

Reach In

Reach Out:

A creative, wellbeing and cultural volunteering project

A toolkit for co-creation, co-production,
and participatory evaluation

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(Plain Text Version)

Reach in Reach Out (RIRO)

was coordinated by Arts & Health South West (AHSW) with our partners:

Bath & North East Somerset: The Holburne Museum and Creativity Works

Bristol: creativeShift and John Wesley's New Room

Weston-super-Mare: Super Culture

The Culture Health and Wellbeing Alliance

The two-year project was supported by Art Council England's Volunteering Futures Fund and The National Lottery Heritage Fund.

RIRO project and toolkit website: www.culturehealthandwellbeing.org.uk/riro

For more information about the project and related training workshops, please contact riroproject@gmail.com

Table of contents

TABLE OF CONTENTS	3
INTRODUCTION TO THE PROJECT AND THE TOOLKIT	6
Commonly used terms	8
RIRO Timeline	10
Overview of RIRO	13
Meet the Partners	15
GETTING STARTED	22
Project Management	23
Activity Planning	25
Partnerships for delivery	26
Outreach and Recruitment	28
Communication and Advertising	31
Care & Safety	34
Co-Creation	37
KEY ELEMENTS	41
Creativity	43
Wellbeing	48
Young people's voices	54
Volunteering	55
ORGANISATIONAL CHANGE	61
Engaging with Organisational Change	62
RIRO Toolkit	https://www.culturehealthandwellbeing.org.uk/riro
	3

Capacity Building	65
Long Term Sustainability	68
CO-PRODUCTION	71
What is 'Co-production?'	72
Co-production in the RIRO project	73
Reflections on Co-production in practice	75
REFLECTION & LEARNING	82
Reflection & Learning	83
FINAL WORDS	88
Advice from young people	89
Transformation Stories	91
Thank you!	93
Appendix	95

Overview

Introduction

Commonly Used Terms

RIRO Timeline

Overview of RIRO

Meet the Partners

Site Profiles

Introduction to the project and the toolkit

‘Reach In Reach Out’ (RIRO) was a creative volunteering and wellbeing project that brought together young people, artists, creative producers, and researchers across four sites and seven organisations in the West of England from 2022-2024.


The aim was to co-create a programme with young people to support their creativity and wellbeing and offer pathways to community engagement and volunteering in the cultural sector. The project targeted young people, 16-25, living with physical or psychosocial challenges, those at risk of social isolation and those transitioning to further education or employment. Through RIRO, the young people made extraordinary personal gains in creative skills, wellbeing and event management, and the project partner institutions strengthened their ability to engage with and co-create with young people.

This project is unique in offering a model for the co-production of a large and complex project involving multiple partners and sites, as well as demonstrating the many ways young people can co-create activities and lead community events with the support of cultural institutions and community partners.

This toolkit shares the voices, stories, and lessons learned from this work. Specific guidance on getting started, co-creation, organisational change, co-production, and reflection and learning can inform your own creative wellbeing work with young people. We also explore the key elements of the project – creativity, wellbeing, and volunteering.

The toolkit is divided into six main sections, with additional links to an appendix that has case studies, videos, and key project documents. You can use the table of contents to jump to any section.

This toolkit and supplementary materials can be downloaded at

 www.culturehealthandwellbeing.org.uk/riro

Commonly used terms

Co-production: The process of all project partners (AHSW and delivery partners) discussing, developing, delivering, refining, and evaluating the project aims.

Co-creation: The process where each local partner group works collaboratively with young people during the co-creation phase to

1. Creatively explore and understand the views of young people on creativity, wellbeing and volunteering, and

2. Develop the creative wellbeing programme that will be delivered to groups of other young people during the delivery/volunteering phases.

Creative wellbeing programme (programme): The creativity, wellbeing and volunteering skills-building programme offered to groups of young people through a series of activities/workshops.

Co-creation phase: The period where partners worked with a small group of young people to design the programme that will be delivered to the 'target' group of young people in the delivery and volunteering phases (also known as Phase One, May – Dec 2022).

Delivery phase: The period where partners delivered the creativity, wellbeing and volunteering skills building programme to groups of young people (also known as Phase Two, 2023).

Partners: The groups who delivered activity programmes to young people in Bath & North East Somerset, Bristol and Weston-super-Mare. Made up of one or more organisations per locality.

Partner lead: The member of staff within a partner group who led on the activity programme delivered in their locality.

Partner staff member: Staff members, including freelancers, who were involved in supporting or delivering activities within a locality.

Volunteering phase: The period when partners offer volunteering opportunities to young people, providing mentoring and wellbeing support. This happened as part of Phase Two, and in some projects, co-creation and volunteering occurred simultaneously from Phase One.

Volunteering: Specific activities or projects developed with young people based on mutual interests that allow them to use their creative, volunteering, and/or wellbeing skills and knowledge in a way that builds on the resources, skills and knowledge of the partner cultural institutions. These may include micro, digital, flexible, or formal volunteer activities. In some projects the word 'volunteering' might be exchanged for 'engagement' or another term that signifies an activity that provides community benefit and is not paid.

Young people / participants: People aged 16-25 that participated in the activities co-created with the partners in the RIRO project.

Young person lead: A young person hired by one of the partner organisations to help organise or facilitate activities and interactions with the young participants.

RIRO Timeline

2022 - Phase 1

January

AHSW and partners coproduce ACE bid

February

March

April

Grant awarded, coproduction meetings begin

Partners develop networks, plan activities

June

Quarterly coproduction meetings with partners and young people

July

Evaluation framework launched

August

Young participants recruited, trial activities begin

Start partner check-ins

September

Start evaluation data collection

Holburne Museum: Halloween tattoo parlor

October

Community researcher training begins.

Weston Sea Monster visit

November

Bristol starts workshops

December

Christmas craft event

2023 - Phase 2

January

Weston refugee solidarity suppers and young culture makers begin

February

Creativity Works: Radstock meetings begin

March

ongoing coproduction meetings, monitoring and evaluation

May

April

June

New Bristol cohort begins

Radstock Fair clay workshop

July

Bristol celebration event

August

November

Begin writing toolkit

Weston refugee Peace Feast Solidarity Suppers

Holburne young people support mentoring

October

CHWA and London conference workshops

New Bath Cohort recruited

September

Begin evaluation data analysis

Young Culture Makers run workshops at Whirligig Festival

December

Bath Christmas^[SEP] craft event

2024

January

Final coproduction meeting

Bristol New Room exhibit

February

Weston Glow event Young Culture Makers


March

RIRO toolkit launch party

Overview of RIRO

'Reach In Reach Out' (RIRO) was a creative, wellbeing and cultural volunteering project that ran in the West of England from 2020-24.


Funded by Art Council England's Volunteering Futures Fund and The National Lottery Heritage Fund, RIR had a budget of £200,000. This supported:

- five delivery partners (whose spending ranged from £7,000 to £40,000 over the two years)
- overall RIRO project management, project evaluation and toolkit development by  Arts & Health South West
- Dissemination activities with the Culture Health and Wellbeing Alliance.

The aim of the project was to offer creative activities for young people aged 16-25, that supported their wellbeing and helped them develop and use skills for cultural volunteering in a variety of settings. The project was structured as a two-phase process:

- **Phase One** focused on partnership building, consultation and development of the key elements of creativity, wellbeing and volunteering, and experimentation with how the programme would work at each site.
- **Phase Two** continued the reflection, refinement and roll-out of the programmes to additional groups of young people, with a greater focus on cultural skills development and event design and management.

The partners each developed their own unique approaches according to the assets, interests, needs, and circumstances they had to work with. Going beyond the two-phase design, in reality consultation, experimentation, creative activities and volunteering took place throughout the two years - a truly iterative co-creation process.

This project was designed to emphasise three delivery approaches: co-creation with young people, co-production of the overall project,  and participatory evaluation.

Co-creation with young people

Each project partner developed its own co-creation approach to involving young people in design and delivery. This included: developing creative workshops to explore views about creativity, wellbeing, and volunteering; hosting creative launch events and inviting young participants to co-develop and run future events; and building relationships with young refugees and young people in supported living to attend creative activities and volunteer at local cultural events. Partner organisations made participation accessible through face-to-face and digital options, transportation support, and adapted meeting spaces and materials.

Co-production with RIRO partners

The RIRO project was developed and managed in a co-produced way with AHSW staff, partner site staff, and young people. The group engaged in a collaborative reflection, learning, and refinement process to strengthen each other's efforts and contribute to overall learning to be shared externally. We met bi-monthly to discuss progress and challenges and adapt our approach as needed. Partners shared their creative delivery and evaluation methods with each other. And as a group, we participated in seasonal creative activities hosted by different partners

Reflection and learning

Our co-production approach also underpinned our participatory evaluation process. This

included a developing a common aim across sites, guided by a logic model with evaluation targets; quantitative data collection (participant data and wellbeing measures); qualitative data collection (participant observation, interviews, focus groups, transcripts of regular project monitoring meetings, activity reports and project profiles); and creative evaluation activities including art journals, participant journey booklets, photography, video, and young person-led activities. We also trained two young people as community researchers to help with data collection and trained project staff and other young people volunteers in community research methods, including analysing data for the toolkit and final evaluation report.

Learnings from all these processes guided our production of this toolkit and will inform trainings and consultation aimed at a larger audience from April 2024. For more information about these, please contact: riroproject@gmail.com

Meet the Partners

Bristol

John Wesley's New Room^[L]_[SEP] and creative Shift

Bath

The Holburne Museum

Weston-super-Mare

SuperCulture

Radstock

Creativity Works

Arts & Health South West

and^[L]_[SEP]

The Culture Health and Wellbeing Alliance

Bath: The Holburne Museum

- The Holburne Museum is a medium-size independent museum and art gallery that receives no regular public subsidy. Its vision is 'Changing Lives Through Art', and contemporary art work is shown alongside its collection of 18th and 19th century paintings and objects. The Museum leads the Pathways to Wellbeing Programme, a Creative Health initiative that supports young people and adults with lived experience of mental health issues and social isolation to engage with local heritage and creative arts activities.
- The Bath partners worked with 21 young people who have experience of mental health issues, loneliness, social disadvantage or are struggling to find work. Many experience extreme social anxiety which means they are not connecting with other people their own age/ leaving their bedrooms. At least three clearly identified as autistic and said how it impacts their ability to connect with other young people, education and employment opportunities. Others were not in education or employment, some due to mental health concerns. Some struggled with intersectional inequalities, including coming from low-income households, struggling to attend sessions due to gender-based religious/ family pressures, or experiencing challenges 'fitting in' as a result of a dual-heritage upbringing.
- This group of young people called themselves 'Make it New' and met 31 times over 19 months at the museum and on-line to develop their creative and event management skills, creating strong social bonds with each other in the process. Collaborating with museum staff and freelance artists, they co-created six public events aimed at engaging new audiences and encouraging young people to get involved in creativity and heritage.
- The Holburne project lead was a full-time permanent member of staff, working with an administrative staff person as the RIRO young person lead. Freelance artists ran creative activities during sessions. The project partnered with Mentoring Plus and Off The Record to assist with recruitment and outreach.

www.holburne.org

Bristol: John Wesley's New Room and creativeShift

- John Wesley's New Room is a small independent heritage site and charity in the heart of Bristol. It is home to the original 18th century chapel where the Methodist movement started. It houses a museum, library, café, and an events space. creativeShift is a small team of freelance artists committed to supporting people experiencing social isolation and mental or physical health challenges across Bristol, North Somerset and South Gloucestershire.
- The partners worked with nine young people who experienced learning disabilities, low mood/depression, self harm, neuromuscular conditions, Functional Neurological Disorder, social anxiety, Autism, autoimmune illness, neurodiversity, wheelchair use, or political refugee status.
- The partners recruited an initial group of young people to explore their views on volunteering, creativity, wellbeing and community through arts activities and exploration of artefacts within John Wesley's New Room. The young people co-created and facilitated a series of six creative workshops exploring these themes with a new cohort of young people, and planned a RIRO celebration event and facilitated some of the activities. Young people from both groups co-created an exhibition at John Wesley's New Room based on works they made during the programme. The young people acted as creative producers and planned the exhibition with support from creativeShift and John Wesley's New Room staff. The group met 18 times over 16 months.
- A full-time member of staff from John Wesley's New Room co-led the project with creativeShift artists. They worked with two creative facilitators and a young person lead, and recruited participants through the North Bristol Social Prescribing team, Fresh Arts on Referral at Southmead Hospital, the creativeShift Arts on Referral group, the Neuromuscular Clinic, South Mead Hospital, and West of England Works.

www.newroombristol.org.uk

 www.creativeshift.org.uk

Radstock: Creativity Works

- Creativity Works was a socially engaged arts charity that worked with children, young people, families and adults across areas of multiple deprivation and areas of historic low arts engagement. Their creative programme used multiple art forms, hosting workshops, artist's residencies, events and festivals. The organisation closed in October 2023.
- Over seven months, they worked with seven young people who struggled with lack of confidence and self-esteem and who were affected by a tragic event that took place locally.
- The group engaged in 17 weekly creative activities to develop skills and confidence across a range of different mediums including clay, charcoal, typography, and oil pastels. They created clay gargoyles that were put on display at the local library. The group decided to share their skills by running a clay-making stall for families at the local Radstock Fair.
- The Creativity Works project lead was a full-time member of staff, working with a freelance creative facilitator and two youth workers from Youth Connect South West.

www.creativityworks.org.uk

Weston-^[L]_[SEP]super-Mare: SuperCulture

- Super Culture was launched in August 2023, bringing together two of North Somerset's flagship arts organisations, Theatre Orchard and Culture Weston, to create a year-round participation programme that enables local communities to connect, get creative and take a lead in shaping their local cultural provision. For RIRO they organised activities with two different groups of young people over the two years of the programme.

