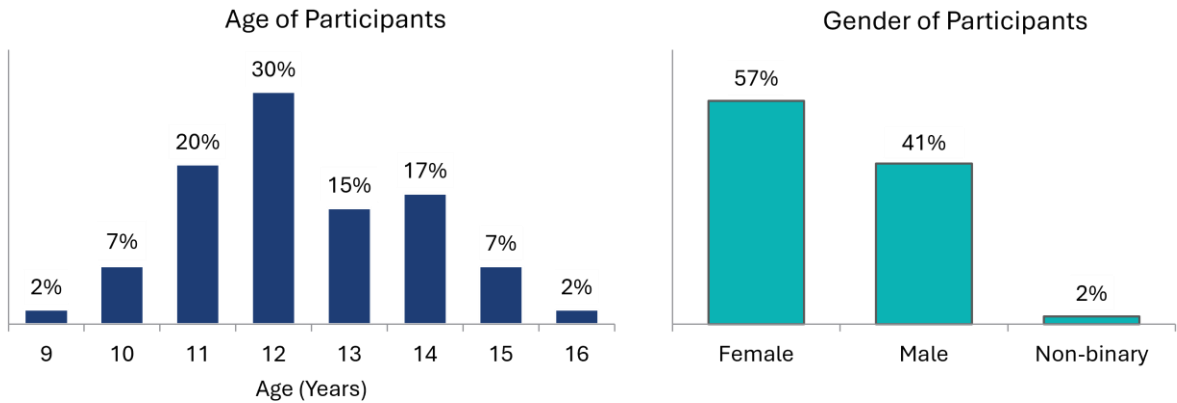
Early exits from the programme were due to finding the anxiety of being in a group overwhelming, not liking the creative medium or unexpected family issues.

In terms of how people had heard about the programme, 30% of referrals had heard about Stepping Stones from school, 21% via a Facebook advert, 18% through a home education network e.g. on Facebook, and 12% direct from Hampshire Cultural Trust marketing or connections.

**6. Demographics**

The targeted age group was 11-16 year olds, however the team received referrals for people as young as 7, reflecting the increasing need and lack of services for pre-teens. The age mix of the groups was considered, as this had influenced group dynamics in previous programmes, and where fitting young people were offered a place. The youngest attendee was aged 9. The mode age was 12.

Overall there were more female participants than male, however there was variation between programmes with the ceramics programme in Alton being 90% female and the gardening programme in Aldershot being 64% male. Among those disclosing their gender there was not the gender diversity seen in previous programmes.



The level of anxiety found in the young people who enrolled was extremely high; 55% of the young people who took part were under the care of another service such as CAMHS or supported through their school pastoral team.

There was a noticeable increase in the number of participants with medical, SEND or neurodiverse needs compared to previous programmes, with 47% having received a recent diagnosis or going through diagnosis at the time of the programme. Conditions present included ADHD, anxiety, allergies, autism, brain injury, chronic fatigue, Developmental Language Disorder, dyslexia, epilepsy, hearing loss, and hypermobility.

The young people’s difficulties during sessions included not feeling comfortable in new places, struggling to mix with others, getting frustrated, masking or not showing the impact of things, not wanting their diagnoses to be known or asked about, not being able to understand instructions, fatigue, visual impairment and hypersensitivity to smells and sounds.

There were some challenges for the creative practitioners in overcoming participants' initial anxieties and adjusting for different needs and limitations, but they were experienced in this work and could adapt sessions to suit the needs of those present. The creative practitioners were supported by venue staff and group facilitators to ensure all the students' needs were catered for. The facilitators also fed back that the informal, relaxed nature of the sessions enabled participants, and that the young people helped each other by giving everyone the space and time to contribute.

## **7. Delivery Format**

The highest number of individual attendees was for the gardening programme in Aldershot. This ran over three school holidays (3 days at Easter, 2 in May half-term and 2 in August '24) to follow the gardening seasons. It was run by Leigh Johnstone, who is popular on social media as The Bearded Gardener and an active mental health campaigner and attracted interest from parents who were looking for outdoor activities and support for boys.

The gardening programme was offered as both one-off sessions and a full series, to explore which formats were most popular. Most of the attendance was as one-offs, with 13 young people coming for only one session and only one attending most of the sessions. So this format worked in terms of subject matter and inclusion, but did not facilitate the ongoing relationships and resourcing of young people that Stepping Stones targeted.

For the delivery team going forward offering only one format in a location would ease administration such as bookings and tracking attendance.

The survey responses indicated a different format preference between the creative practitioners delivering Stepping Stones and the parents of the participants. The creative practitioners liked the 8-10 week format used with 63% choosing it as their preference for future programmes.

