



Lighting the blue touch paper: Kickstarting the Arts Education Revolution

Research Report

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May 2026

Exploring the 'how' and 'why' of supporting professional development and work opportunities for creative practitioners through the West of England Music and Arts' Cultural Education Hub

Executive Summary

West of England Music and Arts' (WEMA) Cultural Education Hub is uniquely positioned. Established in 2024, it is funded by the West of England Mayoral Combined Authority and Arts Council England through the Culture West programme. The research illuminates the central role of the WEMA's Cultural Education Hub in bringing about meaningful, impactful change for and with young people, schools, creative practitioners, cultural organisations and communities in inclusive and cost-effective ways, and the importance of strategically targeting limited resources and funding for maximum impact.

Focussed research undertaken from the perspectives of creative practitioners working in and with primary, secondary and special schools, coupled with insightful findings from seven case studies of creative residencies, demonstrate the power of a Cultural Education Hub to establish new models of working. These bring together and capitalise on multidisciplinary perspectives and experiences of people and organisations, with practices that nurture and develop local, regional and national cultural education ecosystems.

These programmes and creative practitioners provided opportunities for schools to consider identifiable and often invisible inequalities within their own communities alongside the uniqueness and strengths of each community and to give deep consideration to lived experiences. The notion of 'place' within programmes is central, and yet the temptation to see 'place' as simply a 'deficit' has been

avoided. The authentic work of these creative practitioners demonstrates the uniqueness of embracing places, communities and cultures past and present through *placemaking*, which is celebrated, activated and strengthened (aligning with key priorities identified by Arts Council England).

13 freelance creative practitioners at various stages of their career in receipt of grants under the umbrella of WEMA's 'Creatives in Schools' programme contributed to this research. They underwent a process of self-reflection of their key skills and personal attributes prior to and after running creative arts programmes in schools and undertaking professional learning of their choice from a wide offer, to uncover attributes they consider central to their own effectiveness as creative practitioners working in primary, secondary and special schools. Their insights demonstrate several common key attributes practitioners identified as being essential to their success in the role along with their commitment to developing as practitioners, alongside identifying multiple barriers that exist in their work and professional development that are likely to be relevant across contexts.

The importance of creative practitioners being mentored and being supported to feel that they belong both in schools and within wider professional networks alongside accessing bespoke needs-led professional learning opportunities comes through clearly. This research demonstrates the valuable strategic and practical role of a Cultural Education Hub in connecting,

supporting and nurturing the development of creative artists and teachers across all stages of their career and the power of professionals working and learning together in dedicated and authentic ways to bring about fundamental changes that positively impact young people, schools and communities now and in the future.

Arts education and creativity in schools in England urgently need a resurgence. For the ambitions of the recent Education White Paper “Every Child Achieving and Thriving” (UK Government, 2026) to be realised, the power of arts and cultural education needs to not just be recognised but actively developed and integrated within and beyond the taught curriculum. The expertise and authenticity creative practitioners bring is at the heart of developing teachers’ understanding, knowledge and practice, which is central to curriculum development.

Yet, the importance of creative practitioners’ role in brokering and leading learning and engagement in formal and non-formal education settings is often overlooked and under-funded, as is their professional development. To illuminate facilitating factors, issues and tensions in this area, WEMA commissioned a Rapid Research Review exploring ‘Creative and cultural practitioners working with young people and teachers in formal education’ (Clark et al., 2025). This provided a theoretical framework for the current research and for the bespoke professional development

programme developed by WEMA.

The success of this model of working is rooted in a Cultural Education Hub, led by an established and well-connected educational organisation with a breadth and depth of experience across the Arts and wider learning and engagement, leveraging local expertise and regional connectivity through galvanising sector participation around identified local and regional priorities and ambitions. This is central to supporting the development of confidence and expertise to collaboratively tackle priorities and overcome challenges in schools and communities in creative and innovative ways.

This model of working deserves recognition and further interrogation of the possibilities created by widening the network of Cultural Education Hubs to maximise potential for change. These recommendations offer insightful suggestions for policy makers, schools and educational institutions, cultural organisations, creative practitioners and all those that seek to champion creative and cultural education in harnessing the collaborative potential of artistic learning and practices. This model broadens and deepens access to creative and cultural learning and engagement which proliferates inclusive, inspiring and ambitious opportunities for all to achieve and thrive, regardless of their background, circumstances and where they live, work and go to school.