Young Culture Makers

- This was a group of 19 young people who currently live at The Foyer, which is supported living for vulnerable and homeless young people aged 16-25 years with low to medium level support needs. Issues with the accommodation provision include high levels of social isolation with very little natural mixing between the different flats, worsened by the after-effects of Covid, and lack of financial resource. Young people who are residents of The Foyer are not permitted to take paid work as it impacts upon the benefits that cover their living and housing, therefore volunteering has particular value in terms of skills-building and socialising potential.
- Over 13 months, the group took part in 18 activities including a brunch club, pizza making, creative activities, and trips to the theatre. Individual members volunteered at four local festivals, and eventually co-created art works for and managed specific activities at local and regional festivals.
- The RIRO project lead was a part time Super Culture staff member, working with a young apprentice, and two support workers from South Ward Activity Network (SWAN). They partnered with The Foyer.

Solidarity Suppers

- This was a group that included 18 young male asylum seekers and refugees who were in emergency hotel accommodation in Weston-super-Mare. These were highly vulnerable individuals, many of whom have now been moved to other parts of the country. The group included cross-generational participants in order to respond to support and language needs. Connections were also made with the ESOL (English for Speakers of other Languages) provision at Weston College and with Refugees Welcome North Somerset in order to build trust and awareness.

- Over eight months, the group met 11 times. Making food was at the heart of these sessions where participants cooked international dishes together, shared stories, practised English, and created a safe community. The group also foraged and explored nature in the local area and organised informal social sports activities. They prepared the food for a Peace Feast for the local community and volunteered at two other Super Culture festivals.
- A young creative facilitator employed by Super Culture organised the activities with the owner of Loves Cafe, who offered the space for meetings and guided the food preparation and teaching. They also collaborated with support workers and volunteers for CURO (a local housing association) and Refugees Welcome North Somerset.

www.superculture.org.uk

Management & Dissemination

Arts & Health South West

- Arts & Health South West (AHSW) applied for and held the funding for the RIRO project from 2022-2024. AHSW was a registered charity that supported learning, advocacy, networking, and development focused on the impact arts and culture can have on people's health and wellbeing. AHSW closed in April 2024.
- AHSW was responsible for the governance, project management and financial management of RIRO, the development of the toolkit, and the final project evaluation. AHSW had partnership agreements with all the project partners involved in RIRO. Key RIRO staff included a Project Coordinator, a Co-lead and Evaluator, two young Community Researchers, a Research Assistant, and a Designer. They were supported by AHSW core staff including the Director, General Manager, and Finance and Development Officers.

<https://ncch.org.uk/ahsw-legacy-resource>

The Culture Health and Wellbeing Alliance

- The Culture Health and Wellbeing Alliance (CHWA) is a national arts and health sector support organisation providing networked, collaborative advocacy, support and resources, supporting health and wellbeing for all through creative and cultural practice. They are a free-to-join membership organisation for creative health across England.
- CHWA supports the dissemination and education plan for RIRO. This includes project and toolkit pages on their website and training workshops and conference presentations on the methods and lessons learned from the project. For more information contact: riroproject@gmail.com

<https://www.culturehealthandwellbeing.org.uk/riro>

Getting Started

Project Management

Activity Planning

Partnerships for Delivery

Outreach and Recruitment

Communication and Advertising

Care & Safety

Co-Creation

Project Management

Setting up clear structures and processes is essential for meaningful collaboration and management of a complex project

Setting up a project where there are multiple partners requires detailed planning and structure. This section will share learning and recommendations on what to consider when designing and managing this type of project.

RIRO was co-produced between seven partner organisations, which meant that they committed to working collaboratively to deliver the project (for more about this, please see the '[Co-production](#)' section). The project was delivered in four localities, involving five delivery organisations. AHSW was responsible for overall project management which included:

- Management and coordination of the project across four localities
- Evaluation and development of learning materials and a toolkit
- Organising and delivering joint workshops and events for partners including facilitation of eight co-production meetings
- Two co-production celebration events
- Supporting partners in delivery as appropriate through co-production meetings and regular check-ins
- Financial management
- Writing partnership agreements and contracts
- Safeguarding oversight
- Data protection and ethical agreements in relation to all communications and evaluation
- Joint communications.

In order to work together collaboratively to deliver the project, it was important to lay out clear project aims, and articulate how each partner organisation would contribute to fulfilling these. AHSW had partnership agreements with all partner organisations, which set out clearly what their responsibilities were. These included:

- Identifying young people within their target groups, via existing networks, young people's networks and in partnership with other organisations in the locality where appropriate
- Involving young people in a creative co-creation process to explore ideas about wellbeing, creativity, volunteering and community engagement and action.
- Delivering creative activities or workshops with young people
- Sharing learning across all the programmes in co-production group meetings and with the evaluation lead and project coordinator
- Supporting the evaluation and development of the toolkit by using a variety of participatory data collection and evaluation methods
- Participating in eight co-production group meetings
- Participating with all young people and partners in three joint workshops/meetings/celebratory events
- Providing feedback on learning materials and toolkit.

Activity Planning

Planning for co-creation at the delivery sites involves agreeing on project aims, assessing partner assets, and deciding on an initial approach, with young people gradually scaffolded into the process.

As RIRO got started, the partners all met together to discuss the broad project aims and the intended outcomes. Phase One was intended to have partners recruit an initial group of young people at each site to explore the key elements of creativity, wellbeing and volunteering.

The organisational partners at each site met with each other over the first few months to discuss all aspects of getting started, including creative activities, volunteer possibilities, recruitment, and overall programme structure. Each site took a different approach:

- Bath planned an initial start-up event to recruit young people to the project, and then explored the key elements and future events with the young people over time.
- Bristol engaged in several months of careful workshop planning, so that the exploration and creative activities were quite structured for the initial sessions.
- The Weston-super-Mare groups started by canvassing the community, involving young people and potential partner organisations from the beginning, but they also had some critical lessons about what didn't work from their initial approach.
- Due to some unexpected organisational changes, the Radstock group took several months to begin their activities, which then ran for seven months until Creativity Works closed permanently.

While several of the sites engaged young staff people to advise on the project or begin the initial outreach activities, no site tried full co-creation with the participant young people from the outset. The project leaders needed to build their own relationships, gather their expertise and identify potential activities, and see how the young people responded to the initial offerings. They knew they were working with sometimes fragile young people who might not have had much creative experience or understood the concept of co-creation. These issues are explored in more detail in the section on co-creation.

Partnerships for delivery

Building relationships with the right partners is a vital part of this process. There are key elements that need to be addressed first to make sure this is a positive experience for all and is important for long term sustainability of this work.

Lessons Learned:

Be on the same page

In the initial stages it is crucial to have honest conversations with your potential partners to:

- Understand their needs and values for the project and to see if it aligns with your own
- Make sure you are both clear about any funding demands and number quotas that may impact the work that takes place
- Make sure they have the capacity to work on the project with you: an organisation or individual might be really receptive to your work but they need both staffing capacity and time to meet in order to establish good partnership-working.
- See it as a long-term relationship where you will have future opportunities to work together.

Flexibility helps navigate differences

Our Weston-super-Mare Solidarity Suppers group found that there were many different ways of working across different organisations that take on different approaches. Their key learning was to be flexible within this process. The benefits to taking time to do this allows you to find the right way of working which is really important for the long-term sustainability of the work.

“There is no cohesive or centralised way of working. So you have to build relationships with different organisations and be flexible as to who you’re able

to work with... as it's about now, about the future, and the network of possibilities for future young people that we're working with." (Weston-super-Mare partner lead)

Lessons Learned:

Mobilising complementary assets

Map your assets as an organisation and think about how you and your partner could use and/or share your assets and what you might be able to offer as an organisation to the partner to support them as a whole rather than just in this specific project. How can you help each other? For example, you might have meeting space available for them to use for their training days.

Use your strengths

Discuss the unique skill set you each have to bring to the project, and how this can benefit the work that you do together. For example, in the Bristol partnership, creativeShift's expertise in creativity and wellbeing complimented John Wesley's New Room's extensive experience in volunteering.

Practical Tips:

As you're developing your programme, consider doing these things:

- Allocate specific time for this process to take place - it takes longer than you think
- Have clear and honest initial conversations with your partners so you are both on the same page and your needs and values align
- Be open and be aware that no one has all the answers - learn together
- Consider partners as part of the pathway for participants to continue engagement beyond the project.

Outreach and Recruitment

The way you bring young people into your project is integral to your work. It takes time to enable partners to build authentic connections for safe referrals to take place.

There are two recruitment pathways that were accessed by our RIRO partners:

Recruitment by referral

Our Bristol partners recruited young people who were already engaged with social prescribing organisations and who were being supported in developing skills for employment. These young people usually have health care needs and struggle to access employment and skills development opportunities. The social prescribing organisations supported the young people throughout the duration of the project and offered practical solutions, for example transport to the workshops.

Grass roots recruitment

Social prescribing referrals may not exist in all communities. In communities with a tapestry of different connections, stakeholders and individuals, peer to peer communication is a really powerful way of connecting with young people. When discussing this with young people in our co-production meeting they said: 'nothing beats word of mouth'. Establishing the group in the community through a known and trusted venue, brand or individual is a great help because trust is embedded already.

Lessons Learned:

Focus on small targeted locations^[1]_{SEP} to recruit

A large call-out to many different groups of young people and organisations may not work. It can help to choose one or two particular locations and spend time researching key stakeholders, individuals and the needs of the area to really focus your work.

Connect with established groups and organisations within these areas

Reaching out to established groups that are already running sessions for young people is key to understanding their needs and will help you develop stronger links

and relationships. Our Radstock partners developed a partnership with Youth Connect, who work with young people going through challenging times. Youth Connect immediately identified some people who they thought would benefit from the RIRO programme.

Take the project to the young people

Our Weston-super-Mare partners found that for organisations with no institution or building it was vital to find the right space to work in. Territoriality can negatively affect the lives of many young people, where crossing into different areas can create worry and concerns. Connecting with young people in the places where they are comfortable will encourage trust and engagement.

“Going into that space that they already know has transformed the process and allowed them to feel kind of safe to come along. And they now know what to expect when they go, which I think that was like the barriers that we were facing before.” (Weston-super-Mare partner lead)

Keep your Initial recruitment^[SEP] session simple

Young people will feel at their most vulnerable in this session so it can help to run a light touch activity that is accessible, fun and allows everyone to get involved with the focus on making them feel nurtured and welcome. Our Bath partners ran a spray painting and pizza event that was advertised through a local young people’s group and open to all. The focus was on the conversations taking place whilst doing the activity.

“We made the decision not to try^[SEP] and communicate the whole project^[SEP] but doing it in more bite-sized pieces and not presenting something that^[SEP] felt really overwhelming and difficult^[SEP] to understand that you couldn’t articulate it.” (Bath partner lead)

Bringing young people in

Have an offering, such as food and travel expenses, alongside your project activity that can support young people getting into your project space and support their ongoing engagement.