However parents said that the best format for future programmes was either something that ran in the school holidays (33%) or an ongoing programme that was on every week (50%). When asked in the sessions parents gave more explanation, indicating their wish was for a weekly scheduled session that young people could come to when they were able. They wanted them not to feel like they had missed out if they had a break and so structured progression through an 8-10 week programme was less of a priority for them.

## 8. Delivery Locations

Hampshire Cultural Trust's previous programme for young people, ICE Heritage, found that the museum and gallery venues proved to be calm, friendly and interesting settings which had a positive impact on participants' moods and inspired their creative activities.

The Stepping Stones surveys found similar results. Many of the young people were unfamiliar with these venues but the majority thought they were good settings: relaxing, fun and inspirational. The exhibits in the museums were deemed cool and interesting and the calm quiet atmospheres and welcoming staff were appreciated. For parents, the community locations were easy and convenient to access and thought to be comfortable and well suited for the activities. Similarly the creative practitioners responded positively to being among the collections while doing creative activities and appreciated having facilities such as sinks and drying spaces available.

Stepping Stones also trialled a remote version of the programme, designed for young people not currently attending mainstream education who struggle to commit to something in-person or longer term. The programme timings were shorter, with 4 x 40 minute online sessions offered. Each participant was sent a box with the materials they would need for the sessions, similar to the successful [Creative Boxes](#) programme Hampshire Cultural Trust ran during the pandemic.

All participants who applied for the online course attended and it worked well as an alternative offer. Participants fed back that they chose the online programme as a way of trying it this way first, because the dates worked better for them, because they did not like going to new places or because they preferred being in their own space.

## 9. Case Study – New Things Can Be Fun

### **The Young Person**

Charlie aged 12 had heard about Stepping Stones through school. His mum and him hoped he would enjoy going, that it would help him with feelings of insecurity and sensitivity and help him meet other young people. He is diagnosed with autism and is not supported by other services.

### **The First Session**

Charlie attended the first Easter session of gardening at Aldershot Military Museum. He rated it 5 out of 5 and said the best things about the day were getting dirty, weeding and kicking stones. He thought the museum was really good and wanted to come back for the other sessions.

His mum found the venue easy to get to with lots of parking and loved that Charlie was able to have a look round at all the interesting things. She emailed the team after the first session and said “He absolutely loved it! Was so lovely to see him so happy! So impressed with how he got on and how he was immediately accepted.”

### **The Impact**

Charlie returned for nearly all of the sessions over the three school breaks. We followed up with his Mum to ask her about the impact of Stepping Stones for Charlie.

“Charlie is diagnosed with autism and can be very full on. He talks a lot about his special interests and can be loud (however not enjoying loudness himself) this was completely embraced during these sessions. He was really welcomed on this programme and not judged at all. This was wonderful.”

“Gardening was entirely new for Charlie and that was wonderful as it wasn’t necessarily something he would normally choose to do. It really opened his eyes! He was able to see that new things can be fun!”

“Charlie came back from gardening happy and much more relaxed. This made for a calmer time at home especially with his younger sister. He definitely seemed less anxious as well.”

“We welcome anything that can encourage positive socialising especially during holidays when he would usually only see his younger sister. Since participating in Stepping Stones he is more relaxed and socialising more.”

(name has been changed)

## 10. Participant Outcomes

Stepping Stones targeted the following mental health and emotional wellbeing outcomes for vulnerable young people:

- increased confidence and self-esteem
- empowered creativity and self-expression
- positive relationships built
- improved engagement with learning
- celebration and promotion of achievements

The overall aim was that targeted cultural activities would build creativity and help young people feel prepared and confident to tackle ongoing difficulties.

The evaluation used the short version of the [Warwick Edinburgh Mental Wellbeing Scale](#), a validated tool for tracking changes in young people's mental health. 13 paired pre and post programme surveys were obtained from participants. The recommended minimum sample size is 30 people, so findings here are not statistically reliable. Outcomes were not measured at Bursledon House paediatric/psychiatric unit or the Pupil Referral Unit in Basingstoke, due to the high turnover and variable lengths of stay, and at Aldershot where the programme could be attended on a casual basis.

The young people's average wellbeing score was 22.5 at the start of the programme, below the UK population average of 23.5, and 26.0 at the end of the programme, indicating improved wellbeing overall. 11 of the 13 respondents reported higher scores on the last session compared with the first. Improvements were seen across all aspects of mental wellbeing measured, with the greatest increases being in feeling optimistic, feeling relaxed and being able to make up their own minds.