UK Government (2026) Every child achieving and thriving
<https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/every-child-achieving-and-thriving/every-child-achieving-and-thriving-html-version>

Clark, T., Andrews, J., Maisuria, A., & Fernandes, V. (2025). Rapid research review: Creative and cultural practitioners working with young people and teachers in formal education. <https://wema.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/rapid-research-paper-creative-and-cultural-practitioners-working-with-young-people-and-teachers-in-formal-education.pdf>

Recommendations

1. A regional network of Cultural Education Hubs should be central to supporting and developing local and regional infrastructure and ecosystems, proliferating opportunities for schools, young people, creative practitioners and cultural organisations to collaborate, learn and grow through fruitful partnership working.
2. The significant benefits of creative practitioners working in formal education settings should be acknowledged and promoted.
3. The role of creative practitioners in opening up authentic and creative opportunities across formal and non-formal education should be given serious consideration, particularly in relation to their potential to support multiple aspirations outlined in the UK Government's Curriculum and Assessment Review (2025) and Education White Paper (2026).
4. Needs-led professional learning should be central to all creative and cultural arts programmes to support and develop creative practitioners at all stages of their career so that ambition and professional growth is nurtured. Providing access to appropriate inspiring and engaging professional mentoring for creative practitioners at all stages of their career should be developed as a central role of Cultural Education Hubs.
5. Cultural Education Hubs should maintain and grow their professional networks and provide access to support creative practitioners to become established within wider networks.
6. Creative and cultural learning should, wherever possible, facilitate authentic ways of working and support creative practitioners in illuminating potential pathways to further study, engagement and workplace opportunities.
7. Organisations leading Cultural Education Hubs should be well-placed to offer strategic and practical support across multiple domains and to target priority and need in the allocation and distribution of funding and resources.
8. Creative and cultural education should be recognised and embraced for its potential to catalyse development and change that capitalises and grows expertise and willingness to collaboratively identify and tackle local, regional and national challenges, ambitions and priorities.
9. Programmes should support the ambitions of creative artists and cultural organisations in co-developing their ideas and tools with and for young people and schools, drawing upon their own experiences and expertise.
10. West of England Music and Arts should disseminate the findings from their creative artists in schools programme research and share their expertise widely with policymakers, funding bodies, schools, cultural organisations and creative practitioners.

Introduction

Arts education in England is long overdue a renaissance. Even before the UK's 2024 general election, the now Labour government consistently stated and reiterated their support for the Arts, cultural engagement and creativity, and the importance they place on access to arts and arts education for all young people. This is no mean feat after 14 years of decline in funding and status. These ambitions punctuate politicians' speeches on a regular basis and have made their way into recent policies and statements of intent. Notable actions include a promised revamp of England's National Curriculum following a review led by Professor Becky Francis. The title of this review suggests the inclusive ambition of "Building a world-class curriculum for all" (UK Government, 2025). In the executive summary, Francis lays out what needs to happen if this vision is to work towards becoming a reality.

“It is vital that schools and colleges are able to innovate and respond to local needs, and that teachers have the flexibility to extend the curriculum and draw out its relevance for the young people in their classrooms.”

- Professor Becky Francis CBE, Chair of the Curriculum and Assessment Review
"Building a world-class curriculum for all"
(DfE, 2025)

It is this ambition that sits at the heart of the work and thinking shared in our report and

across the work of West of England Music and Arts' Cultural Education Hub. The hub facilitates the bringing together of schools, young people, communities, cultural organisations and creative practitioners to collaboratively develop and grow innovative, inspiring learning programmes based around locally identified needs, ambitions and aspirations.

Supporting creative artists to develop and share their work through developing partnerships in schools is clearly crucial to this process and also brings considerable potential benefits to schools and young people (Tamblin & Bacon, 2023). And yet herein lies another set of multi-layered challenges, not least of which are the stark statistics on equity of access to careers in the creative industries.

A 2024 report by the Sutton Trust on social mobility and the creative industries reveals a series of perhaps unsurprising but nevertheless uncomfortable findings. It lays bare the depth of class inequalities and barriers that exist in access to the creative industries, with stark over-representation of those from the most affluent backgrounds whilst highlighting that those from low socio-economic backgrounds are far less likely to study creative subjects at school or university or to work in the creative sector. It also shows under-representation of some demographic groups and the overrepresentation of others. From a

Department for Education. (2025). Curriculum and Assessment Review Final Report: Building a world-class curriculum for all https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/media/690b96bbc22e4ed8b051854d/Curriculum_and_Assessment_Review_final_report_-_Building_a_world-class_curriculum_for_all.pdf

Tambling & Bacon, S. (2023) The Arts in schools: Foundation for the future - purposes, principles and practice. Calouste Gulbenkian Foundation/A New Direction. <https://www.anewdirection.org.uk/asset/8342/download?1705692414>

Holt-white, E. O'Brien, D., Brook, O. & Taylor, M. (2024). A Class act: Social mobility and the creative industries. Sutton Trust. <https://www.suttontrust.com/wp-content/uploads/2024/11/A-Class-Act-1.pdf>

regional perspective this highlights a strong case for having the ambition and resource to support and nurture a diverse pool of creative practitioners if they are to be representative of the richly diverse and multicultural communities in which they live and work.