Access to sessions

There may be young people who are not able to access a face-to-face session. Offering a hybrid workshop using platforms such as Zoom gives choice. Our Bristol partners sent materials and instructions for the creative activity so that participants could join in when they were not physically in the room. This encouraged young people to keep engaging and allowed them to attend in person in the future.

Pathways beyond your project

Being clear about the pathways and skillset development beyond your project allows the young people to see the stepping stones from this experience. Partners can be part of this process to continue engagement.

Practical Tips:

When recruiting young people the key questions to ask yourself are:

- How do you support that individual?
- How do you break down the barriers?
- How do you build trust?

Spend time spreading the word: Have face to face meetings to promote the project and encourage ongoing communication. These contacts can be revisited to promote, recruit and champion your work.

Initial recruitment session: Be mindful of timing and day of the sessions.

Change your expectations: Understand that young people won't always show up to participate in the way you expect and in the same capacity each time. Sometimes just simply being in the space is enough.

Enrolment form: include a section for the participant to fill out 'what do we need to know about you to help you get the best experience?'. This supports inclusion and access but allows the young person to lead.

Communication and Advertising

How you communicate with young people from the beginning stages of promoting your project to ongoing communication is essential in building and maintaining the safe, positive empowering environment from the word go.

Lessons Learned:

Initial communication^[SEP] with young people

There are many different ways to reach out to young people and to advertise your work. This is very specific to your target group and where you are located. Our partners have worked very differently with their young people. The following points illustrate some approaches that stood out for them.

Word-of-mouth works

The Weston-super-Mare partners recognised the benefits of establishing a group through local venues, projects and/or individuals that have already engaged with young people. This requires joining networks, going to meetings, talking to other organisations, chatting about the work, handing out fliers. This allows you to build contacts who will champion your work.

Check your language

Our partner organisations found that using the word 'volunteering' felt dated, with preconceived ideas about who volunteers and why they volunteer. Using terms such as 'Young Culture Makers' or 'Community Advocates', or using phrases such as 'engaging with the community' gave it a new energy and purpose.

Have young people lead the way

Having a young person working in each of our projects has been invaluable in building authentic connections and engagement with other young people. A positive role model supports the promotion of the project both face to face and online, through sharing their experiences, answering questions and being that relatable and friendly face at the sessions. It allows potential participants to see themselves in that position.

“RIRO has given me a genuine faith and trust in myself and my abilities.”
(Bath young person lead)

Using posters and adverts

Whether this is online or hard copy it needs to be simple and eye-catching and should advertise the creative activity, say that food will be available, and that travel expenses will be paid for. There needs to be a simple way of booking a place, for example, “text ‘art’ to [phone number]”. This is an easy way for a young person to sign-up without needing to speak to someone.

Youth-designed social media

This may feel like the easiest option to reach out to young people but the key is to be authentic. Social media should be created by young people for young people so that participants can really connect with the images or videos that are used to promote your programme.

Ongoing communication with participants

Ongoing regular communication with participants outside the activities is essential for their engagement and builds on the work that you do in the space. Whether it is for sharing important information or for checking in, communication needs to be embedded within your planning and time needs to be allocated for it.

Have one point of contact

Having an identified member of staff as the point of contact for all participants is important for clarity and communication. In Bath, the partner lead took on this role. They were the constant throughout the project who participants knew would be there and would support them. This was essential to develop trust and requires additional staff time and planning.

“It is important to have a consistent presence that sort of creates and holds the safe space for those participants.” (Bath partner lead)

Use WhatsApp alongside email

Many young people don't use email for regular communication. WhatsApp proved an easy way for partner leads to speak individually with participants from the outset, where responses can happen quickly.

Adding WhatsApp participant groups

After the group is well-established, this can be a useful way of communicating with the participant group to share practical information, formulate ideas when co-creating, to ask questions, and do polls. However, this approach might not suit all

target groups, and needs to be carefully managed to keep everyone safe, due to participants being able to see contact details of others.

Setting ground rules on communication

How staff and young people communicate with each other should be agreed and co-produced with those young people from the outset. Ground rules should include an agreed approach to communication, whether this is online or through an app, defining good behaviour, and how participants want to be treated by each other. Bear in mind that the young people within the group may want to communicate independently with each other, outside of any official channels, and if there's a big age difference between participants in the group, you may need to put rules in place to ensure that any communication is appropriate.

Practical Tips:

- Allocate specific time for communicating with young people outside of sessions; it is an essential part of the work.
- Use social media as a signpost for information but face to face promotion is more authentic.
- Use a platform like Instagram where young people are able to ask questions to other young people who are connected with your project.
- Use WhatsApp to communicate with young people participating in your programme — no-one uses email!
- If using WhatsApp for participant group communication, draw up a contract which keeps everyone safe in the group. This will need to be managed by the project lead with a clear plan of action^[SEP] if any concerns arise.

Care & Safety

Care and safety are central to the processes and infrastructure of the project. They also support relationship-building with young people and set the tone for activities.

Lessons Learned:

Care and safety within ^L_{SEP} your organisation

Referrals and information gathering

When young people come into your project, what information do you need to hold about them? How will you collect and store it? What will help you and your team to feel informed so that you can offer the young people the right support? You might be collaborating with a partner organisation that works directly with young people and refers them to your project. Perhaps they collect and hold information about the young people, and if so, what do they need to share with you? Do you need a data-sharing agreement that confirms who shares/holds what information and why? At minimum, you should have an emergency contact for each young person and ask them: “Is there anything you would like us to know that would help us to support you? Is there anything that we should know about that might affect your participation?” Store this data securely.

Safeguarding

If you’re working with young people, you must have robust safeguarding policies and procedures that everyone has understood clearly and agreed to follow. Consider making a flowchart for everyone working on the project that clearly shows:

- how to identify and report a safeguarding concern
- how the information is passed along in a staged process to key contacts within your organisation (including their name and contact details) and to the Local Authority Designated Officer (LADO), who is responsible for managing allegations against adults who work with children. (If you don’t know details of your LADO, you can look them up at <https://national-lado-network.co.uk/>.)

Safer recruitment

All staff members and volunteers involved in the project should have an up-to-date

DBS check appropriate to their level of contact with the young people. Use safe recruitment approaches for all staff and volunteers that might come into contact with young people: consider writing a Safer Recruitment policy for your organisation and undertaking Safer Recruitment training, for example run by The NSPCC (The National Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children, a UK charity).

Care and safety within ^[L]_[SEP] your activities

Creating a safe session environment

Setting up a space with care and safety in mind can help participants feel at ease. You might want to consider setting up a room in a less formal way than usual, perhaps including comfortable furniture or putting chairs in a circle. Providing a relaxed, quiet chill-out space away from the main bustle of activity could be useful if anyone feels overwhelmed or has any sensory processing needs where occasionally some quiet space is helpful. If young people are coming into a new space for the first time, you might want to consider what this experience will be like for them - would it be better to meet in a location that is already familiar to them?

Support and holding

Sometimes groups of young people need to be held carefully with quite a lot of support, which might be a shift compared to the way you usually do things. For instance, how do you handle a young person sharing something emotionally sensitive within a session: is it a safe place for them to speak, and how will you respond while also ensuring that the needs of the rest of the group are taken into consideration? Co-facilitation enables support for a distressed individual while another staff member looks after the rest of the group. With this in mind, incorporating staff debriefs into the structure of a project is also an important part of making sure project staff are supported and held in their roles.

Checking in on young people's welfare

Young people may have mental or physical health challenges, social challenges, or other issues may create barriers to volunteering and employment. You may want to consider how to check in with the welfare of the young people you're working with. Could you contact each young person occasionally by email, text or phone call, depending on their preference, to have a check-in and see how they are getting on? Safely record information from these check-ins and share any concerns with other staff or referring organisations. In RIRO, we used a post-activity report process (described in Reflection and Learning below) to have debriefs after sessions. This can include a process for feeding back any concerns about young people's welfare so that the whole team is on the same page.

Care and support for young people in projects is addressed further in the **Wellbeing** section of this toolkit.

Practical Tips:

- Consider how much information you need to gather about the young people, and how you will safely store and share this
- Write robust, clear safeguarding procedures and make sure everyone knows how to use them
- Follow safer recruitment practices for anyone working on the project
- Agree with the young people how they want to communicate with you and with each other
- Build your sessions around clear boundaries, for example around how people want to be treated
- Make a plan for checking in with young people to see how they are getting on
- Make sure that there is debriefing or supervision time built into the project for staff members or volunteers.

Co-Creation

In RIRO, we define co-creation as the process where project organisations work with young people to build a shared understanding of creativity, wellbeing and volunteering and together develop creative activities and engagements throughout the project.

This approach allows young people to work alongside programme leaders, who support their skills development so they can eventually take ownership of the process, rather than having things decided and done for them.

Each programme found that co-creation has to be tailored to the skills, capacities, interests, and context of participants. While the general outlines of the programme were set by the grant, each site could decide with its young people what they wanted to learn and implement together. Sometimes ideas were put into practice quickly but more often groups worked together at a slow pace, scaffolding confidence along the way by listening, reflecting together, and evolving over time.

Laying the groundwork

The assets of the institution as a partner

Cultural organisations have many assets, including their buildings and grounds, their art and heritage collections, and existing partnerships in the communities. Starting with the strongest and most accessible of these can boost the confidence and engagement of partners and participants. A long exploratory phase can lead to new initiatives and relationships, but if funding is limited this might not be possible and comes with risks if initial ideas do not work out.

Flexibility within structure and constraints

The organisations need to commit clear resources (staff time, access to assets, funding for activities) at the outset, but with the understanding that co-creation with young people is iterative and flexibility is needed. Having project partners agree on the general aims and intended outcomes of the project from the beginning can keep everyone moving in the same direction. Clear roles and responsibilities help build confidence and consistency in working relationships. As the young people learn to trust themselves and the programme leaders, there is a foundation for more flexibility and experimentation.

Co-creation doesn't start^[L]_[SEP] right away

Co-creation can be a new concept for artists, organisations, and young people

It's okay not to know at the beginning what the process or outcome will look like, but this can be difficult to explain in recruitment. Young people who don't engage with creative organisations or are not used to having their voice heard may especially struggle when asked 'what do you want to do?'

Start with easy and enjoyable creative activities

Listen to what the young people like and don't like. As trust and familiarity grow, they will feel more confident expressing their views and taking risks with new ideas and skills.

Building the foundation for autonomy

Structure and consistency in the sessions helps young people feel secure and gives the team a sense of overall direction. As young people are supported to take small decisions, like the timing of sessions, they will grow to take responsibility for choosing activities and planning cultural events. For the partners, it's about finding the balance between giving them skills and autonomy to take responsibility for an event but also being ready to give extra support as needed. Help them transform abstract ideas into activities that are feasible – these are real world skills.

“You know, you are given a project brief, and you work within it. You've^[L]_[SEP] got criteria and you've got things^[L]_[SEP] like problem-solving and putting things together. I think it's a really exciting exercise — skills building — but also this is the^[L]_[SEP] world of work really.” (Bristol partner lead)

Interacting with young people^[L]_[SEP] in sessions

Creating a safe space

Facilitators can consider how to make the physical space feel comfortable and welcoming. They can work to build trust between the young people, as well as with themselves. Personal support and encouragement enables co-creation and participation.

Keep it small and consistent

Some young people said small group sizes made direct interaction easier and the whole process more approachable. This is especially important if some participants struggle with social anxiety or neurodivergence – small numbers make it easier to get to know everyone and easier for staff to support them. Group cohesion and

progress benefits from consistent participation and this should be encouraged, acknowledging that sometimes personal issues make this difficult.

Accessibility of activities

Often creative activities and volunteer roles need to be adapted to individual needs. Hybrid options can allow people to join via an online meeting platform, with creative materials sent to them in advance. Working slowly enables people with additional needs to contribute in a way that suits them.

Modelling and working alongside

When artists are facilitating activities, they are working “alongside” the young people. For example, in Bristol, in addition to creating together, artists and young people filled out the same wellbeing scales and check-in at the beginning and end of each session.

Responding to suggestions and resistance

Taking action on the young people’s suggestions early on — even small ones like furniture arrangements — helps build confidence as the young people can see that they’ve made an impact. Similarly, while they may be asked for their opinion during meetings, facilitators should make clear that it’s okay for the young people not to respond. Sometimes resistance to certain topics or activities might indicate that this is the first time they’ve been able to make their voice heard and respected.

