

MARCH 2026



TUNEFUL CHATTER

FINAL REPORT



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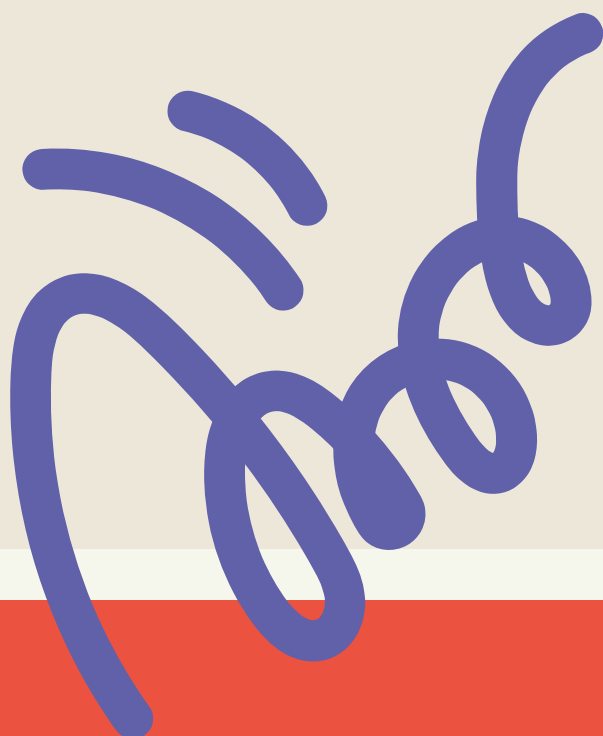
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Recommendations

TUNEFUL CHATTER

FINAL REPORT

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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.



*“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 support 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.



TUNEFUL CHATTER



Tuneful Chatter was an early years arts programme designed to support communication, language and social development in children aged 0–5 and their families. The programme ran from January 2023 to December 2025 and was delivered through a partnership between darts, Cast and the City of Doncaster Council Early Years Intervention and Prevention Service, supported by Arts Council England's Place Partnerships Programme and the City of Doncaster Council.

This report evaluates the delivery and outcomes of the programme over that three-year period.

Context and Rationale

Tuneful Chatter was developed in response to concerns about the developmental impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on very young children in Doncaster. Periods of social restriction reduced opportunities for peer interaction, attendance at early years settings and participation in community activity during a critical stage of development. Consultation with local early years practitioners in 2022 identified noticeable delays in vocabulary, listening and speaking skills, confidence and social interaction, alongside increased need relating to speech, language and communication and personal, social and emotional development. Practitioners also reported that some children had limited access to early learning environments, particularly where parents or guardians were not key workers during lockdowns, while families described heightened isolation and reduced access to informal support networks in early childhood.

These challenges were particularly significant within the local context. Doncaster includes areas of high deprivation, where families may already experience barriers to accessing early learning opportunities and community provision. The effects of the pandemic therefore appeared to compound pre-existing inequalities, increasing the risk of children beginning education without the communication, social and emotional skills associated with school readiness.

Tuneful Chatter was conceived as an early intervention response to these conditions. The programme brought together artists and early years practitioners to use structured creative activity - including music, movement and storytelling - to support children's communication, interaction and confidence, while also encouraging shared experiences between children and their parents and guardians. Alongside direct work with families, the programme sought to strengthen the early years workforce by building practitioners' confidence in creative approaches and embedding practices that could continue beyond the lifetime of the project.

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.

Introduction

Tuneful Chatter was designed for children aged 0–5 and their families in Doncaster who were considered to have been adversely affected by the pandemic. Delivery partners worked with local settings, including nurseries, schools and Family Hubs, to identify and engage those most likely to benefit from early support.

In particular, the programme prioritised families living in areas of linguistic and cultural diversity, including households where English was an additional language. It also focused on children whose needs did not meet statutory thresholds for targeted services but who were nonetheless experiencing developmental challenges. This included children who had limited access to nursery or early education during lockdown periods and therefore had fewer opportunities for peer interaction and early learning experiences.



Settings were encouraged to refer children showing delays in communication, listening, speaking and social development, as well as those awaiting assessment or support for speech, language or social communication needs who had not yet been able to access specialist services. The intention was to provide early, preventative support for children at risk of falling behind, particularly where difficulties had been identified but formal intervention was not yet available.

“I've been bringing my son to a Tuneful Chatter since he was 6 months old; it is an amazing, imaginative and creative session for children (and adults) of all ages to explore and develop. I love that activities are adapted so children of all ages and abilities can join in.” **Parent**

Delivery Model



Tuneful Chatter was delivered as a weekly, place-based programme across 16 settings in Doncaster. Designed as a universal offer for all children within the identified cohorts, sessions took place in accessible and familiar locations—including nurseries, schools, Family Hubs and cultural venues—helping ensure broad participation and minimise barriers to engagement. Alongside weekly sessions, a programme of performances created additional opportunities for families to access arts and culture locally and to engage with artists.

Delivery was collaborative. Professional artists worked alongside early years practitioners - including teachers, teaching assistants, nursery staff, and Family Hub staff - to plan and facilitate sessions. Practitioner development for both early years staff and artists was embedded within delivery through co-working, shared planning and ongoing informal learning.

Each session followed a recognisable structure, typically including greeting songs, warm-up movement, interactive storytelling, music and creative play, and a calm closing activity. Activities were designed to be repeated across weeks while allowing variation and child-led contribution. Children were able to participate actively, alongside an adult, or by observing, allowing them to engage at their own pace. The approach was intentionally low-pressure, supporting participation from children with differing confidence levels and developmental needs.