In spring 2025, West of England Music and Arts (WEMA) commissioned a Rapid Research Review exploring 'Creative and cultural practitioners working with young people and teachers in formal education' (Clark et al., 2025). The review was framed by four research questions seeking to understand 1) benefits, 2) conditions, 3) challenges, barriers and enablers, and 4) effective models and practices, within this context. The findings of this research review provide a theoretical basis for our work, and have developed understanding and shaped thinking and practices across the work of WEMA's Cultural Education Hub.

The focus of this current report is to provide a research-focussed report to share the work that has taken place to understand the perspectives, needs and aspirations of creative practitioners working in two specific programmes of work funded and brokered by West of England Music and Arts' Cultural Education Hub. We also share our thinking about how cultural education hubs and other arts organisations can support the professional development and career trajectories of a diverse range of creative practitioners in the future.

What we wanted to find out and develop

The need and aspiration to support the professional development of creative practitioners was established right from the inception of WEMA's Cultural Education Hub. Professional development is woven as a strand through all aspects of the programmes directly funded by WEMA's Creative Education Hub and encompasses an offer which aims to recognise and support creative practitioners wherever they are on their career pathway. The diversity of experience amongst creative practitioners working across the West of England Combined Authority (WECA) region is likely to be mirrored in other geographical regions and includes highly experienced creative practitioners as well as those who are earlier in their career or seeking to get started.

Aims

- To explore creative practitioners' perspectives on attributes of an effective creative practitioner working in an educational setting and map changes over time
- To gain greater understanding of how to provide, support and evaluate professional development of creative practitioners
- To further enhance the development of the professional development offer for creative practitioners provided through West of England Music and Arts' Cultural Education Hub.

Clarke, T., Andrews, J., Fernandes, V. & Maisuria, A. (2025). Rapid Research Review: Creative and cultural practitioners working with young people and teachers in formal education. University of West of England. <https://wema.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/rapid-research-paper-creative-and-cultural-practitioners-working-with-young-people-and-teachers-in-formal-education.pdf>

Participants involved in the study

Participants in this study worked as creative practitioners across two closely related areas of work under the umbrella of the 'Creatives in Schools' programme, both of which were grant funded by WEMA's Cultural Education Hub. Successful grant recipients were selected from a very over-subscribed open call for applicants in the second round of funding and represented a wide range of artforms, backgrounds and levels of experience. 13 of the 24 grant holders volunteered to participate in this study.

Creatives in Schools Grants	Creatives in Schools Residency Programme
<p>West of England Music and Arts' Cultural Education Hub awarded 24 grants to two cohorts of creative practitioners. These grants supported creative and cultural freelancers to develop and deliver workshops or activities in schools and education settings across the region.</p>	<p>Bringing together young people, schools, cultural organisations and creative practitioners, seven diverse creative residencies were established in primary, secondary and special schools across the WECA region. These sought to support schools in identifying and addressing needs, aspirations and priorities in collaboration with creative practitioners.</p>

Findings shared in this report are presented anonymously and with the agreement of participants.

A brief overview of the current professional development programme offered to creative practitioners through West of England Music and Arts' Cultural Education Hub

In-person and online professional development was offered to creative practitioners as part of the Creatives in Schools grant programme. This is briefly summarised below.

- 1 day, in person workshop delivered by arts education lecturers from Bath Spa University.
- Online safeguarding training.
- Introduction to creative education: four online training modules exploring context and pedagogy for delivering creative workshops in schools.
- Inclusive teaching for cultural educators: online training modules exploring how to apply the social model of disability to cultural education.
- 3 hours of 1:1 mentoring with a subject specialist.
- An in person collective reflection workshop at the end of the grant, delivered by arts education lecturers from Bath Spa University.
- Access to West of England Music and Arts' bespoke 'Creatives in Schools Toolkit' with practical advice and templates to support delivering workshops in education settings.