Reflection-in-process

Making self-reflection and group reflection a regular part of the process can help everyone track their progress, make corrections, and celebrate their successes. Some of the RIRO programmes used art journals for reflection at the end of each session. In Bath, the young people talked as a group about their accomplishments and made a presentation on their progress at a RIRO co-production meeting with all the partners.

Organisational considerations

Staff skills and capacity for co-creation

Project staff should have the ability to:

- empower the young people to take charge^{[[L]]}_{SEP} and lead
- offer help without taking control
- let the young people show them new and different ways of doing things (that may be outside the normal templates)

- set helpful boundaries to support the progression of the project
- tolerate uncertainty
- manage a project that progresses at a slow pace
- receive feedback and reflect.

Organisational commitments and approach

Organisations need to:

- allocate time capacity to support the process over a long period
- plan for staff capacity to support both the creative processes and the wellbeing support
- often required by young people with specific needs
- commit adequate financial resources, understanding that specific costs may not be known at the beginning and flexibility is required across the course of the project
- all of the above requires internal organisational advocacy and regular communication — to other staff, decision-makers and trustees — about the benefits (and the challenges) of the co-creation approach.

“When you're working as a team co-producing things with young people... it just slows things right down... and you check yourself — are we doing this right? So you're constantly reflecting... I think it's taken a really long time to get used to that and to get used to being slow, especially for our partnership, where we are really starting from scratch. And I think we have got to the point where we kind of know what we're doing, but it hasn't necessarily sped things up.” (Bristol partner staff member)

Key Elements

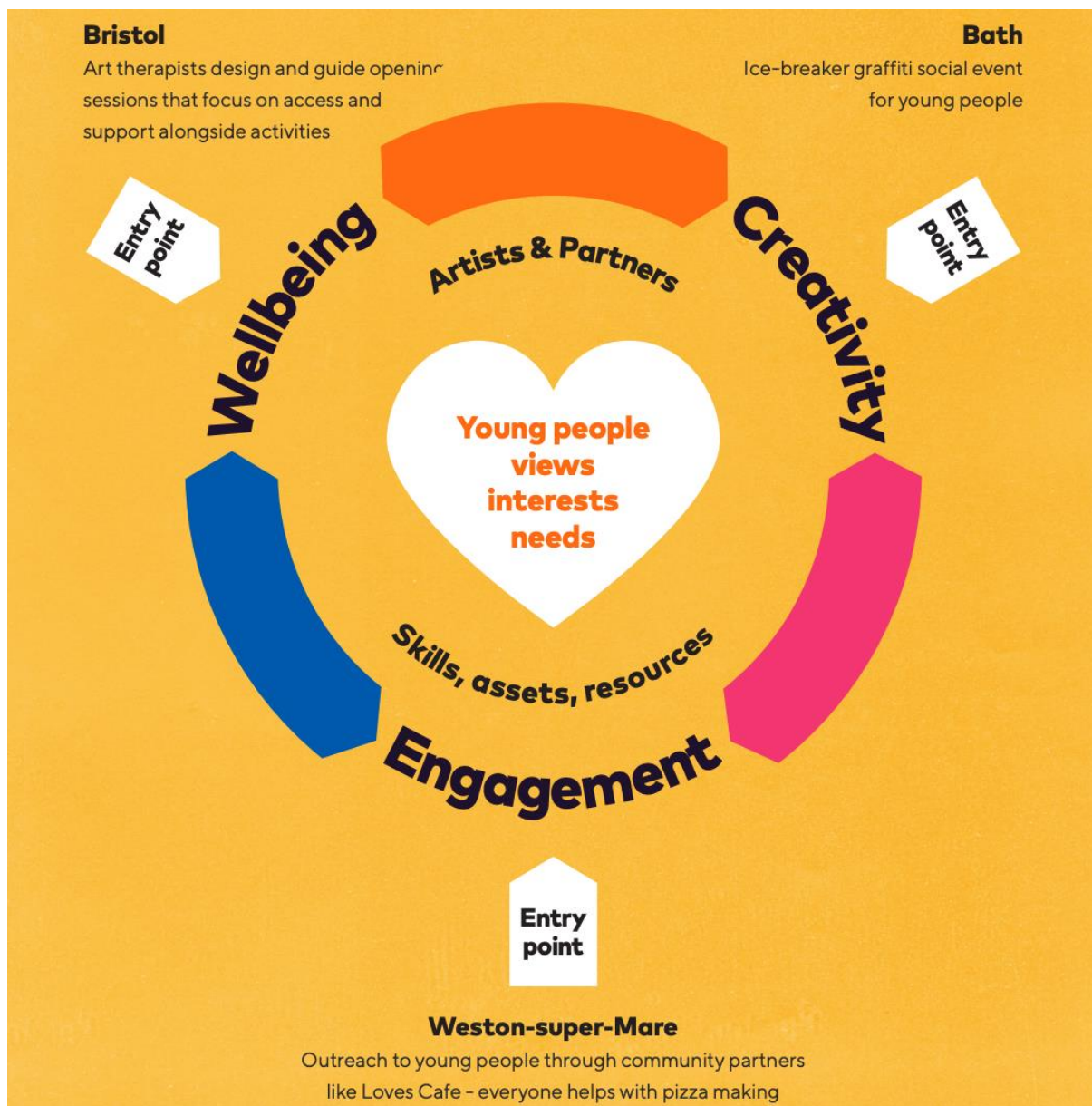
Creativity

Wellbeing

Volunteering

Creativity, wellbeing, and engagement ^{SEP} are the key elements of the RIRO project

Each element supports and interacts with the others. RIRO partners and young people focused on one or two elements at the beginning, expanding into the others over time. Young people's views, interests, and needs are at the heart of all the activities, surrounded by the skills, assets and resources of the artists, staff, and partner organisations.



Creativity

Creativity in the RIRO project was the thread that held everything together. Not only did the young people develop new skills and cultural objects, engaging in creativity processes helped connect participants and staff to build trust and confidence. They explored a wide range of inspiring activities, from engaging with nature to historical and contemporary art exhibitions and used these influences to create their own cultural events to share with others.

The building blocks of creative exploration with young people

The ultimate goal for our partners was for young people to express themselves through creativity, develop their creative voice, and build a skillset to reflect on what inspired and informed them during the process. For this to happen, a variety of factors needed to be put in place to support building confidence and trust for all within the space. These factors were important to the process:

Accounting for creative experiences^{[1][SEP]} prior to the project

When planning creative activities, our partners found that young people's knowledge, experiences and understanding of creativity prior to RIRO varied significantly. Some had studied the arts at school or college, and others had not ever painted before or been to the theatre. So it was important for the partners to not have set expectations and to be open and adaptable when planning their work so it was accessible for all.

Creating a safe space

Creating a safe space for exploration and self-expression is essential for emotional safety but also for creativity. Start with small accessible creative activities that are familiar to the participants to build confidence, trust, and group cohesion. These initial workshops give time and space for the facilitators to understand the different experiences, knowledge, needs and expectations of the group and for all to find the groups own creative rhythm.

Responding to needs and interests

Allow time to consider what creativity means for the young people within the group. Why have they come to the session? What interests them about art? These conversations are a starting point for developing the creative pathway. Responding to their needs and interests allows for a deeper engagement where trust and confidence can grow. In some cases, this can stretch the definition of creativity to its

furthest points, but skilled facilitation can help you listen to and respond to the group. During initial conversations in the Solidarity Suppers refugee group for example, it was clear there was a passion for film, but most had never been to the cinema before so our Weston-super-Mare partner lead organised a trip to the local cinema. From this a conversation about football led to cooking sessions taking place outside followed by a football game afterwards - all vital stepping stones to build trust within the group.

Allow time to reflect

Reflection during workshops

Having space in the workshop to hold conversations about the participants' work was essential for building confidence in their creative voice. For example, at the end of each session in Bristol, all would share what they had made and this would trigger conversations about the process and the successes and challenges of their efforts. While some struggled to express their thoughts at the beginning, together they built a language for creative expression and reflection.

“Initially there was some hesitance but as time went on the young people gained confidence in talking about what they had made and sharing their creative ideas.” (Bristol partner lead)

The idea of learning together was an instrumental part of the Bristol partners' strategy: the facilitators would do everything the participants would do. Leading by example was a key message from the team – everyone learned to accept failure and explore alternative ideas and pathways. This included holding the space for 'bad' art or 'art that participants did not like' and making it safe to talk about that.

Reflection journals

Borrowing from their own professional practice, the artists in Bristol and Bath encouraged the young people to keep reflection journals in a sketch book for the whole of the project. This book gave a space for all to write or draw their thoughts and feelings about the creative process, to doodle, and play.

The staff made clear that it was okay if a young person didn't want to use it or was not keen on drawing during that session - the facilitators supported this and offered different ways it^[1]_{SEP} could be used.

Outside the workshop

The RIRO project invited each site to have a staff debrief after each session to share observations, discuss concerns, and plan for the next activities. All partners completed Post Activity Report forms to document these reflections (these are discussed further in the **Evaluation** section).

Developing new creative skills

After laying the building blocks, the next stage of the creative process is where participants have the opportunity to build additional creative skills by exploring new media and techniques. This will only happen when the groundwork has taken place and trust and confidence has developed within the group and the young people begin to feel safe to create, make mistakes, and speak about their creative journeys. Each group reaches this stage at different times, and it's important to wait until they are ready by observing and discussing progress among the staff and with the young people. One partner observed:

“Seeing young people really come out of their shells and get more confident in talking whilst being creative and becoming more keen to get creative - it has been transformative.” (Bristol partner lead)

Experiencing new techniques

For young people to develop their creative skills it was important to bring in a range of artists and practitioners to teach across various artforms. This allowed young people to be creative in new ways. Part of the co-creation process of the Bath 'Make it New' group was to discuss what medium they would like to upskill on. They chose to learn screen-printing, inspired by an exhibition that used slogans and affirmative poetry in text. A screen-printing artist was employed to run this specialist workshop.

Making it accessible

The partners repeatedly asked themselves 'how can we make these art media and methods accessible?' The concept of 'scaffolding' was a key element in the Bath group, breaking down complex tasks and activities into smaller, more manageable steps, and providing support and feedback as the young people master new techniques and begin to work more independently. The programme team took more responsibility for designing and leading an early event, demonstrating the creative skills needed in design, the planning and coordination of the space and the visitors.

“[We used] the process of using themes and artefacts within the museum and the stories behind them to explore further and connect with their own likes and dislikes through the creative task.” (Bristol partner lead)

Using inspiration from your surroundings.

All the sites used local assets to inspire the creative process. This included exploring the local community for Solidarity Suppers, introducing artefacts at John Wesley’s New Room, and exploring historical art at the Holburne Museum. This was integral to creative planning, as starting points or stimulus to engage and connect with participants and was also used to influence their own creativity through the medium or method of exploration. The Bristol group would visit different parts of John Wesley’s New Room and respond to the artefacts they saw:

Using quality art materials

It was important for our partners to provide good quality art materials when working on their creative projects as it signalled that young people’s work was of value. The Bath group consulted with a graffiti artist on the materials to use for their doodling project. They developed an awareness of cost and learned budgeting as part of their decision-making process.

Being aware of the constraints

Not all ideas young people develop can be realised. Managing creativity within the boundaries of the project was sometimes difficult, but a necessary part of learning to work within time and budget constraints.

Example of creative experiences

Radstock

At the start, ‘volunteering’ was an intimidating word for this group, so they focused on the creative activities first. The group needed time to build their creative confidence to take any further steps in developing their skills and also redefine what volunteering could look like for them. After exploring different media in the early sessions, working with clay clearly led to an increase in positive mood, attendance, and confidence within the space. This allowed the facilitator to plan a variety of different activities around clay: painting clay models, making a plaster cast of their hand, making jewellery, and employing a potter to run a session about clay pots. These experiences led to the idea of sharing their skills with others and they ran a

try-it-out stall at their local arts fair, a space that they were familiar with. The group designed their

own bunting for the stall and later organised an exhibition of their work at the local library, which they created posters for.

“I learnt how to use clay and can show other people how to use it. I found it hard at the start because I didn’t know anyone, but I became more confident in making art.” (Young participant)

Other creative examples can be found in the **Appendix**.

