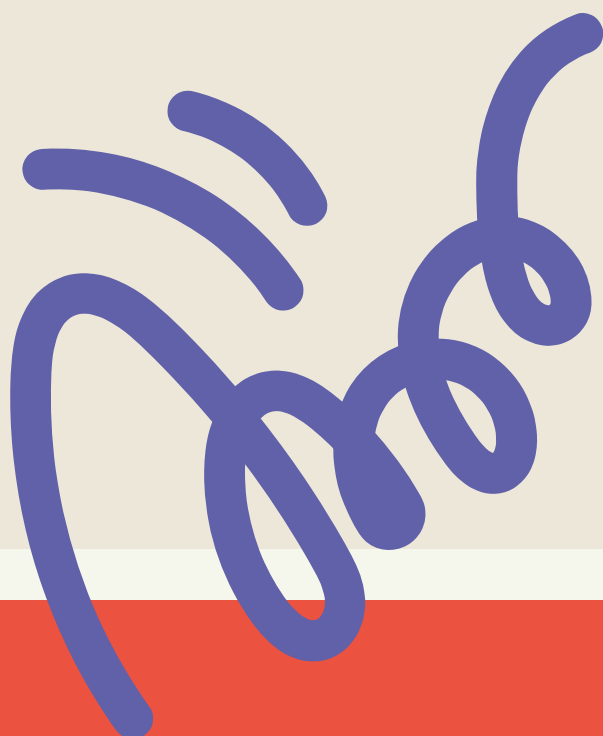


TUNEFUL CHATTER

FINAL REPORT

MARCH 2026



Executive Summary

Context and purpose

Tuneful Chatter was developed in Doncaster, South Yorkshire in response to concerns about the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on very young children. Local early years services reported increasing delays in speech, language and communication, reduced social confidence and lower readiness for group learning among children aged 0-5. Families also experienced isolation and reduced access to informal support networks and early learning environments.



The programme brought together cultural organisations, early years practitioners and the local authority to deliver regular creative sessions for children and their families. The intention was to support communication, interaction and confidence through shared creative activity, including dance, drama and music, while also strengthening parent and guardian capability and practitioners' creative expertise.

Alongside weekly sessions, the programme aimed to:

- Support children's development
- Build parent and guardian confidence in play and interaction
- Develop practitioner skills and collaboration with artists
- Share learning across the early years and cultural sectors

This evaluation examines the implementation, outcomes and wider implications of the programme between January 2023 and December 2025.



All photographs by James Mulkeen, darts.

Project Aims

Tuneful Chatter was developed around four core aims:

Aim 1: Supporting children

To support children aged 0–5 in Doncaster to develop confidence, language and social skills through arts activity, enabling greater participation in learning and early education.

Aim 2: Supporting practitioners

To develop early years practitioners' knowledge, skills and confidence to collaborate with professional artists and incorporate creative approaches into provision for children and families.

Aim 3: Supporting parents and guardians

To support parents/guardians to engage in creative activity with their children and feel confident continuing this at home.

Aim 4: Sharing learning

To disseminate learning from the programme and share effective practice with local, regional and national partners.



*“Creative,
engaging, fun,
inspiring.”*
Parent

The Delivery Model

Tuneful Chatter was delivered weekly across multiple locations in Doncaster, including Family Hubs, nurseries, schools and cultural venues. Sessions combined drama, music, movement, storytelling and imaginative play within a structured but flexible format.

Professional artists co-delivered sessions with early years practitioners. Children attended sessions in cultural venues and Family Hubs with a parent or guardian, who was encouraged to participate rather than observe. The programme emphasised accessibility, local delivery and low-pressure participation so that children could engage at their own pace.

In addition to family sessions, the programme included weekly sessions in schools and nurseries, working with full classes of children aged 0-5. Further to this, Tuneful Chatter included practitioner development, conferences, early years performances and dissemination activity.

Evaluation Approach

The evaluation used a mixed-methods approach combining quantitative and qualitative evidence from multiple groups, including children, parents/guardian, practitioners, teachers, artists and delivery partners. Evidence sources included:

- Developmental tracking using the Birth to 5 Matters framework
- Parent/guardian and practitioner surveys
- Observation and session feedback
- Interviews and case studies
- Participation and audience data

As the programme was not a controlled study, the evaluation cannot demonstrate causation. Instead, it identifies credible contribution where consistent patterns across independent evidence sources indicate the programme likely supported observed outcomes.