West of England Music and Arts' Cultural Education Hub is now planning to offer the online training and toolkit out more widely as a resource to the sector beyond the Creatives in Schools Grant.

What we did

Creative practitioners in receipt of grants from West of England Music and Arts' Cultural Education Hub for the second round of the Creatives in Schools Programme and also the Creatives in School Residency Programme were invited to take part in a reflective conversation with one of the research team at the beginning and end of their funded work. The purpose of the interviews was to gather their perspectives on the attributes they consider are required to be an effective creative practitioner in an education setting and explore changes in their practice and perceptions over time.

These interviews were framed around developing a self-reflective profile based on identification and rating of these attributes. The process drew on the framework of Personal Profiling (Butler and Hardy, 1992) and the philosophy of Personal Construct Theory (Kelly, 1955), which places the perspectives of each creative practitioner at the centre of their world view.

Details of how to conduct the process of creating a performance profile can be found in WEMA's Creatives in Schools toolkit; it is also used in WEMA's programmes as a tool to support all creative practitioners.



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Butler, R.J. & Hardy, L. (1992). The Performance Profile: Theory and application. *The Sport Psychologist*, 6 (3) 253-264.

Kelly, G.A. (1955). *The Psychology of personal constructs*. New York: W.W. Norton & Co.

What we found

Number of attributes

Across the responses from the 13 creative practitioners, 31 different attributes were identified and defined as being important for creative practitioners to have. This breadth of delineation highlights the freedom offered by this reflective process for each creative practitioner to identify key attributes meaningful for them. Each creative practitioner identified between 4 and 9 attributes, demonstrating their unique perspectives on what is needed and which attributes are most important to them.

Most regularly occurring attributes

Of the 31 attributes identified, "flexibility/adaptability", "punctuality", "creativity" and "facilitation" were four key attributes consistently mentioned as being important by the majority of creative practitioners. A more in-depth description of each of these attributes is shown in Table 1, alongside the mean average 'ideal rating' they awarded to each of these attributes.

As a helpful resource for future organisations seeking to adopt this approach with their creative practitioners, a template performance profile has been developed incorporating these four attributes which can be used as a starting point to facilitate future discussions around what attributes creative practitioners identify as being important to them. Crucially, while this template can facilitate future discussion around key attributes, it is not prescriptive or rigid and the included four attributes can be kept or dismissed by each individual creative practitioner.

Attribute	Description "A creative practitioner who is this..."	Average 'Ideal' Rating
Flexibility/ Adaptability	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • is flexible in communication, delivery style and content during sessions; to be a "Stretchy Human" • is able to cope with being under timetable pressures through being a flexible teacher and not rigid • is able to adapt in the moment • is ready to learn • is open and willing to adapt their practice to the young people and their emergent needs • has multiple activities and strategies to choose from • is open to external help from teachers and others • is good at extensive planning and working with a school • is willing and able to go off plan 	9/10
Creativity	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • is aware of and knows themselves • is clear about what they are doing and why they maintain the need and desire to be true to themselves • has something to say and promotes it • opens up and communicates through their artform • comes up with their own ideas and regularly thinks outside the box • uses different mediums, words and actions • is able to allow and encourage freedom of expression • notices things happening in the session and is able to build on that, whilst viewing everything through a creative lens 	9/10
Punctuality	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • will be on time and provide structured lessons/workshops • gives themselves time to set up fully • takes account of traffic and doesn't get panicked • is focussed on timings in sessions to enable something to be created that everyone values • will respect the environment they are going into 	10/10
Facilitation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • can scaffold learning, remove their ego, take joy in their relationships and is able to teach their artform skills and soft skills • can break down material effectively so that it is easily understandable • encourages young voices and listening to each other • give praise and encouragement when needed whilst maintaining discipline in the room • listens to the room and all conversations taking place within it - listens actively • is aware of the wider context • keeps people on board and is prepared to change a session if that's what's needed 	9/10

Table 1: Most commonly identified attributes required by creative practitioners to work in educational settings and the mean ideal rating of these attributes

Categories of attributes

Considered individually, the 31 attributes identified by these creative practitioners may look broad in the first instance. However, these attributes can be categorised into a series of inter-related higher order attributes which may be useful for facilitating discussions in the future and can be classified under the four categories determined from categorisation of the full list of attributes generated by creative practitioners in this research (Table 2).