A defining feature of the model was co-participation. In family sessions, parents and guardians took part alongside their children rather than observing from the side, while practitioners and artists facilitated together within the same activity. Artists modelled responsive interaction - following children's ideas, responding to sounds and gestures, and encouraging turn-taking and shared attention - and adults were supported to try these approaches within the session. This meant the activity functioned both as a children's experience and as a live demonstration of interaction techniques.

Parents and guardians involvement therefore formed a core element of delivery. Adults were encouraged to repeat similar interactions at home, with the intention of strengthening communication and supporting the home learning environment.

Case study: A Tuneful Chatter session in practice

A Tuneful Chatter session took place in a nursery room that has been transformed into an imaginative play environment before the children arrive. On this occasion, artists created an “under the sea” theme using blue fabrics of different textures, soft sea creatures, puppets and sensory lighting, while gentle wave sounds played in the background.

As children entered, they were given time to explore freely. Some immediately picked up the sea creatures and began playing, while others chose to watch from the side or stay close to staff. The artists interacted with each child individually, using puppets, movement and sound to encourage engagement at each child’s own pace.

After exploration, the group gathered in a circle to meet the sea creatures together. The artists introduced shells and invited the children to listen, talk and copy sounds, prompting conversation and shared attention. Activities then developed into imaginative play: children “swam” through the fabric sea, splashed in waves created by the artists, and took turns hiding beneath the fabric. Laughter and movement were balanced with calmer moments, including listening to sounds and acting out a short fishing poem.

Music and repetition formed a key part of the session. The group sang greeting and action songs, and although some children initially watched, many joined in as the songs were repeated. The session ended with quieter sounds and a goodbye song, with children waving, making eye contact and saying farewell to the artists.

The session combined sensory play, music, storytelling and movement within a structured but flexible format. Children were able to participate in different ways - actively, alongside an adult, or by observing - allowing them to build confidence, communication and social interaction in a supportive environment.

The Evaluation

The evaluation assessed implementation and outcomes between January 2023 and December 2025, drawing on evidence from children, parents and guardians, early years practitioners, teachers, artists, trainee artists and delivery partners. Quantitative indicators (including developmental tracking and surveys) were combined with qualitative insights from observation, interviews and case studies to understand both whether change occurred and how it was experienced.

Data collection:

1. Surveys

Structured surveys were completed by parents/guardians and practitioners. These gathered self-reported information about:

- Confidence in communication and play
- Home learning behaviours
- Professional practice
- Perceived impact on children.

Some surveys captured change across time (for example, parental confidence measured after sustained attendance). As participation was voluntary and sample sizes varied, survey findings are interpreted as indicative rather than statistically representative.

2. Developmental tracking

A sample of participating children in school settings were monitored using practitioners' routine developmental assessment processes aligned to the national Birth to 5 Matters framework. Practitioners tracked progress in:

- Communication and Language (CLL)
- Personal, Social and Emotional Development (PSED).

3. Observation and session feedback

Practitioners and artists recorded observational feedback during delivery. This included children's participation, interaction, attention and confidence. Informal feedback from children was gathered through conversation and observation within sessions, appropriate to their age and communication stage.

4. Interviews and focus groups

Discussions with practitioners, artists and delivery partners explored:

- How sessions operated in practice
- Professional learning
- Barriers to participation
- Perceived outcomes.

5. Case studies

Individual case studies of participating families and children were used to illustrate how engagement developed over time and to contextualise the quantitative data.

6. Participation and audience data

Attendance records, audience booking information and dissemination engagement (e.g., conferences, performances and exhibitions) were analysed to understand reach and engagement beyond core sessions.

Analysis and Interpretation

Findings were analysed thematically across stakeholder groups and compared across evidence sources. Quantitative data (tracking and surveys) was interpreted alongside qualitative accounts (observations, case studies and interviews) to identify patterns and corroborating evidence. Patterns observed in one evidence source were compared with others; for example, developmental tracking was considered alongside practitioner observation and parent/guardian reports to assess whether reported behavioural and interactional changes were consistent across contexts.

The evaluation does not constitute an experimental or controlled study. As participants were not randomly assigned and developmental maturation occurs naturally in early childhood, direct causation cannot be established. Instead, the evaluation identifies credible contribution: where consistent patterns across multiple evidence sources suggest the programme likely supported observed outcomes. While the evaluation cannot demonstrate causation, convergence of independent data sources strengthens confidence in a contribution to change.

Limitations of the Evaluation

Several limitations should be acknowledged:

- Survey responses were voluntary and may reflect more engaged participants
- Sample sizes varied between groups
- Developmental progress may partially reflect natural maturation; however, children were continuously assessed against the developmental stage expected for their age at the point of assessment rather than their starting level.
- Longer-term outcomes beyond programme participation were not tracked.

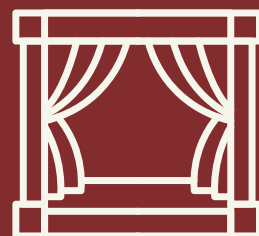
Accordingly, the findings are best understood as evidence of contribution rather than definitive causal proof. Although change cannot be attributed exclusively to participation, the convergence of independent quantitative and qualitative data sources provides a credible basis for inferring that the programme supported the observed outcomes.