Wellbeing

Wellbeing is at the heart of the RIRO project, but when working with young people, it's often not the first thing they want to discuss. Creativity can be a better starting point, and as participants are held safely through listening and care, their trust and confidence can grow. Having solid expertise in wellbeing and mental health and supportive approaches is essential for working with young people who may have additional needs or challenging circumstances.

Planning and Structure

In RIRO, the partners and artists met several times at the beginning of the project to think carefully about what skills and structure would be needed to adequately support the needs and wellbeing of the young people they wanted to involve. These are some of the issues they addressed and came to understand better ^[L]_[SEP] over time:

Training and skills for wellbeing

Given the varied levels of need of the young people across all the sites, having some expertise and training around mental health issues was considered essential. Partners may have complementary expertise, and some may be brought in through freelancers or external partners. This may include Mental Health First Aid training, prior creative mental health work with adults, and working with arts therapists and youth workers. With small budgets and limited staff capacity, it's best to have a single point of contact for young people and good signposting to external support agencies.

Caring for the staff

Working with additional needs and actively supporting young people in vulnerable circumstances can be very demanding. Building a process with regular planning and debriefing meetings is essential for staff and freelancer wellbeing. Young artists and staff can be important role models in sessions – they are relatable to the participants and offer important insights to older staff. They especially need mentoring and support to manage and learn from this work, and they will grow in skills and confidence as they help facilitate sessions.

Allocating responsibility for participant support

While freelance artists have an important role in holding the group during sessions, most partners chose to make salaried organisational staff responsible for regular

contact with young participants as safeguarding responsibilities needed to be held within the organisation.

Managing expectations about communication and support

Responding to frequent individual communications from participants can take time and energy. Partners needed to set clear expectations with participants about how frequently they could contact project leaders, how quickly leaders can respond, and the overall amount of non-session support they can offer. The Bristol partners supported their young people outside of sessions as part of their process. However, they found that participants reached out for help and support at irregular times, which was tricky to respond to. Putting clear boundaries in place supported staff and participants:

“One young person sought ongoing frequent contact and reassurance between workshop sessions. This was not possible to provide within our budget and capacity - establish clear lines of communication through one project manager within working hours.” (Bristol partner staff member)^[1]_{SEP}

Boundaries

Setting good boundaries can help participants feel safe to participate in sessions, and it can be a positive learning curve for young people to see how to model good boundaries. In addition to setting communication boundaries as above, boundaries could address how to treat each other with respect in the session and being responsive when young people communicate what they do or don't want to do.

Anticipating and accommodating accessibility issues

Truly enabling participation, regardless of barriers, communicates care and supports the wellbeing of young people. RIRO participants had a wide range of extra needs, including communication challenges, social anxiety and isolation, neurodivergence, wheelchair use, and medical concerns. Partners devised a variety of accommodations, including sessions with hybrid face-to-face and online participation, sending activity packs for at-home participants, facilitating written as well as verbal communication, and allowing people to engage when and how they felt able. Knowing these accommodations will be provided helps young people feel that they are meant to be in the space and are welcomed as full participants.

Balancing flexibility and consistency

The young people said it was important that their schedules were considered when planning meeting and cultural event times. At the same time, they felt secure knowing that there was a regularly scheduled offer with the same structure and the same staff.

Responding to unique situations and contexts

It's important to be aware of and offer support for the important issues affecting participants and their communities. Refugees living in hotels in Weston-super-Mare were particularly socially isolated and unfamiliar with many of the usual creative activities offered. The engagement had to be tailored to their immediate needs and interests, working across language and cultural differences through experienced community volunteers. In Radstock, the devastating death of a young person in the community meant that the underlying grief of the young participants had to be anticipated and handled sensitively.

Keeping things small

Limiting numbers so that you establish a small cohort of young people can not only be helpful in ensuring that each person can be well supported but could also make the experience of participating more impactful for the young people. Having a smaller group means that there is space for each person to be held and to grow and makes it easier to develop adaptations to accommodate people's needs within the group.

“We're not just, as artists, planning and running a workshop and having a little reflective time afterwards. We're actually kind of providing emotional care, aftercare, and practical solutions to the life around the workshop. So... it's quite an intense way of working and it's a small group. So it probably couldn't work that way if we had 20 people because we just couldn't be as responsive.”
(Bristol partner staff member)

How to approach wellbeing ^[11]_{SEP} with young people

Start with a light touch

All the partners stressed the importance of having wellbeing as a key intention in planning and delivery of the sessions with young people. However, they agreed on the need for this to be implicit rather than explicit at the beginning. For young people who may be struggling, they may not want this to be the primary focus of their engagement - they may want to engage creatively as an enjoyable pastime.

While some projects worked with art therapists, they were not providing art therapy and felt it was important not to frame creativity as leading to wellbeing in a transactional way. For the refugee group in particular, it was important to respect the difficulty of their situation and what impact it had on them, while also bearing in mind that in their cultures, the language and concepts of wellbeing may not be used in the way that they are in the UK. A light touch is helpful in the beginning, with casual conversations, creative check-ins, and reflective discussions. Over time, all the groups dis

cussed wellbeing more deliberately, and young people spoke directly about how participation improved their anxiety and social engagement.

Interacting with young people^[SEP] in sessions

Small acts show care

All partners said that there are many small acts that show a young person that their needs and interests are heard and being responded to. ^[SEP]This can include providing food at sessions (some people don't get regular meals), accommodating allergies and food preferences, reimbursing travel costs, and directly addressing accessibility issues. Alongside this, having a regular and reliable communication channel that they choose (for example, WhatsApp over email) and doing personal check-ins are some of the gestures that were the foundation of building trusting relationships.

Responsive relationships create a sense of security.

Especially for those young people who don't have close personal relationships with other adults, the partner staff could offer many kinds of support, from being a friendly touchpoint to someone they can trust in difficult times. While the programme is not necessarily the first point of call in a mental health or physical crises, staff can check in with the young person and decide how to support them so they can return to the group.

Use group and one-to-one check-ins to shape engagement possibilities

Creating a routine of reflection after activities and having individual check-ins can help facilitators respond to individual needs and interests and develop appropriate small tasks in volunteering. Confidence built from early successes inspires more creative exploration and risk-taking over time. If you are using art journals or other reflective documentation, participants can see and celebrate their progress over time.

“The Bristol RIRO team that I am part of... have just accepted me for me from day one and I just feel so relaxed there. Also I feel like I can just be myself and that is an amazing feeling. It has also helped me with my confidence especially in bigger social situations. I wouldn't have been confident at all about going on the Bath trip without [the Bristol staff]. In RIRO I feel like I can achieve anything that I want to do, and before RIRO I thought that I was rubbish at art and being creative, and I was struggling. But as soon as I walked through the doors and saw [the Bristol staff], I just felt really welcome and appreciated from all of them.” (Bristol young person)

Wellbeing lessons from the partners:

- State the safe intention of the group each time
- Encourage listening, caring, laughing, kindness, and valuing everyone in the space
- Ensure each young person can engage in a way that suits them
- Be aware of all accessibility needs
- Establish clear boundaries and expectations ^[11]_[SEP] of what the project can offer
- Keep communication channels open and relevant to their needs (texts, WhatsApp groups)
- Have more than one facilitator in a session
- Young facilitators can model and offer peer support

Wellbeing impact

Changes in wellbeing among the young people were both drivers and benefits of their creative and volunteer engagement. Over time they grew in confidence socially and creatively. They became more comfortable with each other and with a range of creative activities, making requests for new experiences. They began to see the purpose of their creative activity beyond a leisure activity and started taking the initiative in generating creative ideas and planning events.

For many of the young people, who struggled with a variety of physical and social challenges, these gains were transformative. Some found that stepping out of their comfort zone and participating in public events was not as hard as they imagined, and doing so boosted their confidence.

The young person lead from Bath observed that one of the main impacts on the young people is that over time they felt much more free and able to speak with their own voice and show up as their full selves, with more humour and less seriousness, and their confidence in their abilities increased.

The young person leads in each programme made many observations about the wellbeing changes of the participants. Some of the other psychosocial benefits they noted were:

Learning to self-regulate in sessions with group support

In several projects, some young people were noticed to have difficulties regulating their emotions or behaviour at the beginning. As the sessions went on, this improved. For example, one participant frequently needed to leave the room when they were overwhelmed. “As weeks went on, they just became more competent and more comfortable”, a young leader observed. The group were able to have conversations about this and support each other to relax and be aware of what they could each cope with.

Learning to articulate preferences

Across the different projects, there was resistance from some participants to particular activities or even to attending after being referred to the programme. This was taken in stride by the leaders, and young people were allowed to not take part until they were ready. A young person in one group initially didn't want to attend, or felt forced to by someone mentoring/supporting him. At first he was incredibly quiet but “now he's such an asset to the group because he lifts the spirits”. He has become much clearer with communicating his boundaries about what he does or doesn't want to do.

Transcending accessibility and isolation

Physically disabilities and social isolation were a challenge for some participants, and they were often unable to participate in person. But over time this changed. “Another amazing thing that's happened is that one of our young women, who is a wheelchair, has been attending sessions on Zoom, but [then] she came to a session. That was brilliant! And it was so lovely to see her in the flesh, as it were.”

Social awareness and supporting ^[L]_[SEP] each other

As the young people met and worked together on a regular basis, they learned how to relate to each other's experiences, and gave each other support and advice. They had greater awareness of everyone's limits and what people were able to contribute. This was likely supported by the early role modelling of this approach by the programme leads. In one group, during a session where some young people shared emotional subjects with the group, other members of the group prompted the staff to follow-up and make sure that person was okay.

Young people's voices

“It has helped me regulate my mind through practicing to take time and do a creative task... I have really enjoyed the trial-and-error our group has been doing, and the feedback we shared helped spark new ideas, interest, and questions for me that helped me develop my thinking through the sessions and out of the sessions... Meeting amazing people who I feel supported by and connected with — a safe space to go to.”

“At the beginning I was very low, very shy, and isolated. The best youth worker never gave up and believed in me that I can do great things... Eventually I was employed at 16 and started working with other young people and children and alongside families who are financially struggling etc. Now I’m 18 and [my youth worker] are the bestest of friends and even now call her ^[L]_[SEP] mum as she’s loving and caring.”

Volunteering

One of the main aims of the RIRO project was to work with young people to transform the way project partners thought about volunteering, and to imagine new possibilities for what volunteering could offer young people.

Understanding what ‘volunteering’ means

In our co-production meetings, and in the sessions that project partners ran with their young people, there were many conversations about the concept of ‘volunteering’, and the need to define this term so that partners and young people alike shared an understanding of what it might mean. It was evident early on that the word ‘volunteering’ had the potential to be off-putting to young people, and was associated with older people who have time and money to spare, for ‘high-fliers’ or for people with pre-existing skills.

Creatively unpacking the term ‘volunteering’

Partners from Bristol and Bath both used creative activities to explore what volunteering meant to young people. This included reframing volunteering in terms of what ‘gifts’ each young person brought to the project, and also opening up the real reasons people wanted to volunteer. This revealed the ways in which volunteering might impact beneficially on the young people’s lives, but also helped the groups to discuss the challenges that come with volunteering.

Different perspectives on why young people might volunteer

Partners reported being surprised at the suggestion from a number of young people that one of the reasons for them wanting to volunteer in arts and heritage settings was because they felt that museums offered a calm space “and they just needed to slow down ... they were talking much more about their wellbeing and the fact that it was a really calm, safe space to be in, which I thought was really, really interesting.” (Bath partner lead). A number of the young people involved in the project also expressed how important ‘community’ was to them, and their ambition to be an active part of their community was a factor in wanting to volunteer their time.

Developing opportunities

Understanding young people's routes^[1]_{SEP} into volunteering

The Bath partners spoke with their group of young people about their previous experiences of volunteering and some of the young people talked about “feeling quite exploited”. It was helpful to discuss the differences between volunteering and internships, and what the young people's expectations were around the two. It is important to consider that those who have a natural interest in arts and culture might already be interested in pursuing volunteering or work experience within arts and heritage organisations, but reaching out to young people who don't have that established interest, and finding ways to make volunteering appealing to them, is a different kind of challenge. This might require an organisation to think how they might need to pay closer attention to what young people need, beyond wanting a career in arts and heritage, or having a natural interest in the arts.