The young people attending Stepping Stones hoped that the outcomes would be that they would meet new people and make new friends, try something new and learn new skills, make some good artwork and be more confident in their abilities, and have some 'me time' and relax.

The programme was well reviewed, 73% of participants rated the programme a 4 or 5 out of 5. Young people particularly enjoyed interacting with others and being creative:

### What was the best thing about Stepping Stones?

- being with my mate and talking to different people
- being creative and being able to chat and make new friends :)
- amazingly wonderful friendly artist
- learning if us humans left strawberries unattended they would basically take over the world
- doing the design on the clay and making it all colourful
- being creative and trying new things

- meeting Mia and Charlotte they made me come out of my shell
- I liked the characters I made and making presents for my family

(names have been changed)

The young people reported that they had tried new things, learned creative techniques, and were feeling more skillful, confident and positive, indicating that Stepping Stones achieved many of their desired outcomes:

**Has taking part changed anything for you?**

- I found that I am very good at art and pottery
- yes how to create in different ways
- I've learnt how to plant seeds
- Yes I feel I can achieve new things and do new tasks
- I learnt a new skill and are being more creative
- We learned how to take better pictures. I feel more confident!
- I've started making jewellery for myself. I like being creative
- I feel happier having a go at new art and meeting new people
- it was nice chatting with friends
- I felt better after doing the session

Suggestions for improvement were limited to requests for protective equipment, running the programme for a longer time, and for different activities that better fit the young person's age, needs or preference.

The creative practitioners and facilitators were also surveyed to obtain additional perspectives on the impact of Stepping Stones for the participants. They recorded seeing the participants having fun, growing in confidence and creative ability, overcoming social anxiety and interacting more with their peers:

**Have you observed any impact on the participants?**

- In the early sessions the students did not interact with each other very much. The last session showed they had embraced each others favoured designs/colours/styles and they enjoyed making something for each other.
- First session the young people were very shy and mostly quiet. Over the duration of the course they started to engage more and interacted with each other in meaningful ways. They've exchanged contacts and became friends.
- Growth in confidence, pursuing creative activities 'out of lessons'.
- Creative confidence and the ability to challenge and change.
- They were keen to continue working with the materials and by the last session were taking creative risks.
- Their self-confidence in all of them has grown so much. Their ability to interact with each other and the adults working with them, their confidence in sharing ideas and opinions is wonderful to see. They have all really enjoyed both the photography and filmmaking and have really taken to using both these mediums to creatively express themselves.

## 11. Wider Impact

Parents made referrals to Stepping Stones because they were looking for activities that would support young people with managing their emotions and promote self-care, give young people the opportunity to socialise with peers and help parents to include heritage and cultural activities affordably in their home education plans.

13 parents provided feedback via the follow-up survey. 77% of them said they had noticed positive changes in the young person due to participating in Stepping Stones. Positive changes included the young person being more relaxed, confident and socialising more, as well as having learned new creative skills.

Parents also provided evidence that coming to Stepping Stones had encouraged young people to then take up new activities or attend something new without parental support, indicating their personal resources had increased.

78% of the parents who responded had also noticed positive changes for the family due to the young person participating in Stepping Stones, indicating that helping the young person feel more relaxed, confident and engaged had a wider benefit.

“Both my kids did the gardening programme at the military museum, they both really enjoyed it and the next day even helped me in our own garden and now they seem to show more of an interest in gardening which is lovely.”

“I had two reluctant children at the beginning who came out more enthusiastic with some ideas of what they would like to do to at home.”

“She has enjoyed the small group. It has made her more confident on being without parents as she feels safe.”

“From a parents’ observation - both of my children left each session, smiling, laughing and chatting. I often had to wait for them to finish as they were not in a hurry to leave! For me, that was such a positive outcome to witness.

“Trying new things has been anxiety ridden at times due to their abusive school experiences. Stepping Stones has enabled them to learn to trust new adults, whilst exploring nature driven crafts. This has been perfect for us as a family that spends a lot of time in the forest!”

“We cannot begin to thank you enough for running this program. The positive impact it has had on him (increased confidence, socialising and learning a new skill he realised he was good at!) has been inspiring to watch.

“He felt accepted, important and empowered, all things that in a peer group he hasn't felt for a while! He is more outgoing and positive which impacts the whole family.”

## 12. Case Study – Work to Be Proud Of

### **The Young People**

Anna aged 10 and Bea aged 12 had come to Stepping Stones hoping to build their confidence in being creative. Anna is a young carer and receives support from the school ELSA and Bea may have autism and ADHD. They came to all 10 of the sessions in ceramics at the Allen Galley in Alton.

### **What did you hope to get from the sessions?**

To understand pottery better and feel more confident about creating art with clay.