PARTICIPANT NUMBERS CHILDREN



1980
participating
children

120
children at
weekly sessions
at Cast



679 children in
Family Hubs

425 children in
nurseries



486 children
in



4
schools



270
children at The
Point's weekly
sessions

Children's Feedback

"The nearly-end is my favourite [calming moment with music] because we get to lay down and sleep"

"Warming up is my favourite because we can do our own dances"



Feedback from participating children was gathered across a range of venues through informal conversation and observation during sessions.

Children most often talked about singing, dancing and imaginative play when describing their favourite parts of Tuneful Chatter. Many referred to being able to make choices within activities and participate in their own way.

Comments included "we can do our own moves", "I like using my imagination" and "I get to do my own singing", with several children identifying dancing as their favourite activity. Some children also mentioned the quieter parts of sessions, including the relaxation with music at the end.

"Can we come back again in one more sleep?"

"We go on a journey to find different things and I like using my imagination to do what I want"

"I like using my imagination"

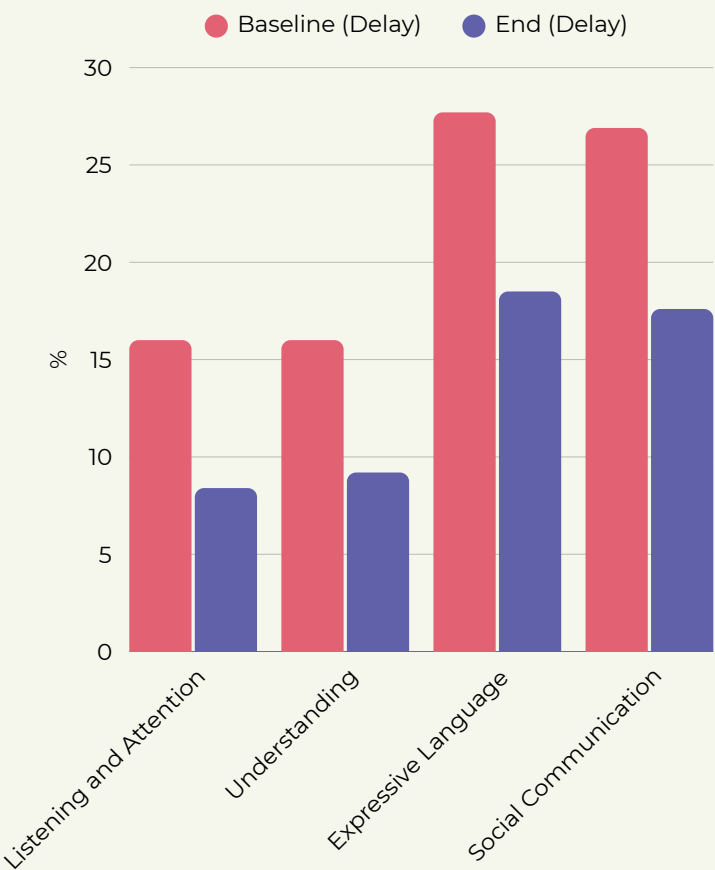
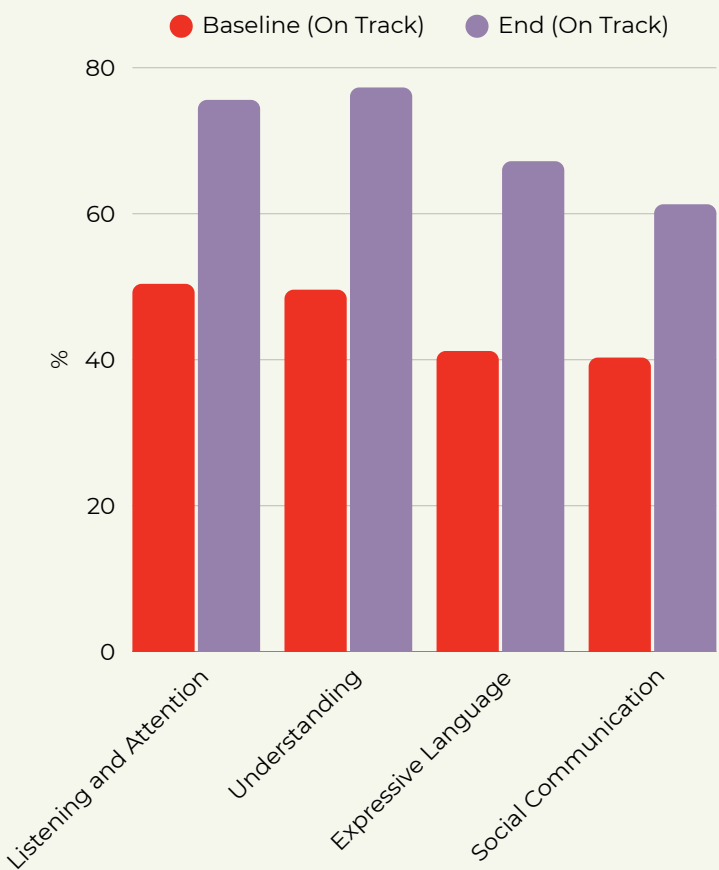
Impact on Children: Children’s Developmental Tracking

A small cohort of participating children in school and private nursery settings were monitored using the Birth to 5 Matters framework. Development was tracked over the course of participation in two areas: Communication and Language (CLL) and Personal, Social and Emotional Development (PSED).

Communication and Language (CLL)

At baseline, approximately 40–50% of children were assessed as “on track” across the four communication and language domains. By the end of participation, higher proportions of children were assessed as on track across all areas.