There is also an interesting observation to be drawn from the discussions that took place within the context of identifying these attributes and the wider discussions around each creative practitioner’s work. Perhaps as expected, creative artists with the most experience and who had usually worked in many school and community contexts, framed their discussion about what they wanted for the people attending their workshops. Experienced creative practitioners were passionate about the importance of participants being able to feel safe, be inquisitive and able to take creative risks, and to find something personally enriching and satisfying from their participation in workshops; to walk away feeling successful and energised. Creative practitioners with less experience tended to focus most of the conversation around seeing teaching and learning from their own perspective and what they needed to do.

Another interesting observation is that more experienced creative practitioners talked about each teaching/workshop situation being different and requiring a different emphasis to be able to adapt to the context and community, which meant that they

Higher-order attribute	Constituent attributes
Inter-personal	These can be considered, or are often referred to, as ‘soft skills’. They include having clear and concise communication, showing empathy with young people, actively listening, being personable, engaging and charismatic.
Teaching/facilitation	These fall within a broad spectrum of skills that incorporate attributes such as being punctual, prepared, resourceful, good facilitation, time keeping within the sessions, being easily understood and behaviour management.
Technical	Attributes identified frequently referred to a creative practitioner’s abilities to be proficient in their own field of expertise and include such attributes as being skilful, knowledgeable, confident and professional.
Artistic	These are attributes pertaining to a creative practitioner’s ability to remain creative and working authentically even within the constraints of their environment. These attributes were identified as being authentic, creative, passionate, playful and joyous

Table 2: Categorisation of higher order attributes

viewed attributes flexibly and understood that they were malleable for the environment. This demonstrates the importance of the insightful conversations around the attributes, which support and enhance understanding of how creative practitioners view each attribute, which is unique to each person.

This list of attributes is not exhaustive. In future, organisations working with creative practitioners using this exercise are likely to identify further wide-reaching attributes that support discussions and actions to facilitate effective practice and promote professional development.

Defining bipolar attribute scales

Each of the identified attributes was considered by the creative practitioners on a bi-polar scale. In the first instance this necessitated them to identify the 'opposite' attribute to the one chosen. For example, the opposite of flexibility was described as 'being panicked', 'being precious', 'being linear/stiff', 'being closed' and 'not listening' by five of the creative practitioners. The opposite of creativity was identified as 'utilitarianism', 'brainless and boring', 'grey', 'box-y' and 'stagnant', amongst many other terms. The range of responses to the same



attributes again signify the importance of personal construction; just as similar terms mean different things to different people (see table 1), the opposites of attributes identified varied greatly too.

Using numerical scales to frame thinking and discussion around ideal attribute ratings

Use of numerical scales can be a useful tool for developing nuanced thinking and generating discussion that supports personal evaluation without objective judgement. The varied interpretation of the numbers across the data set is of little comparative significance, because they are referenced only to and by the individual concerned. For some people, the numerical scales provide a meaningful way of solidifying nebulous ideas and states. As a society, we are familiar and often comfortable with making judgements on rating scales; everything from reviewing recent purchases to describing pain. Inviting creative practitioners to rate themselves in this study seemed natural to many, although there can be some hesitancy about rating oneself. As noted in this study, honesty requires trust between the creative practitioner and the interviewer.

Having established each attribute scale, e.g. 'flexibility to panicked'; 'creativity to brainless' and identified a creative practitioner's ideal rating for each chosen attribute, creative practitioners were asked to rate their own perceived competence for that attribute. Of note is that a minority of ratings were above the 'ideal' rating. Examples here include 'passionate' (opposite: 'frustration') 'skilful' (opposite: 'lack of clarity'), 'boundaries' (opposite: 'inappropriate') and 'enthusiastic' (opposite:

'complacent'). This shows a good level of self-awareness and may also be an area of developmental focus. Ideal ratings mostly showed a 'graphic equaliser approach' to personal attributes, where the ideal rating was not always 10, although it is notable that less experienced practitioners choices showed less variation in the ideal ratings and these tended to be towards the top of the 10-point rating scale for all chosen attributes.

Reasons attributed to changes in attribution rating

While it is not always possible to fully know what leads to any meaningful change in creative practitioners' perceived practices and thinking, we are able to draw some concise conclusions based on the comments made by creative practitioners in their interviews. The central catalyst of these developmental changes can be attributed to four areas:

1. Support facilitated by West of England Music and Arts' Cultural Education Hub
2. Enhanced self-awareness
3. Feeling part of a wider network
4. The longer-term nature of the provision

Support facilitated by West of England Music and Arts' Cultural Education Hub

West of England Music and Arts' Cultural Education Hub provided opportunities for all creative practitioners in receipt of grants to work with an experienced mentor and access CPD prior to, and during, their engagement in funded programmes, alongside opportunities to attend workshops, networking and undertake online and in-person training. The take-up of these opportunities was entirely the decision of each creative practitioner and, as would be expected in a needs-led

approach, varied across the participants.