Integrating young people into existing

Partners identified ways that they might integrate their emerging work with young people into their existing programmes. The Weston-super-Mare partners aimed to integrate participants into their Young Culture Makers programme, through involving the young people in festival planning and delivery, with the aim to have conversations about contributing creatively to future festivals, where the young people could take on specific roles and responsibilities relating to their interests.

It may be that there is a rich, existing volunteer culture and infrastructure that young people can be welcomed into, and partners found it generative to explore the ways in which knowledge and experience could be exchanged between young people and existing volunteers. The Bath partners spoke about working with young people to offer new training and mentoring programmes, to help their existing staff and volunteers become more engaged and informed about working with young people, and the Bristol partners understood that by bringing young people into traditional roles, “the site or the museum could gain new insights from young people about new types of roles that they could create, with a focus on gaining experience ...we ended up seeing it it works both ways what the site can offer to a young person and what the young person can offer to the site”.

Make new programmes that are relevant to young people

Beyond existing programmes, all the project partners worked to identify and build roles based on what the young people were interested in, which involved stretching the definition of what they previously considered volunteering to be. It became clear to the partners that some young people might not want to volunteer in a traditional

sense and might just want to have access to a safe space to be creative in.

Events co-designed with young people were a really successful way of bringing new young people into the partners' buildings, showing how the organisations could be relevant to young people's interests, and demonstrating the organisation's capacity for collaboration, flexibility and creativity.

The Bath partners aspire to work in future with young people to design a work experience programme and a wellbeing programme for students at a nearby college, focusing on how these can be designed to fit the needs of the

The young person's development journey

Partners identified that to begin with, volunteering might look like young people running one-off events or experiments, but then as their relationship with an organisation develops they might move into more traditional volunteer roles, such as for instance being on advisory boards, helping advise on policies or helping out with programme activities. However, it was important that this journey started from the young person's interests, with the partners responding through facilitating a supportive development journey that aligned with these interests.

Respond to young people's interests without adding pressure

It is important to notice that sensitivity is required when offering encouragement based on a young person's interests. The Bristol partners identified that there is a balance of responding to an interest a young person has, and encouraging them to share that interest, for instance, sharing skills with other young people in the group but resisting putting pressure on them as this might cause them to "retract back in". They learned:

"To hold that and not put any pressure on at all. For it to be okay to say that 'you know something, and you're good' but without anyone pouncing on that and saying, 'Oh, you could volunteer', just keeping more ^[L]_[SEP] softly with those edges." (Bristol partner staff member)

Partners noticed that when the young people have roles and jobs that are geared around their personal goals, they didn't see what they were doing as 'volunteering'. This indicates a need to be more flexible with looking at how young people themselves want to frame their contributions.

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Build a staged process

Progressing in stages can help development feel achievable and less intimidating. Partners in the RIRO project developed phases of bringing their young people on board, for instance beginning with participatory activities that brought young people into the spaces for the first time, which could lead to a more regular programme of activity. The Bristol partners repeated an additional round of workshops, where the cohort of young people from an earlier phase acted as co-facilitators, welcoming in the new cohort and helping to run the sessions. The Bristol partners described their programme as a “step-by-step” process, starting with making the young people safe, then supporting them to take on roles that work for them, noting that “it’s a very gentle step-by-step because it has to be, and it’s different for each of them”.

Establish a sense of value

Think about the question of payment

One question that emerged in the RIRO project, that challenged traditional understandings of the word ‘volunteering’, was: ‘can (or should) you pay volunteers, and is it still volunteering if you do?’ The Bath partners decided that they were going to offer their young people an honorarium for a chunk of work that they did in the early rather than volunteering. They said this felt important to make sure that the young people knew that the work they were contributing was acknowledged. After this initial period, they decided to go back to the structure of the young people volunteering their time for free, but having their travel expenses covered. It is important to discuss with the young people what they prefer, and to understand any effect that payments may have on an individual’s benefits, for example.

Demonstrate the value of young people’s contributions

It can be helpful to illustrate in a clear way the tangible value of volunteering. The Bath partners did this by calculating the number of hours the young people had spent at meetings, planning and delivering activities, costing this against pay scales from the Museums Association, and sharing this with their young people. This can help participants see the scale and significance of the work they have put in as volunteers, and can also help emphasise that the experience they are gaining is relevant and transferrable to paid work.

Building useful skills and experience

Identify and name the skills

There was a sense from partners that the young people didn't necessarily identify the skills that they brought to volunteering, even though to the partners it was clear that programming, planning and facilitating events required a wide variety of skills. Therefore there was a clear need to mark and acknowledge these as they emerged. The Bath partners observed that by labelling the skills, "you are giving the young people value when they may feel none or doubt it."

Celebrate increased confidence

Partners reported that it was amazing to see how much difference had been made in the journey of the RIRO project in building the young people's confidence, for example some participants going from hardly talking in sessions to getting actively involved in volunteering. Encouraging young people to take on small tasks can be a tangible way to encourage this. The lead young person from the Bristol partners said that because of an increase in confidence, every young person volunteered to do something at one of the celebration events, and before they wouldn't ^{SEP} have had this level of participation.

Recognise the value of social experiences

It emerged in this project that volunteering was a way for the young people to feel more connected with people in general and more confident and creative. For young people who have been unwell or socially isolated, volunteering may be the first time they have joined a new social group for a couple of years since being unwell, and the social interaction can help them feel more connected.

Volunteering can help young people understand their own aspirations

The lead young person from Bath said that being part of RIRO has given him more guidance in terms of what kind of career he wants to have: as a result of the RIRO project he has learned he wants to be much more involved in learning and engagement, and working with people. He feels much more experienced which has grown his self-confidence.

In one of the Bristol partner sessions, one of the young people shared how proud they felt of themselves and how much they realised the meetings and creative activities had helped them. They stated that the meetings had opened the world of volunteering up to them, leading them to other volunteering roles. They said that they now do lots of volunteering and find it really rewarding. One young person in the project said that the work they did on the RIRO project has encouraged them to look more at

youth work as a career using their creative skills to support this, and they are actively planning to get more involved in this sector of work.

Example of exploring volunteering: Bristol

The Bristol partners ran a session with their young people exploring ‘what does volunteering mean to you’, and the analogy they used to open up this discussion was to think about it in terms of ‘what gifts you bring’:

“We ended up in a very different place^[1] with the notion of volunteering than we thought we would.” (Partner lead)

“We made creative responses that represented our gifts and put them in a^[1] basket. So that's one creative way of encouraging thinking about volunteering.” (Partner staff)

The Bristol partners also ran an activity in one of their sessions with the young people, gathering themes about what volunteering might be, in the context of John Wesley’s New Room, using the motif of clouds on a glass window: “We started to look at the real top reasons why everybody wanted to volunteer; what did it bring to us, you know, how did it impact beneficially on our lives, but also thinking about [how] it’s challenging. People might have felt like they had not been thought about properly as a volunteer, you know, because they weren’t earning money.”

Organisational Change

Engaging with Organisational Change

Capacity Building

Long Term Sustainability

Engaging with Organisational Change

Starting a project with a new audience can be an opportunity for positive organisational change, both to accommodate the project^[SEP] and to change your culture and community outreach for the better.

Lessons Learned:

Openness to being changed through the work with^[SEP] young people

For the work to have a meaningful impact, think about two-way learning: how might you allow the young people's ideas to cross-pollinate with existing ideas and narratives from the organisation's programme or collection? For example, young people might help you think about your collections, building or programme differently and in a more playful way. Their interpretation of artworks, collections, and buildings can help with making these more relevant to contemporary experiences or re-contextualise them so that they engage with stories people can relate to.

“You can feel the real kind of joy that they're getting from it. And the New Room is learning so much as well from it. And it's just like, oh my god, this is what it's—this is working. This is what it's all about. It's exciting.” (Bristol Partner Lead)

Your organisation might be changed in the following ways:

- **Attitudinal change:** Work with young people challenges the organisation to think about why they exist, and who or what the organisation is 'for'
- **Tangible change:** Young people might run new activities, create new work for a collection, or have an impact on the layout of a building

- **Culture change:** The organisation begins to see the value of the young people's voluntary contribution and considers paying them for their time; young people are invited onto advisory boards and or encouraged to apply for permanent jobs within the organisation

Addressing barriers

Reflect on how your organisation might be perceived, by young people and others: what barriers might prevent new audiences from engaging? Look closely at the language used within the programmes, collections, or spaces to see if this may alienate young audiences.

Flexibility and openness to unknown outcomes

When planning your work, be prepared to leave the outcome open so that young people can choose how to respond, and what direction they want the work to go in. You may need to be prepared to be flexible, with your expectations, the timeline, and your budget.

Use existing structures and programmes to your advantage

Your current programmes and structures, such as those for wellbeing or mental health, can guide and hold this type of work with young people. How can you adapt these for a younger audience?

Identify how organisational structures and hierarchies enable or prevent change

Good communication and links between those delivering the project and those 'at the top' in an organisation can help the whole organisation understand the value of the project. How can this communication happen? How can the rest of the organisation benefit from what's happening? Are there champions of your work in key roles?

Commit to the work^[SEP] through continued funding

Organisations can demonstrate their ongoing commitment to young people by putting funding behind this work or applying for grants that can continue an additional phase. It can be harder for organisations without core funding to continue the work in a consistent and sustainable way.

Practical Tips:

As you're developing your programme, consider doing these things:

- Offer the young people in your programme and more generally free access to your programme/collection/space

- Think about changes you can make to address barriers that might alienate young people or prevent them accessing what you offer
- Have conversations with people higher up in your organisation to make them aware of the value of the activity
- Think about a funding strategy so that the work can be properly integrated into your activities on a more permanent basis

“Maybe the thing that we did not even know... that could be achieved with this project, that [we've] sort of taken it beyond the bounds of our original expectations and then really grown something that's not just been good for the young people that have been involved but have also transformed the institution and can potentially be embedded. I don't think you can ask for much more than that.” (Bath Partner Lead)

Capacity Building

In order to nurture meaningful change within your organisation, you will need to build capacity: for learning skills, for different types of knowledge, for new ways of working. You might be working in totally new ways - how can you resource this growth?

Lessons Learned:

Here are some of the ways that you might build capacity:

Embedding new structured ways of working

- As you learn how to do co-creation or co-production, document and map your process so that you can grow your capacity to repeat this way of working in future projects.
 - At the beginning of a project, consider what you would like to achieve and different pathways for getting there
 - You will have creative stages to explore ideas and then take tangible actions based on what young people have told you that they want.
 - Continuously return to formulating the vision of the work you are co-creating - who can be impacted by this work and how can this best be achieved?
 - What are the tangible outputs, like artistic products or events, and what are the intangible outputs, like the impact on participants and staff? How can these be documented?
 - Then you'll need to reflect and do it again
 - You might create new proformas or procedures that can be consistently used across the organisation in other work that you do to make it safer and better managed.

Gaining new skills and knowledge

- Learning facilitation skills for co-creation or other participatory techniques can support open creative and decision-making spaces, which may be different to the skills artists usually have

- As you work with partner organisations, be open to be learning from the way they work, e.g. with particular communities who have specific needs, so that you can feed this into your own organisation’s knowledge and skillset

“Everything was so new for us. We’ve never done anything like this before. And it’s been such a learning process for us as an organisation to work in ways that we’ve never worked in before. And ^[1]_[SEP] I think we’re still working on how that will change us long-term...” (Partner Staff Member)

Telling new stories

- Young people might encourage you to tell new or different stories about your building, collection or programme, that take up a critical perspective, such as looking at the legacy of women’s stories or colonialism in a museum collection.
- You might need to grow your capacity to accommodate and tell new stories that are brought into focus through this work, and challenge embedded or uninterrogated institutional norms.

Learning to compromise

- This work will require you to build meaningful partnerships, which in turn will mean learning how to collaborate. Collaborations will bring the need for compromise, and require you to have the capacity to loosen your control around particular outcomes
- In order to collaborate, you need to be able to listen to and take on board others’ ideas, whether those of a partner organisation or the young people you’re working with.

Strengthening capacity in the organisation’s governance

- Build vigilance and good joined-up practice across the organisation around safeguarding, risk assessments and safer recruitment (see the ‘**Care and Safety**’ section of this toolkit, for more guidance on this).

Growing your staffing and volunteering base

- You may need to build roles that are new or different that specifically support this type of work.
- You may find that you need to bring in co-facilitators or other new staff to increase your capacity. This might be through bringing in specific project workers (whether freelance or permanent staff) or volunteers to support the project.