Domain	Baseline (On Track)	End (On Track)
Listening and Attention	50.40%	75.60%
Understanding	49.60%	77.30%
Expressive Language	41.20%	67.20%
Social Communication	40.30%	61.30%



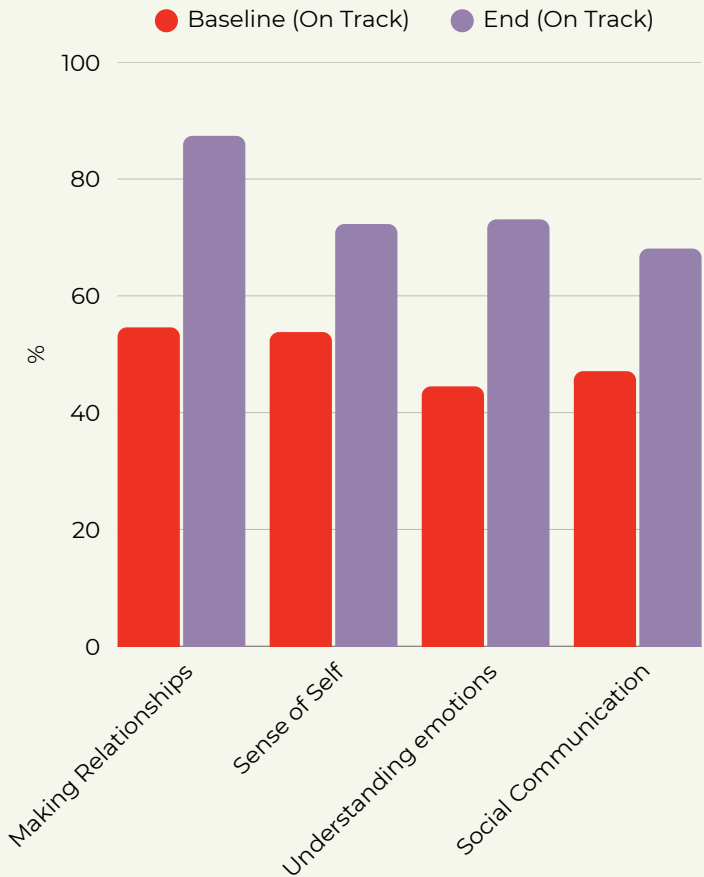
Additional tracking examined the proportion of children assessed as having a two-stage developmental delay. The percentage reduced across all communication domains.

Domain	Baseline (Delay)	End (Delay)
Listening and Attention	16%	8.40%
Understanding	16%	9.20%
Expressive Language	27.70%	18.50%
Social Communication	26.90%	17.60%

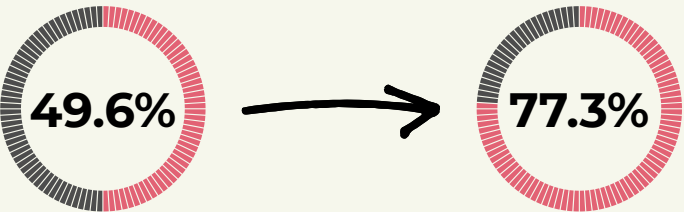
Personal, Social and Emotional Development (PSED)

At baseline, approximately 44–55% of children were assessed as on track across PSED domains. By the end of participation, a higher proportion of children were assessed as on track.

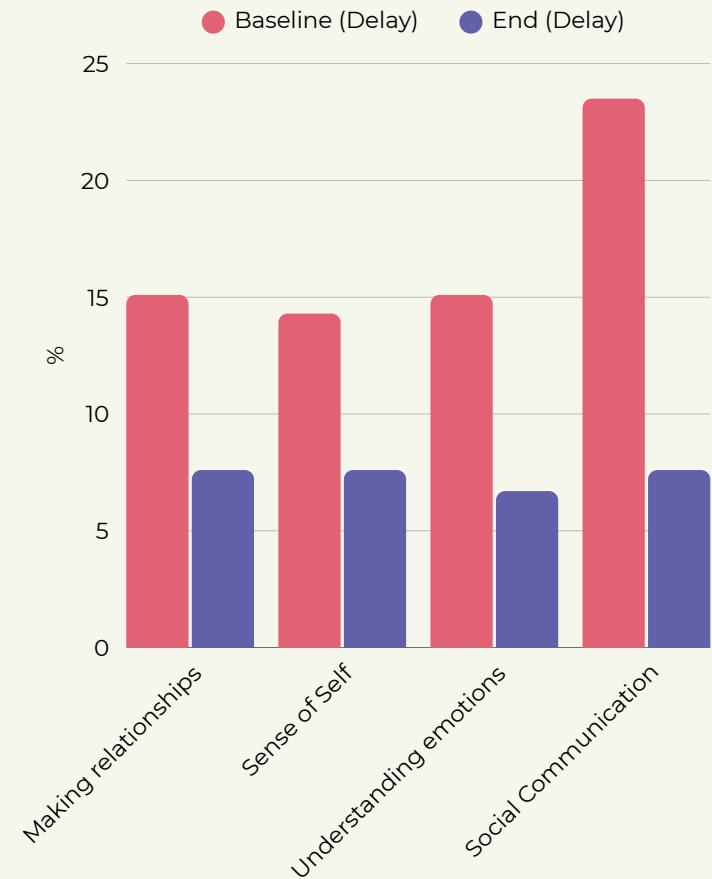
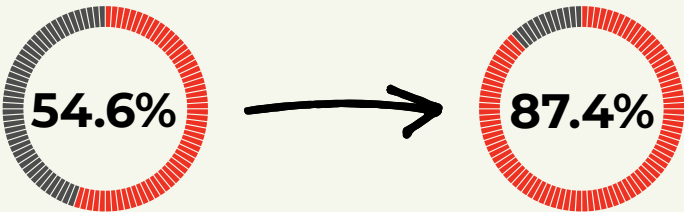
Domain	Baseline (On Track)	End (On Track)
Making Relationships	54.60%	87.40%
Sense of Self	53.80%	72.30%
Understanding Emotions	44.50%	73.10%
Social Communication	47.10%	68.10%



‘Communication and language understanding’ improvement



‘Making Relationships’ improvement



Tracking of two-stage developmental delay showed reductions across all domains.