Working with mentors, as well as workshops and training were all highlighted as helpful for supporting practical aspects of creative practitioners' work; for asking questions, gaining new ideas, being able to seek advice from a more experienced colleague or from a different perspective and to widen professional networks. A less experienced creative practitioner discussed they were

able to talk about their practice and develop their ideas and planning through sharing plans with their mentor who "gave me lots of questions to consider about my plans". For other creative practitioners who highlighted the self-recognition that they need to develop their experience of working in schools, it gave opportunities to ask their mentor questions that helped them better understand the context of working in schools, unpack education and jargon, build their confidence to liaise with school staff and clarify roles in the workshops, and support them in making their practice more inclusive of all. Another mentioned that "It was useful working with a mentor to develop ideas to have up my sleeve", and mentoring was also described as "a useful touch point".



For another practitioner, the framework used for this research was also reflected on as it structured their thinking before meeting their mentor. A creative practitioner stated: *“Investment in practitioners to develop in programmes like WEMA’s helps grow confidence...The mentoring was valuable in the development of these attributes”*. Overall, support facilitated by WEMA was described in terms that signify that it is very well targeted and appreciated, and there is evidence from these conversations that it acted to promote a deeper level of thinking about the reasons ‘why’ decisions were made.

“ The mentoring and training on education in general and creativity in education specifically really helped me to understand the ‘why’ and think about why am I doing this particular activity or game. ”

This suggested that their level of effectiveness for this participant *“definitely changed because of the workshops”*.

The interviews collected as part of this research served as a reminder of the professionalism and commitment of creative practitioners working across the region, and that those with extensive experience are also committed to lifelong learning. Without access to mentoring and coaching, meaningful opportunities for this can be limited or non-existent, leading to them operating *“inside their comfort zone”*. As discussed in one of the interviews, mentoring can be a very powerful tool *“to explore the balance between creative integrity and representing authentic practice with educational outcomes”*.

Creative practitioners who chose to work with a mentor/coach discussed how useful they found the mentoring. Gratitude for this aspect of the programme came across strongly in the interviews. In a profession where social isolation is reported to be relatively normal and there are limited opportunities for professional peer-to-peer engagement this is perhaps unsurprising. Nevertheless, highlighting it gives food for thought about the importance of facilitating and funding mentoring and coaching, alongside other forms of CPD, across all programmes if, as a profession, we are serious about developing and nurturing the development of creative practitioners who fulfil important roles across our schools and communities. As shown here, cultural education hubs have an important role in this, particularly because they have established relationships with a diverse range of experienced applied creative practitioners, professionals working in a range of roles across cultural organisations and those working in further and higher education.



Enhanced self-awareness

Through conducting performance profile interviews based on creative practitioners' identified attributes of a successful creative practitioner, WEMA sought to enhance creative practitioners' preparation. This was achieved by encouraging creative practitioners to focus their attention on their strengths (to enhance confidence of successful delivery) and to focus on self-identified areas that may merit additional attention across their practice. As seen through the evidence from interviews and improvements in ratings over time, this enhanced awareness reportedly led to significantly greater buy-in by some creative practitioners and increased self-perceived effectiveness in their work.

Another creative practitioner reported feeling the benefits of enhanced self-awareness and focus on planning from the outset. For example, one commented: *"Reflective sessions were great ways to start the project"* and for another, a benefit was *"spending time in the planning stage to get clear on the task, what do I need to do?"*. This was further mentioned by one creative practitioner who noted their improvements though gaining the awareness of the importance of planning outcomes before activities. They stated the usefulness of *"putting a programme together and a structured plan for all of the sessions was really helpful"*.

Some creative practitioners noted the enhanced self-awareness of their own beliefs and how they could move away from them if considered detrimental, such as moving away from perfectionist tendencies, to accept that *"It's ok to fail at some things and it's ok if not everything is perfect"*.

Some creative practitioners also report that they enjoyed regular reflection promoted through the initial set up of the residencies and felt that these reflective meetings provided them with a means through which their offering was enhanced. Some practitioners reported the usefulness of keeping journals either in writing or through voice recordings.



I reflected and refined my teaching practice throughout the project... I kept a creative journal throughout the project - this helped me connect by thinking more deeply about what I'm doing.