- Working with young people can also be an opportunity to strengthen the future of your workforce, building relationships that might translate into permanent roles for those young people within your organisation. How might you listen to the young people you're working with, and respond to their ambitions and interests, to see how you might support them to take the next step?

Doing this work can be an opportunity for your organisation to grow and learn in many ways. Look for ways to embed this learning so that the capacity that you build can support future projects.

“The learning in our institution... that's been massive, and that's partly why I was keen not to freelance it out, because the organisation doesn't learn, you know, it'll just be that the freelancer goes away, and has learned a lot, but it's not embedded. So the fact that the young person works here, it's sort of influencing what he's doing as well. ^[1]_{SEP}And I think that's really important.” (Bath Partner Lead)

Long Term Sustainability

In order for your work with young people to be sustainable, you need to show commitment to embedding this work in a meaningful way within your organisation.

Lessons Learned:

Building sustainable programmes

There are a number of things that could help you develop sustainable programmes for young people.

- Think about any existing or long-term programmes of activity your organisation runs - how could your work with young people be integrated into these programmes?
- Consider working with a group of young people to create a new course or programme that could be advertised to partner organisations, e.g. a local college. The young people may be able to identify how to connect with students who might be interested.
- Make sure that programmes are designed to be useful and responsive to young people's interests: consider focusing on things that your young people have identified as interesting or that would help them with skills development or work experience
- If you do have a limited activity programme, make sure the support for young people doesn't dwindle after this specific activity finishes - how else might you continue supporting young people in the interim, before something new begins?
- Think creatively about how to use the stable assets you already have: if you have a building, such as a museum, that is not likely to close, this can be made of service to young people, as a space for them to be in.

Commitment to embedding young people

Beyond creating a sustainable activity programme, you might want to consider the ways in which young people become embedded in the structure of your organisation. Could you allow young people to shadow other members of staff and volunteers to get a sense of how things work behind the scenes, potentially encouraging them to apply for permanent jobs with the organisation? Could you invite young people to form advisory groups or even become board members? Think about how young people's learning and perspective could be meaningfully and actively integrated into decision-making processes within the organisation. When you've mapped this out, share these potential pathways with the young people so they know what their involvement might lead to.

“Just the idea of providing ideas of ways to move forward or links after this project is finished gives some comfort for me as someone who is always looking to be involved with things afterwards. But also the idea of like, ^[1]_[SEP]“this is not the end of your time in this kind of space.” (Young Person)

Bringing in new cohorts

Consider how you can bring in future cohorts of young people and run further iterations of your project. You can invite an existing or previous cohort to mentor, train, and facilitate the new cohort of young people. This can provide a sense of continuity and motivation from both the older cohort (taking pride in wanting to share their experience) and the younger cohort who can see role models of peers who have already been through the process.

Nurturing and cultivating partnerships

Ongoing partnerships can support outreach, continuity, and bidding for ongoing funding. How might you continue working in partnership with organisations that have supported your programme with young people? Can you identify other relevant organisations to secure further funding to continue the work in a new partnership? After delivering a first round of your project, you could consider going back to any organisations you were previously unsuccessful in partnering with and invite them to bring in groups of young people to a new round of the project: they might have more confidence in the project after seeing the results of your work so far.

Practical Tips:

As you're developing your programme, consider doing these things:

- Decide who will be the main staff member responsible for the project, and be intentional about how to facilitate and maintain a trusted relationship with young people
- Look at any existing or long-term activity you run, and think about how to integrate your work with young people into this
- Think creatively about how to use your existing assets (buildings etc.)
- When developing your activity and throughout the project, ask young people what's interesting, useful and relevant to them
- Plan ways for young people to shadow other members of staff and volunteers to get a sense of how things work behind the scenes
- Take action to embed young people in decision-making, e.g. through advisory groups, your board, or by inviting them to apply for permanent roles
- Make a plan for how to support this work in new or existing partnerships with other organisations

“It's just kind of the excitement and drive of it. And actually, it makes it really—it just makes it sustainable as well, outside of RIRO those connections are still there, that kind of structure.” (Partner Staff Member)

Co-Production

What is Co-Production?

Co-production in the RIRO project

Reflections on Co-production in Practice

Co-production in the RIRO project

In the Project Overview, we described two layers of interactive group processes in this project:

Co-creation, which is the partners' work with the young people on their own programmes, and **co-production**, which we defined as the work that happens between AHSW and the partner organisations to collectively shape and manage the overall project. Prioritising a co-produced approach focused the intention of the project around collaborative processes, learning, and reflection.

The RIRO project was punctuated by regular 'co-production meetings', a combination of online, in-person and hybrid meetings where the partner organisations (including staff and lead young people) came together in a big group with AHSW as the convenor. In these meetings, partners shared reflections on their progress, gave examples of the activities they'd been developing, and the young people contributed their thoughts and ideas. This was an opportunity for knowledge exchange and for partners to discuss how they wanted to approach various processes such as evaluation.

"I find that these meetings that we have every once in a while are super helpful for bringing these issues out onto the table and getting some feedback from other folks." (Partner Staff Member)

In its partnership agreements with the partner organisations, AHSW set out the following requirements for the project partners:

- To work collaboratively in their site to co-create volunteering opportunities with young people through creative activities and workshops
- To contribute to joint activities with the other sites
- To support the process evaluation and development of learning materials and a toolkit

Although these partnership agreements mentioned some specific commitments, e.g. how many meetings the partners would be required to attend, AHSW did not dictate what activities each partner organisation should deliver, how they should build relationships with young people, nor how they should manage their own partnerships. This meant there was a level of trust, openness and flexibility built into the way the project was managed that was directly linked to the ethos of co-production.

We embedded innovative inclusive practice into the coordination of the RIRO project, which helped us facilitate rich discussion, ask important and challenging questions, and position young people not only in the central conversations but also at the heart of the evaluation process for this project. Here are some of the ways we did this:

Creative Facilitation

Our co-production meetings included not only group discussion but also embedded the creative facilitation skills of many of the partners and project staff. We made use of a card deck developed by AHSW staff member Hannah Mumby in collaboration with the University of Exeter, 'the Co-Production Oracle', which helped the partners and young people discuss important issues relating to co-production, exploring topics like power dynamics, nurturing relationships, and valuing diversity of knowledge.

Young people had a seat at the table

Each partner worked with a lead young person in developing and delivering their programme. These young people were also key contributors in co-production meetings and led engagement and reflective activities among all the partners. We regularly held meetings and events that were open to all young people (not only the leads), such as the celebration events where partners and young people took part in activities together.

Participatory Evaluation:

We used a variety of quantitative, qualitative, creative and participatory approaches to reflect on our learning and adapt the project as we went along. These led to improvements in practice and lessons learned for the toolkit and the evaluation.

Reflections on [SEP] Co-production [SEP] in practice

The benefit of co-production

There are many benefits that come from doing co-produced work. Here are some that we identified in this project:

- It is possible to build a safe space where partners can share where they've met challenges, where things aren't working the way they expected, and to give an insight into their 'work in progress'
- There can be space for everyone's voice to be heard and this can be immensely powerful and transformative
- Partners learn from each other about new approaches and ideas and bring these ideas into their own work
- Different forms of knowledge emerge, sometimes in unexpected ways, and these [SEP] are truly valuable
- There is greater commitment to reflection [SEP] and flexibility
- It's an opportunity to build meaningful relationships that have the potential to [SEP] support future collaborations.

"There are different kinds of value in each one of [the parts]. And I think there's a particular kind of power that comes from this collective that we've built."
(Partner lead)

The challenges of co-production

In practice, co-production is always a challenge. The reality of funding-limited partnership projects brings many obstacles and restrictions. Here are some of the ways co-production was difficult within the RIRO project:

- One organisation, AHSW, had to be the grant holder and had a contracted accountability for reporting to the funder. Although money was distributed, the overall financial responsibility for the project could not be collectively held.
- As the budget holders and coordinators of the overall project, AHSW had a certain amount of power over the partner organisations: they took the lead in organising meeting times and agendas (though they often asked for additions from partners); they requested certain updates and reports from partners; they were in charge of the money and partners had to invoice them in order to be paid. It is important to acknowledge that there is very often this kind of power imbalance in co-produced projects.
- Although partners had freedom to decide how to develop their activities, the fact that each strand of work developed at its own pace, following very different trajectories, meant that sometimes some partners whose projects took longer to start, felt like they were falling short in comparison to other partners whose work had gotten started quickly.

“I think one of the things we've learned from this project is that everything is fluid ... we had this plan and we had a timeline that was part of the original application. And we've seen how differently everybody approaches that.”
(AHSW staff member)

Lessons Learned:

Money / Resources

What's required

- Transparency on the budget and how this is distributed amongst partners/activities
- An agreed approach to compensating participants fairly for any contributions (this might include freelancers and young people or other participants).

Challenges

- Determining the real cost for each partner to deliver the work: does their allocated budget reflect this?
- Partners' tracking of their allocated budget and how this gets spent across

delivering activities

- The requirement from the main budget holder for budget reports and updates from partners who have received allocated funds
- Managing limits around funding, making sure you're being realistic and not too ambitious
- The fact that although some partners may have other resources e.g. a building/space, these may come with their own restrictions
- Compensating people fairly for their time and contributions, including covering access costs
- Budgeting enough money for activities that are undetermined
- Deciding rates of pay in a way that's fair.

What might help

- Work early on to plan a project well, at the stage of applying for funding: this will help you factor in extra budget for areas that need to be flexible, e.g. access-related costs
- Develop partnership agreements that clearly state the amount of money each partner will receive and a payment schedule — this will help partners plan their cash flow
- Look for opportunities to combine the budgets of more than one organisation, to better resource staff time, transport costs, access costs and practitioner fees.

Partnerships

What's required

- Clear roles and responsibilities
- The ability for partners to rely on each other
- An acknowledgement of power dynamics
- Recognition of varying capacities amongst partners

- The bringing together of a diverse range of resources and skills in a way that's complementary

Challenges

- Relationship building takes a lot of time and staff investment
- Partnership organisations can pull out, close down, or not be able to offer what they had originally agreed to
- Partners may want to go in different directions with how they do the work
- There may be differences between the capacity and financial resources of organisations who have permanent staff, and the capacity of freelancers; some organisations may also have help from more staff or volunteers.

What might help

- In partnership agreements, make sure to clearly indicate what each partner is required to do, in as much detail as possible, including any key meetings they will be required to attend
- Facilitate regular, clear communication between all partners. This could include regular all-hands in-person meetings and/or online communication through apps like Discord or Slack
- Organise meetings in a way that creates space for everyone to contribute.

Knowledge Sharing

What's required

- Celebrating different types of knowledge that partners and participants bring to the process
- Facilitating a variety of ways for people to contribute their knowledge

Challenges

- There may be different levels of expertise in the project, and this may lead to a hierarchy of knowledge, which may be seen for instance in people with more experience believing that their knowledge is more legitimate than someone who is a beginner
- People may have very strong feelings or beliefs about certain topics that they don't want to be challenged on

- There may be clashes in people's needs, for example, some people may request hybrid meetings, while others may specify needing in-person meetings only

What might help

- Consider facilitating ways of learning about each other that encourage people to share their passions and interests beyond the hats they usually wear - you might be surprised about people's hidden talents, and these could end up being useful or relevant. This can also help people form meaningful connections
- Look for activities or processes you can run with the partners that offer a range of options for contributing or sharing knowledge: for instance, activities where partners write or draw their ideas rather than always relying on spoken communication. Look for inspiration online from resources that share facilitation activities for groups
- Find ways to accommodate everyone's needs as much as you can, even if this means making adaptations or compromises - you won't be able to support everyone equally all the time, so you might need to think about what adjustments you can make to ensure things are equitable.

Flexibility

What's required

- Regular reflection
- An understanding of the project's limits, challenges or obstacles
- Preparedness for elements of the project to take longer than anticipated
- Readiness to pivot if partners' circumstances change or if things need to be adapted.

Challenges

- The co-production process requires shared discussion and decision making, and until you begin, it may not be clear how much time or resource is needed to support this process
- Co-production can involve resisting a predetermined outcome for a project. Responding to ideas as they emerge can demand a level of adaptation within the bounds of any restrictions you face (such as a limited budget)

- The project may be planned according to a fixed timeline that doesn't have flexibility built in
- There may be deadlines that aren't moveable, for example relating to reporting to funders, running events^[1]_[SEP] or creating certain outputs.