Domain	Baseline (Delay)	End (Delay)
Making Relationships	15.10%	7.60%
Sense of Self	14.30%	7.60%
Understanding Emotions	15.10%	6.70%
Social Communication	23.50%	7.60%

Supporting children: Choice, imagination and regulation

The findings suggest that the significance of Tuneful Chatter for children lies less in exposure to arts activity itself and more in the developmental conditions the sessions created. Children's feedback indicates that they experienced the sessions as spaces in which they could act, choose and contribute, rather than simply follow instruction. Their emphasis on "doing our own moves", "own singing" and imaginative participation points to perceived agency. In early childhood, agency is closely linked to engagement and sustained attention; when children can influence an activity, they are more likely to remain involved, communicate and interact. The programme therefore appears to have functioned as an environment that encouraged active participation rather than passive attendance.

The value children placed on both energetic and calming elements is also instructive. Enjoyment of movement, song and imaginative play alongside appreciation of quiet closing moments suggests that sessions supported not only expression but regulation. This balance is important in early development: participation in group learning requires children to manage attention, transition between activities and tolerate shared environments. The structure of Tuneful Chatter - predictable routines combined with flexible participation - appears to have created conditions in which children could gradually practise these skills in a low-pressure context. The implication is that creative activity may have been effective not because of its artistic content alone, but because it offered repeated opportunities for shared attention, turn-taking and emotional regulation.



Developmental tracking in schools provides tentative support for this interpretation. Improvements across communication and language domains were particularly marked in listening, attention and understanding. These are receptive skills that underpin participation in early learning rather than isolated speech outcomes. The pattern suggests children were becoming more able to attend to others, follow shared activity and respond within interaction — capacities that are consistent with a participatory group environment. Gains in expressive language and social communication further indicate that children were not only hearing and processing language but increasingly using it purposefully with others.

The reduction in the proportion of children experiencing more substantial delay is notable. Progress occurred not only among those close to age expectations but also among children with higher levels of need, suggesting that the environment supported gradual entry into participation. A plausible explanation is that the option to observe, join gradually and remain alongside a familiar adult reduced performance pressure and enabled repeated attempts at interaction. Over time, this may have increased confidence and willingness to communicate, which in turn provided more opportunities for language development.

This approach was further strengthened through the inclusion of smaller nurture group sessions for children who found larger group environments overwhelming or difficult to access. These sessions provided a calmer setting in which children could explore the same activities and props at their own pace, supported by familiar adults. This created additional opportunities for repetition, sensory engagement and early interaction, without the demands of a full group context. In many cases, this acted as a bridge into wider participation, with children gradually building confidence and later joining full class sessions. Together, these layered approaches supported more inclusive engagement and enabled children with higher levels of need to participate in ways that were responsive to their individual starting points.

A similar pattern emerges in personal, social and emotional development. The largest improvements were in making relationships and social communication, indicating greater comfort engaging with peers and adults. These are not specialist therapeutic outcomes but indicators of readiness to participate in group settings. The findings therefore suggest that the programme supported children's capacity to be part of a shared social environment. The weaker change in emotional understanding is also informative: emotional literacy is typically slower to develop and may require more explicit or longer-term support, indicating the limits of what a weekly participatory programme alone can achieve.



Taken together, the evidence points to a mechanism of change based on participation rather than instruction. The sessions provided repeated, supported opportunities for interaction, attention and shared activity. Improvements in communication and social engagement are therefore plausibly understood as outcomes of children having more frequent and successful experiences of interacting with others. While maturation will account for some developmental progress, the alignment between children's experience of agency, the structure of delivery and improvements in interaction-related domains suggests the programme likely contributed to strengthening the foundations of early learning readiness.

In this sense, Tuneful Chatter appears to have operated less as a discrete arts intervention and more as a structured social environment for early development. Creative activity functioned as the medium through which children practised communication, participation and regulation, supporting movement toward age-appropriate developmental functioning even though causation cannot be definitively established.

PARENT AND GUARDIAN FEEDBACK



83%

**rated sessions
as 'excellent'***



93%

**reported gaining
ideas for musical and creative
ideas to use at home.**

90%

**said they will continue
to engage with other
creative offers with
their children in and
around Doncaster.**

Feedback from parents and guardians was collected through a voluntary self-report survey.

Parents/Guardians consistently described increased confidence in how they interacted with their child. Many spoke about feeling more able to play, communicate and connect through music, play and everyday moments, including using “serve-and-return” interactions to support communication.

These changes were reflected in the home environment, with parents/guardians describing a shift towards more playful, creative and interactive family routines. They also reported gaining practical ideas for musical and creative activities that could be easily incorporated into daily life.