Another creative practitioner, who used their grant to develop and strengthen new workshop ideas by delivering similar workshops in multiple schools stated that they *"reflected in the first school...how to engage every child...to feel they have a role and are involved in some way"* and this shaped their awareness of the importance and challenges of making their practice more inclusive.

It was noticeable that many creative practitioners identified the greater feeling of connectedness that came about through the facilitation of deeper thinking and self-reflection throughout the programme. This was attributed to the ways in which the programme used different tools to promote this.

“ The whole project has made me focus in on why I’m doing what I’m doing. It has built my confidence around being good at what I’m doing and made me realise what’s important. I feel so much more in touch with the project than before, more connected. ”

Engendering feelings of belonging to a wider network

As noted earlier in the report, it is not uncommon for creative practitioners to work on their own, although some of the creative practitioners involved in this study work in a small team or for a small cultural organisation. Most creative practitioners mentioned the importance of feeling that they were more connected to a wider network as a result of undertaking the work funded by these grants, and the enhanced enjoyment this gave them. This came about through engagement with WEMA’s Cultural Education Hub as a professional network, which reportedly facilitated collaboration and belonging. As one creative practitioner noted, *“I really enjoyed the opportunity to come together with other facilitators and other connection points”*.



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Some creative practitioners, particularly those who returned to the same schools on multiple occasions (e.g. through the residencies) also reported experiencing feelings of becoming part of the cultural fabric of the school and this helped them to build their confidence as relationships and trust with young people and staff developed. This was commented on by one creative practitioner as *“not being the norm”*:

“ Unlike in other projects I’ve worked on, I had a direct connection with the school. ”

Furthermore, some creative practitioners were also cognisant of the release of pressure they felt because a longer-term relationship with one school led to them feeling a sense of embeddedness in the school community. As well as allowing opportunities to seek advice on pupils in classes and to build relationships with them, this allowed for roles to be negotiated and commonly understood, and also for school staff to become more comfortable with creative opportunities and ways of working that might ordinarily be outside of their own experiences and comfort zone. One creative practitioner stated that some classes were *“led by teaching assistants rather than teachers...I wasn’t put under any undue pressure to lead the class and it worked well”*.

Creative practitioners also frequently mentioned the enhanced confidence they developed as a result of collaboratively working with others, particularly school-based staff, reflecting on the positive impact of this. For example, one stated:

“ Working with WEMA, the mentor and the school collaboratively has given me more confidence to know what I am capable of. ”

Others suggested a greater willingness to ask for assistance and help from others, for example noting: *“I found it helpful to check in with teachers about student behaviours”*; that they were *“not afraid to ask for support from people around me to build skills”* and a significantly enhanced willingness to *“use the team. Work as a team”*.

The impact of the longer-term nature of the funded programmes

Although only a small number of creative practitioners involved in this research were funded for a residency, some others ran multiple sessions in the same schools. It was noted that the longer-term arrangements gave feelings of much greater confidence to creative practitioners and enabled them to relax more and be more “calm” in their settings which reportedly also acted to facilitate “greater authenticity”.



Some creative practitioners who developed workshops to run in multiple schools spoke of how *“delivering the sessions again and again built confidence...”* and with that confidence came an associated rise in creative practitioner’s authenticity, suggesting that feeling able to work authentically is related to feeling confident to do so in a particular situation, which comes with experience and drawing on prior experiences. One creative practitioner who ran creative workshops in multiple schools noted: *“As my confidence has grown, I’ve automatically become more authentic”*. Furthermore, other creative practitioners noted the impact on numerous other areas of their own wider professional self (with reference back to their own performance profile). One stated that *“The opportunity to complete a longer-term residency really feels like it could be beneficial for development across all these attributes”*.

The longer-term nature of the funding also acted to enhance feelings of *“a more polished product”* being presented in schools through repeated workshops. One creative practitioner commented on how the longer-term nature of the projects was an enhancer because of the time allowed within the programme to establish deeper and more focussed ways of working.

“ It was good to go in a month earlier for the first session and then come back later on... good to have a longer timeline on the project...that really helped with the clarity. ”

Familiarity, the opportunities to build trust and interest were also supported through longer-term engagement, which was noted by one creative practitioner who reflected that: *“Spending so long with the children over the project means the energy levels really go up”*.

Working as a creative practitioner can be a precarious career because continuous employment is not guaranteed. Discussions with creative practitioners elicited that securing funding beyond one-off sessions is helpful in providing assurance of income and this reportedly helps in multiple ways, including feeling more invested in a programme and having the time and a supportive environment, which benefits everyone involved, whilst providing fertile ground for creative exploration. The nature of funding and providing opportunities for creative artists to flourish and feel authentic sits centrally to their confidence and ability to catalyse changes to thinking and practices.