To not feel scared about it and confident that I can do it again in the future.

### **What was it like at the sessions?**

I felt excited to go every week.

I knew what the topic was and it felt good to be in a small supportive group. The leaders were friendly and open minded.

We learned that we can erase or glue things back together.

I learned about the different types of clay. There was a topic but we could use our own ideas and creativity to make something.

### **How do you feel about what you made?**

I love the mugs and the octopus and vase we made. I have them on my window sill and see them every day.

I love the little plant pots that we made, they are so beautiful.

### **What was the impact of the sessions?**

I was happier and so proud after each session.

It helped me to relax and reduce stress, and helped me to socialise with people I didn't know.

I would love to do it again and also try something new that is art related.

My confidence grew and now I feel more motivated to try other new things.

(names have been changed)

## The Creative Practitioner

Hi, I'm Jill, I'm a ceramic artist and teacher and I'd like to tell you about the work that I've been doing with young people at the beautiful ceramic Allen Gallery in Alton. Over 10 weeks of morning workshops I have been teaching the young people how to express themselves through clay, basically – have your say with clay.

They have designed things like themed mugs, they have made little planters, we've done slab rolling and coil pot making. They've done lots of experiments and the best thing about it is that they've been able to use their own creativity to design the things that they produce.

Clay is a very therapeutic medium to work with, and when you start to knead it and feel it, you can actually sense the relaxation in your body and that was very apparent with the young people.

At the beginning the group were quite shy, a couple of the young people were quite withdrawn, and over 10 weeks they became more and more confident and they produced some really good work that they were proud of.

We had a special celebration of everything that they'd achieved, their improvement in confidence, the friendships that they'd made, the conversations that we had. It was a celebration of them being able to be themselves and express themselves. We made hot chocolate and they drank that from their mugs and they made some beautiful porcelain leaves that they hung up in the garden of the Allen Gallery, as a thank you to for hosting and being a wonderful location in which to work.

We displayed their work and the families were invited to come and we had a little workshop for them as well. Afterwards parents came up and told me how much a difference the sessions had made and that their children had really become excited over Saturday mornings and they wanted it to carry on. I mean we had almost 100% attendance over 10 weeks which is amazing.

I feel very privileged to have been part of this journey with the young people and the takeaway was they had a lot of fun, they didn't want it to end and they made friendships and they felt good about themselves.



### 13. Conclusions and Recommendations

The Stepping Stones programme was delivered successfully, with good attendance and positive feedback across the sessions. It put into practice learnings from previous programmes and trialled new approaches; elements that worked well included:

- having an open and inclusive self-referral process
- using established and wide-ranging channels to reach potential participants
- responding to current needs, such as for provision for home-educated young people
- having trial offers to create low stress entry points
- drawing on and adding to the young person's network of support
- having experienced creative practitioners and facilitators who adapted the sessions to meet complex and varied needs
- combining group, individual and peer support
- locating sessions in accessible community settings and friendly heritage venues
- having activities that appealed to both boys and girls

Recommendations for the delivery of future programmes include:

- creating an open-ended programme to encourage regular meeting and relationship-building, and to minimise dropping out if sessions are missed
- continuing to help young people trial and stick with the programme, e.g. by promoting coming with a friend or sibling, or giving them a choice of creative medium
- continuing with the offer of an online programme and exploring ways to move young people who want to to a face-to-face encounter
- including more celebration and sharing activities to maximise the impact
- considering creating a programme for 7-10 year olds
- developing the evaluation approach further to encourage more comprehensive data collection

Stepping Stones generated positive outcomes for participants, including:

- improvement in mood, with young people having fun and feeling relaxed
- growth in creative skill, confidence and experimentation, with young people learning or mastering techniques, and returning to or taking up a creative hobby
- trying something new and finding enjoyment in learning, which increased confidence and led to them wanting to try other new things
- producing creative work they were proud of, that was celebrated by others, which they gifted or which served as a reminder of their experience and ability
- overcoming initial anxieties around being with other people, feeling accepted and valued by adults and their peers, which built trust in others and led to them socialising more

- family relationships were also positively impacted, with the young people being more relaxed and interacting more, reducing stress at home for them and others

The overall aim for Stepping Stones was that the targeted cultural activities would build creativity and help young people feel more prepared and confident to deal with ill health, recovery and other challenges. The evaluation found that Stepping Stones contributed to increased openness, optimism, creativity and confidence in young people. It helped them recognise their value and skills, make choices, trust others and want to try new things.

Alongside previous evaluations Stepping Stones makes the case that supported creative programmes in cultural venues have a positive role to play in helping resource young people to tackle the ongoing difficulties they face.