*“Different each
week, let's
children lead”*

Parent

*“The artists are all absolutely fabulous! They are so
knowledgeable, creative and engaging. The artists
are also incredibly kind and understanding and love
to see the children grow on their learning journey.”*

Parent

*Based on 86 responses

93%

agreed or strongly agreed that they felt more confident playing with their child, communicating through music, play and everyday interactions, and using 'serve-and-return' communication,



There was also evidence of growing social connection between families. Parents/guardians described feeling more connected to others, with an increased sense of community and shared experience emerging through the programme.



Alongside this, parents/guardians expressed a stronger understanding of the value of play and musical interaction in supporting their child's development, often recognising these as important tools for learning rather than simply leisure activities.

86%



agreed or strongly agreed that their home felt more playful and creative after attending sessions

79%

agreed or strongly agreed that they felt more connected to other families

"All of the Tuneful Chatter artists are compassionate, non-judgemental, enthusiastic and want the best for your child."

Parent

"Each session is wonderfully created and builds on from the following session. This is fantastic for children as the structure follows a brilliant routine which really helps the children grow confidence" **Parent**

Case study: A mother's reflections on their child's experience

"For us, the biggest thing that has helped with that, for Flynn, is the fact that staff have been really understanding that he is developing a little differently to others, and they're giving him that space... It has just been really welcoming and lovely." Helena

Helena first brought her son Flynn to Tuneful Chatter aged three, after becoming concerned about changes in his communication and increasing shyness around other children. Flynn experienced communication difficulties and sensory sensitivities and was later referred for a developmental assessment.

At first, Flynn found the sessions challenging and was hesitant to interact. Over time, however, he began to look forward to attending. Helena described the sessions as offering gentle exposure to situations he usually found difficult, allowing him to build confidence without pressure. The artists supported him to take part at his own pace, giving him space to step away when overwhelmed and re-join when ready. Helena felt this helped him develop resilience and become more comfortable around others.

She noticed Flynn forming positive relationships with the artists and gradually engaging in shared activities. Music, rhyme and clear modelling of communication were particularly helpful. Flynn had previously used very little language and had gone through a period of not speaking, but Helena reported that he began using more spontaneous language and felt comfortable talking during sessions and afterwards.

Helena felt the participant-led style and welcoming environment were key, as Flynn could observe, copy and explore imaginative play in ways that suited him. Overall, she believed Tuneful Chatter contributed to his communication, confidence and readiness for school, noting that he was leaving sessions with new words and greater willingness to interact with others.

Supporting parents and guardians: confidence, participation and home learning

Parental feedback points to the importance of the relational environment created by Tuneful Chatter. Responses consistently focused less on individual activities and more on how families felt within the sessions. The emphasis parents and guardians placed on warmth, personal recognition and non-judgemental facilitation suggests that engagement was shaped as much by emotional safety as by programme content. For many adults, particularly those new to parenting or lacking confidence in group settings, reassurance about how they and their child would be received appeared to be a prerequisite for participation. The welcoming atmosphere therefore operated as an enabling condition: before developmental or learning outcomes could occur, families first needed to feel comfortable attending and returning.



Routine and predictability supported this process. Regular sessions and consistent structures reduced uncertainty for both adults and children, allowing attendance to become habitual rather than effortful. When participation became part of weekly family life, opportunities for repeated shared activity increased. This continuity matters because the programme's effects were unlikely to depend solely on what happened during sessions, but on what those sessions enabled to happen between them.

The reported increase in parental confidence is therefore best understood as behavioural change rather than simply positive perception. The sessions did not provide formal parenting instruction; instead, they modelled interaction in practice. By observing artists

responding to children's cues, following their lead and sustaining back-and-forth communication, parents and guardians practised these approaches directly with their own child. Over time, adults appeared to shift from viewing themselves as observers of an activity to active participants in their child's development.

This distinction is central to understanding the programme's impact. Most early learning takes place in everyday interaction rather than organised provision. When parents and guardians felt more able to initiate play, conversation and shared attention, children experienced more frequent opportunities for

communication and social exchange. The programme therefore did not only affect behaviour within sessions; it altered patterns of adult–child interaction in daily life. The central pattern emerging across the data is that the programme changed adult behaviour, which in turn increased children’s opportunities to practise communication and interaction.

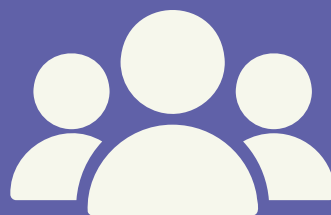
Changes reported within the home environment reinforce this interpretation. When parents and guardians used songs, games and communication strategies independently, the home effectively became an extension of the intervention. This was further supported by the provision of resources, including accessible props, which enabled families to continue activities in familiar ways and reduced barriers to engagement at home. A weekly session offers limited direct contact time, but repeated interactions at home multiply developmental opportunities. Increased understanding of the value of play appears particularly significant: behaviour change in early childhood depends as much on adult beliefs as on skills. Once parents/guardians recognised play and communication as developmentally meaningful, they were more likely to prioritise them in everyday routines. In this way, the programme supported both competence and motivation, sustaining behaviour beyond the sessions themselves.

The social dimension of participation also contributed to this process. Connections formed between families suggest the sessions functioned as a social support setting as well as a learning environment. Reduced isolation and increased familiarity with group settings may have strengthened parental confidence more broadly, including confidence to communicate, attend activities and engage with services. In a post-pandemic context, where many parents experienced limited early peer contact, this social reassurance likely reinforced continued participation and the adoption of interaction behaviours.