What happens next

There is no doubt from the evidence collected that the opportunities for these creative practitioners to hone their skills through engagement in these programmes, including through the professional learning opportunities and access to a professional network, have had a significant impact on the thinking and motivation of creative practitioners. All expressed their desire to continue to build on their experiences going forward, whilst candidly identifying challenges including gaining ongoing funding and “pushing the door open” in some schools. One of the most notable observations from the research is that whilst most of these creative practitioners often work as the sole creative practitioner when delivering programmes, there was an overwhelming feeling of how important it is for them to be able to collaborate with others, who are expert in their own fields, to enhance their practice and thinking. This included working alongside teachers, teaching assistants and other creative practitioners.

Clearly, there is a desire amongst these creative practitioners to want to do more, but also recognition of the key barrier to sustained interaction being the level and availability of funding, alongside the knowledge of where to find funding and support. One participant lamented on the difficulties of “knowing what opportunities are out here to fund more activity like this in schools and how difficult this is to find” while other creative practitioners highlighted that they were keen to enhance their own skills in obtaining greater funding and develop better business planning to enable them to grow their own offering by having helpful training on *“Growing it,*

turning it into a living. Business plan on how to keep it going". The opportunities provided through these grants were appreciated, but there is a lot more to be done to reinvigorate, grow and sustain arts engagement for all.

Many of the creative practitioners felt that the longer-term nature of these funded programmes had provided new insights into their own abilities and were keen to deepen their engagement with a limited number of schools. Supporting creative practitioners to secure targeted funding for such opportunities and ensuring that programmes have a dedicated professional development strand with a commitment to collaborative working and learning should be a priority for Cultural Education Hubs.

Cultural Education Hubs also have a responsibility to share their research evidence and expertise widely in order to present convincing, research-informed, applied evidence to authoritatively lobby for more sustained provision across a wider range of schools and communities, and to ensure that channels are opened up which genuinely support better representation within the creative industries so that creative practitioners are more reflective of our society.

Acknowledgements

From 2024-2026 West of England Music and Arts' Cultural Education Hub was supported through funding from the West of England Mayoral Combined Authority and Arts Council England, and was a strand of the Culture West programme. WEMA's Cultural Education Hub is supported by a steering group of schools, facilitators and cultural organisations.

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Who are we?

West of England Music and Arts (WEMA) is an education charity that aims to make music, arts and culture accessible, affordable and enjoyable for all. The Cultural Education Hub was established as a new strand of work for WEMA in 2024, funded by the West of England Mayoral Combined Authority and Arts Council England through the Culture West programme.

The West of England Music and Arts' Cultural Education Hub aims to give every child in the region the chance to engage with inspiring, high-quality cultural activities, supporting them to achieve their aspirations and experience a rich, creative curriculum. It does this by:

- Building partnerships between schools and the creative sector.
- Supporting professional development for teachers and creative practitioners.
- Creating opportunities for children and young people to engage with high-quality arts experiences.

Research team

Dr Ally Daubney is a researcher, teacher and educator who has worked across all ages and stages of education from preschool to postgraduate. Alongside her extensive work on international curriculum development and assessment, Ally is renowned for her work on creative and cultural learning and engagement across education and communities. She has conducted and widely published research and evaluation funded by local, regional, national and international organisations which has fed into policy and

practice in the UK and abroad. Ally led the research strand for the West of England Music and Arts' Cultural Education Hub 2024-2026. Ally is co-editor of the British Journal of Music Education and an Honorary Senior Lecturer at the University of Sussex.

Greg Daubney (CPsychol) is a freelance Chartered Psychologist registered with the British Psychological Society. Greg has provided psychological support across numerous performance domains, including sport and the performing arts, to improve performers' wellbeing, resilience and performance for over 18 years. He has worked with the British Association for Performing Arts Medicine (BAPAM) since 2021, providing psychological support to performing artists struggling with their mental health in these changing and challenging times as part of their 'Music Minds Matter' programme. Greg enjoys working holistically with individuals and groups to provide strong evidence informed practical guidance for performers at all stages of their career.

Megan Clarke was the programme lead for West of England Music and Arts' Cultural Education Hub during the period of this research. She is an arts and cultural engagement professional with over 10 years of experience working with children and young people, communities and artists to deliver inspiring engagement projects in the cultural sector. She has a passion for supporting people from all backgrounds to engage with arts and culture and the positive impact this has on people's lives.