Key Findings

Children's development

Developmental tracking showed improvement across Communication and Language and Personal, Social and Emotional Development in line with the Birth to 5 Matters Framework. The proportion of children assessed as “on track” increased, while the proportion experiencing significant developmental delay reduced.

Qualitative evidence supported these findings. Practitioners reported increased participation, listening, turn-taking and social interaction. Children described enjoying imaginative play and valued being able to participate in their own way.

Adult behaviour as the mechanism of impact

The most consistent pattern across the evaluation is that the programme changed adult behaviour. Parents and guardians reported increased confidence communicating, playing and responding to their child, and described continuing activities at home. Practitioners incorporated interaction-focused creative approaches into everyday provision.

As a result, children experienced more opportunities for communication and shared attention beyond the sessions themselves. The programme therefore influenced development not only through direct participation, but through changing everyday adult-child interaction by empowering parents/guardians as their child's first teacher thus improving the child's home learning environment.

Parents/Guardians and families

Feedback from parents and guardians indicates that participation in Tuneful Chatter was associated with increased confidence in interacting with their child and a stronger understanding of the developmental importance of play. Parents and guardians described communicating more frequently with their children and incorporating shared activities such as songs, games and conversation into everyday routines at home. The sessions also operated as informal social support spaces. Families reported reduced isolation and the development of peer connections with other parents/guardians, which was particularly significant for those whose early parenting experience had been shaped by pandemic-related restrictions.

Practitioner learning

Professional learning occurred primarily through shared delivery rather than formal training. Practitioners observed artists working with children and applied the same approaches in their own settings. Creative approaches became embedded within routine provision rather than remaining external activities.

Artists also developed early years expertise, including around speech and language development, and continued applying these approaches in other contexts.

Accessibility and engagement

Engagement was strongest where provision was free, local and delivered in familiar settings. Outreach sessions reached families unlikely to attend cultural venues independently. Venue-based activity was more difficult to access where travel, childcare and routine pressures were barriers.

Cultural participation and dissemination

The programme introduced new families to cultural venues and early years performances, with many first-time visitors recorded. Dissemination activity also reached practitioners and partners through conferences, professional development and research engagement.

System and organisational impact

The programme influenced local service structures as well as individual participants. Cultural organisations became recognised partners in early years development, collaboration with the local authority strengthened and the work informed local strategic planning and partnership networks. This indicates the programme functioned as capacity-building within the early years system rather than solely as a time-limited project.

Overall Conclusions

The evaluation indicates that Tuneful Chatter substantially achieved its intended aims and generated change across children, families, practitioners and organisations.

The programme worked most effectively not as a conventional arts participation offer but as preventative early childhood support. By modelling interaction and building adult confidence, it changed everyday communication between adults and children, increasing opportunities for language use, social engagement and participation in learning. In turn, this supported the development of a more language-rich home learning environment, where adults felt more confident engaging children in conversation, play and storytelling, strengthening early language, social development and readiness for learning.

Importantly, impact extended beyond participants. Partnership working and local authority recognition demonstrate that the programme influenced how early years support was organised locally. Cultural organisations became part of the early intervention landscape and creative activity was incorporated into approaches to supporting children aged 0–5. Tuneful Chatter therefore operated as preventative support infrastructure: a regular, trusted community provision that strengthened relationships, built adult capability and supported child development before specialist intervention was required.

Implications

The findings suggest that effective early childhood support can be delivered through relationship-based, community-embedded provision rather than solely through targeted child intervention.

Key implications include:

- Parent/guardian participation is central to early development
- Workforce development is most effective when embedded in practice
- Accessibility and local delivery are critical for engagement
- Partnership between cultural and early years services expands support capacity
- Early years arts activity can function as preventative public service provision

Overall, Tuneful Chatter demonstrates that creative programmes can support early childhood development not only through arts participation, but by changing adult behaviour, strengthening relationships and embedding cultural organisations within early years support systems.