Patterns of engagement further indicate that accessibility shaped outcomes. Provision delivered through Family Hubs and darts activity was fully funded, helping to lower the threshold for attendance, while activity at Cast, although subsidised, required a parent or guardian contribution and therefore presented a different level of access for some families. Alongside this, local and familiar settings supported engagement, and inclusive delivery reduced fear of judgement about children’s behaviour. However, the persistence of transport, time and venue-related barriers suggests that confidence developed most strongly within trusted environments. Participation depended on relationships and proximity as much as interest, reinforcing the importance of embedded community delivery.

Taken together, the evidence suggests the programme’s primary impact on parents and guardians was behavioural rather than purely experiential. The sessions did not simply provide an activity for children; they changed how adults interacted with their children in everyday life. Increased confidence, greater understanding of play and continued use of activities at home indicate a shift in parenting practice. The developmental changes observed in children are therefore plausibly linked not only to participation in the sessions themselves, but to the increased frequency and quality of communication occurring outside them. Tuneful Chatter functioned simultaneously as a child activity, a parent/guardian learning experience and a community support space, with its effectiveness arising from modelling interaction and enabling sustained adult–child engagement rather than from one-off attendance.

PARTICIPANT NUMBERS PRACTITIONERS



Practitioner Feedback

Evaluation data was collected from a broad range of practitioners and delivery partners, including family hub practitioners, nursery practitioners, teachers, local authority staff, artists, trainee artists and other creative professionals.

Early-years practitioners

Overall satisfaction among practitioners was consistently high, with sessions widely described as engaging, enjoyable and valuable. Practitioners frequently highlighted children's active participation and positive group interaction, noting that children looked forward to sessions and that those with additional needs were meaningfully included and engaged.

Feedback also indicated shifts in professional practice. Practitioners described increased confidence in using arts-based approaches and a broader use of creative activities within their settings. Many reported integrating creativity more fully across different areas of learning, alongside growing confidence in using storytelling as a tool for communication and engagement.

In practice, this was reflected in changes to delivery approaches, including the use of repetition, storytelling through song, opportunities for free exploration of instruments, and adapting sessions in response to children's interests. Practitioners also described making greater use of creative play and communication strategies in their everyday work. Learning was most commonly attributed to observing artists in practice, alongside opportunities for co-delivery and participation in development sessions.

Artists and Trainee Artists

Artists described the programme as providing valuable opportunities for mentoring, observation and supported delivery, which helped them develop facilitation skills for working with very young children. Many reported enjoying their involvement and noted that the approaches learned were transferable to other contexts, including work with babies, families and community groups. Participation also led to further employment opportunities and collaboration with partner organisations.

70%

of early-years practitioners rated sessions as excellent. The remaining

30%

rated them as great

80%

of early-years practitioners reported increased confidence using the arts

80%

of early-years practitioners reported increased confidence in storytelling

In addition, seven trainee artists developed through the programme. They initially observed and supported sessions before leading activities with guidance, and reported increased confidence in working with both early years practitioners and young children. The trainees highlighted the experience as an important step in their professional development, providing practical skills and useful career experience while strengthening South Yorkshire's artist workforce.

Teachers and SENCOs

Teachers reported observing sessions and adapting classroom approaches. Reported adaptations included using music and storytelling, incorporating interactive group work, adjusting classroom routines and using strategies to support communication and participation.

"Beyond the project, we will be continuing Tuneful Chatter each week in school because we've seen how important it is."

Teacher

"Without a doubt, the most useful part of the traineeship was the opportunity to work alongside a range of different artists, each with their own speciality and skillset. Every artist was so generous in sharing their time, ideas and experience. They all made me feel comfortable within the sessions; involved in the planning and decision-making; and emboldened to plan and deliver activities. They actively encouraged me to work within my own skillset (drama, music and poetry), and take risks and try activities in areas with which I was less comfortable (dance)."

Artist



Case study: Teacher and SENCO experience

Natalie is an early years teacher and Special Educational Needs Coordinator (SENCO) at Marshland Primary School in Moorends, Doncaster. The small school serves a community facing significant socio-economic challenges, and Natalie reports that many children arrive with delayed speech, limited confidence and reduced social interaction, particularly following the pandemic. After hearing about Tuneful Chatter, she felt it would be a “perfect opportunity” to support both communication and personal, social and emotional development.

Working with the artists quickly demonstrated an impact. Natalie observed noticeable improvements in engagement and speech, describing these as two of the school’s most persistent challenges. Children became more confident joining activities, listening to one another and taking turns. Over time she saw pupils contribute more readily to class discussions, show empathy towards classmates and engage more comfortably with adult-led learning. She notes that children now better understand what effective listening looks like and that turn-taking has become embedded within classroom routines.

The programme also influenced Natalie’s professional practice. Observing sessions provided practical ideas for engaging children through music, storytelling and movement, and she began adapting her own teaching approaches. Rather than simply delivering content, she used creative interaction to build confidence first and language development afterwards. She describes rediscovering creativity in her teaching, explaining that Tuneful Chatter “brought back the spark” that first motivated her to enter the profession.

For Natalie, the value of the programme extended beyond individual sessions. It offered a way to observe children’s developmental responses directly and adjust next steps accordingly. She now advocates for the approach within her school, seeing Tuneful Chatter not as enrichment but as an effective strategy for supporting early learning readiness and participation.

Practitioners: professional learning, practice change and collaboration

The practitioner evidence suggests that Tuneful Chatter functioned not only as a programme for children and families but as an embedded workforce development model. Rather than learning primarily through formal training, practitioners appear to have developed skills through witnessing change in children and testing approaches within their own settings. Observing children's responses during sessions seems to have been a key mechanism: when staff saw familiar children become more engaged, calmer or more socially participative, the techniques being demonstrated gained credibility. In effect, developmental change in children acted as practical proof of concept for adults.