What might help

- Remember that co-production is all about a shared learning process. It's not about getting it right or wrong, or ending up with a perfect outcome
- Keep a reflective record of the challenges and adaptations you have faced in the project: this is where some of the most important learning takes place
- Anticipating that some project elements may take longer than anticipated
- Keep talking to each other! A collective approach, making use of the diversity of available knowledge in your project, can help you respond creatively to obstacles.

Young people's voices

“[I have] more confidence in leading sessions ^[L]_[SEP]for young people specifically, and confidence in coproduction - able to support my team and^[L]_[SEP] offer my own skill set. I look towards working^[L]_[SEP] in more project and group focused work with^[L]_[SEP] young people.”

“I felt a sense of belonging and it is really special. I have got more confidence and I feel like I don't need to wear a mask and I feel like I can be myself! It also feels like a^[L]_[SEP]special art family that feels like a community.^[L]_[SEP]I am now doing an NHS advocating job [as a^[L]_[SEP] learning disabilities and autism co-trainer.”

Reflection & Learning

Reflection & Learning

Reflection ^[L]_[SEP] & Learning

A key part of the RIRO co-production process was a participatory reflective learning process.

As co-creation and experimentation meant that every partner site was doing something different, we wanted to anchor our process in common aims and intentions for the project. Two years offered a substantial amount of time to try things, discuss how they worked, adopt each others' approaches, and make adjustments as needed. We used ^[L]_[SEP]the bi-monthly co-production meetings and partner check-ins to facilitate this.

We also wanted to document our process and learnings in detail so we could share our insights with others through this toolkit and a formal evaluation. Drawing from many different participatory research and evaluation approaches, we used a variety of quantitative, qualitative, and creative tools to collect data and support our discussions.

This section describes the methods we used and how they worked for us. Key documents and sample forms in bold below can be found in the **Appendix**.

Setting intentions for outcomes: ^[L]_[SEP] **A logic model**

At the second co-production meeting, we discussed a draft **Logic Model** for the project. This included a statement of the aims for Phases 1 and 2 of the project, and a table that described Inputs, Activities, Participants, Delivery partner outcomes, Young people outcomes, Project outcomes, Assumptions and External factors. ^[L]_[SEP]

Over the course of the project, this document guided our **Phase 2 Evaluation Plan** (linking ^[L]_[SEP]key elements, outcomes, and measurement tools) and the **Final Evaluation Questions** for both young participants and partners.

Data collection on participation

In order to support their internal monitoring and evaluation of the Volunteering Futures Fund, Arts Council England (ACE) had all grantees fill out quarterly reporting forms. This posed reflective questions and collected quantitative data, including types of volunteering opportunities, numbers of participants and how they participated, and demographic data.

To collect some of this information we developed a **RIRO Project Participation and Consent Form** that was filled out on paper by the participants, and an online anonymised demographic data reporting form.

Knowing that having people fill out forms at first contact can be off-putting, some partners waited one or two sessions before presenting these. The Bristol programme collected some of this information earlier to prepare for the additional needs their participants had.

Understanding the young people's experience

The partners brought different prior experiences of evaluation processes and these were discussed early on. A key concern for everyone was how to track the young people's mental health journeys in a way that didn't feel confronting or intrusive, especially at the beginning. Some felt that using some standardised mental health measurement tools like WEMWBS can make people feel bad and may not reflect the nuances of their experience. Others had successful experiences of using simple and playful adaptations of mood tracking tools in previous projects. It was suggested that the young people have the opportunity to write 'then and now' statements about their hopes, feelings, and personal circumstances as a reflection throughout the process.

Here are some examples of how we approached this:

Sketchbooks/reflective journals

Bristol led the way, demonstrating to their young group how creative practitioners use art journals to record their views, experiences, and self-expression through a variety of media. Throughout the project, each session had time for both facilitators and young people to work with their journals. The Bath programme also picked up this idea after hearing about in a co-production meeting.

Participant Journey Reflective Prompts

Responding to a concern about formal wellbeing measures, we devised an alternative way to document the young people's experience with RIRO's key

elements – creativity, wellbeing, and volunteering. We developed a series of **prompts** that they could answer in their sketchbooks or in a free-standing exercise. This included identifying goals they wanted to achieve and reflecting on the progress they'd made. To respect their privacy, participants were told they could choose to share with the evaluators some or all of their reflections, or just answer questions using their responses as a guide.

The Bath group chose to initiate this as a group exercise and developed prompt cards for each young person to do their goal-setting, customised to the particular activities of their programme:

“As a process it felt accessible - we have one young person who struggles with writing, but he said he was glad he didn't have to write a lot. Someone else was doing it on-line, as they joined us by Zoom, and they also engaged. It didn't feel too heavy and intrusive (especially around wellbeing which can sometimes feel heavy-handed when you ask young people) and everyone was happy to do it and took it seriously.” (Bath partner lead)

Mood and experience tracking

Based on a long history of tracking participant experience in other projects, creativeShift in Bristol introduced a light-touch wellbeing/mood scale that was used at the beginning and end of every session by participants and facilitators.

Young Community Researchers

Young people were trained as community researchers in order to concretely embed and value young people's perspectives in the reflection and learning process. This training was delivered at in-person and online sessions and included skills in observing, interviewing, and leading informal focus groups. Initially, two young community researchers were employed as freelancers and carried out research by visiting programmes, making detailed observational notes about the sessions they attended, and writing these up as blogs or notes for the toolkit and evaluation. Later we offered the training to interested young people leads, and two of them developed a creative evaluation exercise for a co-production meeting in year two – **the RIRO Reflection Tree**.

Documenting the partners' ^{RIRO}SEP delivery experience

We used several tools to support partners' documentation of their experiences delivering their activities, how they interacted with the young people, and what issues arose during the course of the project. These included regular AHSW staff check-ins and problem-solving with each set of partners, and progress reports and reflective discussions at the quarterly co-production meetings. All of these were recorded and

transcribed and helped us shape the lessons learned.

Partners also filled out **Post Activity Report Forms** after each session with young people. This was a debriefing template for their delivery teams that addressed how each session worked, what they learned about young people's views, and what they observed about participation and wellbeing in the sessions. Collected together, these forms offer a rich view of how the programmes unfolded over time. The partners also filled out an overview of their Phase 1 experience in a form adapted from the Public Health England "Arts for health and wellbeing: an evaluation framework" (**RIRO Phase 1 Programme Details Form**).

Training project staff in data analysis

Over the two years, a great deal of data was collected, and analysing it for the toolkit and evaluation became a team effort. The project evaluator trained two AHSW staff and a research assistant to manage transcripts and project reports, code them in qualitative analysis software (Quirkos), and collaboratively synthesise the data to identify key themes.

Lessons Learned:

Information gathered from all these methods guided our production of this toolkit and inform the **overall project evaluation**. On the topic of reflection, learning and evaluation, we learned that:

Managing reflection and learning requires time and capacity

The RIRO project was fortunate to have an evaluation budget to span the two-year grant, and staff to develop, organise, and adapt the process as the project evolved. Some partners had prior evaluation skills but needed support to implement new methods.

Flexibility is key

It's important to agree on general aims and desired outcomes for a project, and to offer common tools to document experiences and progress. But each site may have to customise these for their own circumstances, especially when communication challenges (related to health or language differences) make standard reporting formats difficult.

Manage the load

Ongoing reflection and discussion is good, but perhaps not too much. The partners agreed that learning from each other in co-production meetings was helpful, but it's easy to collect a lot of data, which can be difficult to digest in the end.

Involve young people

At the session level and the co-production level, asking questions and listening carefully was key to meaningful reflection and adapting the programmes to their needs and interests. Having young people in leadership roles (site leads and community researchers) signals the value of their views and role-models the skills and leadership qualities you want them ^[L]_[SEP]to learn.

Final Words

Advice from young people

Transformation Stories

Thank you

Appendix

Advice from [L] [SEP] young people

How better to end this toolkit than with advice and stories [L] [SEP] from the young participants and our partners?

At the last co-production meeting, we asked the young people: [L] [SEP]

*What would you tell other organisations and adults about the best way [L] [SEP] to support **young people** in a project like this?*

Here's what they said:

Know who you are working with

LISTEN to young people

Don't make assumptions on [L] [SEP] their needs/ what they want

Work with young people directly

Take your time [L] [SEP] - meet young people

Gentleness and consistency and empathy

Personal goal-setting is really important

You need to have time to get used to us!

Understand that all people not just young people, won't always show up to participate in the same capacity each day - humans are inconsistent and sometimes just simply being in the space is enough

Advocating for a safe space to [L] [SEP] let them be their genuine self

Any and all engagement is a good thing!

Trust them - never give up on them even when they don't open up the first time.

Don't rush them

Believe what they say^[L]_[SEP] - don't question

Be consistent

Be there - when they need you and^[L]_[SEP] NEVER judge or say 'I know ^[L]_[SEP] understand exactly how you feel'

Never promise

Access and accessibility - Don't just rule out young people who can't physically get there. There are other ways for young people to join in, young people^[L]_[SEP] are determined to help themselves^[L]_[SEP] - don't close the door on them.

Transformation Stories

And finally, here are some excerpts from the Transformation Stories from the project, highlighting how co-creation and co-production can trigger major changes in practice and attitudes:

Through the RIRO project I have met and made genuine connections with other like-minded young people and through sharing our perspectives we are changing how the Holburne engages its surrounding community. The project has provided me with a supportive space to develop the skills to plan and run arts events and learn from people in the sector. Meetings with the group have made me feel excited about the potential museums hold to benefit people's wellbeing and has reconnected me with my own belief in the positive effects of being creative regularly. **Young Person**

I understood that from the start of the project that there would be a need to be flexible. However, the reality completely exceeded my expectations... Often, I tend to over-plan and structure when leading sessions or a project. When those structures/ plans are naturally altered because of the nature of co-creating with young people, I had previously found it difficult to manage. I have found that I have started to develop the skill of becoming much more responsive/adaptive to the needs of young people whilst working on this project. **Creative Producer**

We have learned to be more flexible and widen our vision of what volunteering, creativity, wellbeing, and community mean to young people, particularly in relation to how they have responded positively to our museum collection. We have been able to respond well to questions of accessibility and online participation. We have become aware of what it means to support vulnerable young people and to give them agency in decision-making. **Museum staff**

I've not really worked with many young people of this age group for an extended

period before so it has been a really interesting learning curve over the last two years... I've really enjoyed this kind of collaboration, understanding that young people can bring a totally different energy and perspective. I have felt my own confidence grow but at the same time felt humbled by the contributions and commitment that these young people have brought to the group and the sessions. It's only through that commitment that we have been able to achieve all the things we have. **Artist**

You can read the Transformation Stories in full in our Appendix document at www.culturehealthandwellbeing.org.uk/riro

Thank you!

We celebrate the inspiration, creativity and hard work of everyone involved with the RIRO project:

Bath

Project Lead: Louise Campion

Creative Facilitator: Susie Walker

Young Person Lead: Arthur Warburton

Bristol

Project Leads: Julie Matthews, creativeShift; and Mandy Briggs, John Wesley's New Room

Creative Facilitators: Jess Baum and  Amy Lloyd Jones

Young Person Lead: Carlo Hornilla

Radstock

Project Leads: Philippa Forsey and Sarah James

Creative Facilitator: Rosie Simmonds

Youth Connect South West: Carrie Ford

Weston-super-Mare

Project Lead: Fiona Matthews

Solidarity Suppers Lead: Casey Lloyd

Young Culture Makers Lead: Sophie Shepherd

Young Culture Makers Apprentice: Poppy

South Weston Activity Network:  John Wheatley, Kally Critchley and Dylan Barker

LOVES Cafe: Anna Southwell

Arts & Health South West

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Designer: Izzy Way



Communications: Alexis Butt

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Appendix

In our external appendix document, you will be able to find the following:

- Partner case studies
- Transformation stories
- RIRO logic model and evaluation plan
- Budget summary
- Evaluation tools
- Forms and templates
- Videos and photos
- External links

The appendix PDF can be found at :

www.culturehealthandwellbeing.org.uk/riro

For more information about the RIRO project, training workshops and consulting, contact Dr Julia Puebla Fortier and Deborah Miles at:

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