This is important because professional learning in early years settings often depends on perceived relevance. Training delivered away from practice can be difficult to translate into everyday provision, whereas observing approaches working with children practitioners already knew appeared to make learning meaningful and transferable. The accounts of children moving from distress to participation, or from observation to interaction, therefore did more than illustrate outcomes; they supported practitioner confidence in trying similar approaches themselves.

The structure of delivery helps explain this shift. The programme relied on co-delivery and observation rather than classroom-style instruction. Artists modelled pacing, repetition, turn-taking and responsive interaction during real sessions, allowing practitioners to see how techniques operated moment by moment. This type of "live modelling" enabled practitioners to learn concrete strategies rather than abstract principles. The example of offering children choices during a turn-taking activity illustrates how small adjustments in interaction could change participation. What practitioners appeared to acquire was not simply knowledge about creativity, but practical methods of engagement they could immediately replicate.

Learning embedded within routine working practice also addressed structural barriers within the early years workforce. Staff often struggle to attend external training due to limited cover and workload pressures. Because professional development occurred within normal sessions, practitioners were able to observe, practise and reflect without leaving their workplace. The findings therefore suggest that the accessibility of professional learning was as important as its content.

Reported changes in confidence and behaviour indicate that this learning translated into everyday practice. The approaches practitioners adopted - such as repetition, rhythm, responsive communication and imaginative play - were integrated into routine provision rather than confined to the programme. This suggests transfer rather than dependency: staff were not reliant on visiting artists to deliver activity but began to adapt their own interactions. The significance lies less in the number of creative activities delivered and more in how practitioners interacted with children, particularly through communication-focused engagement and flexible facilitation.

Collaboration appears to have been central to this process. Practitioners described working with artists as a shared activity rather than an external workshop. Continuous communication during sessions allowed both groups to adjust delivery together. This altered the typical relationship between cultural and educational professionals: instead of artists providing enrichment alongside existing provision, a form of co-practice developed. Practitioners gained creative facilitation strategies, while artists developed understanding of early childhood development, behaviour and educational priorities. The programme therefore operated as reciprocal learning rather than one-directional training.



Evidence from teachers suggests this learning extended into formal education settings. Observing how children responded to music, movement and storytelling led teachers and nursery practitioners to reconsider how they structured group work, attention and participation in the classroom. The programme consequently influenced pedagogy as well as enrichment. Rather than being treated as an additional activity, elements of the approach were incorporated into everyday teaching practice, particularly in areas related to listening, turn-taking and communication.

Several enabling conditions can be inferred. Learning was effective because it was situated in practice, immediately applicable and sustained over time. Regular sessions allowed practitioners to build confidence gradually and observe the impact of small changes in interaction. Collaborative relationships also appear significant: mutual respect between artists and staff supported experimentation and reduced fear of getting activities “wrong”.

*I can honestly say that the Tuneful Chatter traineeship was the one of the most valuable training experiences I've had and I feel very lucky to have been a part of it. My knowledge of Early Years, and my confidence in delivering across disciplines and working with parents and carers, has grown exponentially and I'm very grateful to continue to be involved with such an important project. **Artist***

However, the findings also highlight structural limitations. Workforce capacity continued to restrict participation in formal CPD and limited time for reflection. Although embedding learning into delivery mitigated these pressures, it did not remove them entirely. This suggests that practitioner willingness was not the primary barrier to sustaining change; rather, ongoing implementation depends on time and staffing capacity within the early years sector.

Overall, the practitioner evidence indicates that Tuneful Chatter's impact lay in changing practice rather than simply increasing knowledge. By combining observation, co-delivery and immediate application, the programme created a form of professional development integrated into service delivery. The approach appears particularly effective for practitioners without specialist arts training and for artists developing early years expertise, while also strengthening collaboration between cultural and education sectors.

Taken together, the evidence suggests that the programme's impact on practitioners was primarily a change in practice rather than simply an increase in knowledge. Practitioners moved from observing creative facilitation to incorporating it into everyday provision. The mechanism appears to have been experiential learning: observing artists, trying approaches immediately and witnessing children's responses.



The programme therefore functioned as workforce development embedded within service delivery. It supported educators without prior creative training and early-career artists developing early years practice, while also strengthening collaboration between cultural and education sectors. However, sustained implementation remains dependent on ongoing capacity within the early years workforce, indicating that structural constraints - rather than willingness - are the main limit on longer-term continuation.

"A golden moment for me was in the turn taking activity where each child and grown up had to travel across the bridge. I asked each child what they would like to do; offering the options of going over the bridge or under it worked really well! It empowered the children to make a decision, whilst also reassuring the children if they were feeling a little apprehensive. Each child loved it, and as a result after the first go they wanted to keep going!" **Early Years Practitioner**

Case study: Nursery practitioner experience

Bella is a lead practitioner at Fledglings Nursery in Dunscroft, North Doncaster, an enhanced provision supporting children aged six months to five years, including those who are neurodivergent. Located in an area of high deprivation, the nursery frequently works with children experiencing communication, language and personal, social and emotional difficulties. Tuneful Chatter was introduced to support these areas of development.

She recalls that children were initially unsure but quickly became engaged. Staff enthusiasm helped children gain confidence, and over time sessions became part of the weekly routine. Even very young children began anticipating the sessions, asking whether the artists were coming and recalling details from previous weeks. Bella was particularly struck by children remembering specific props and activities and talking about them outside the sessions.

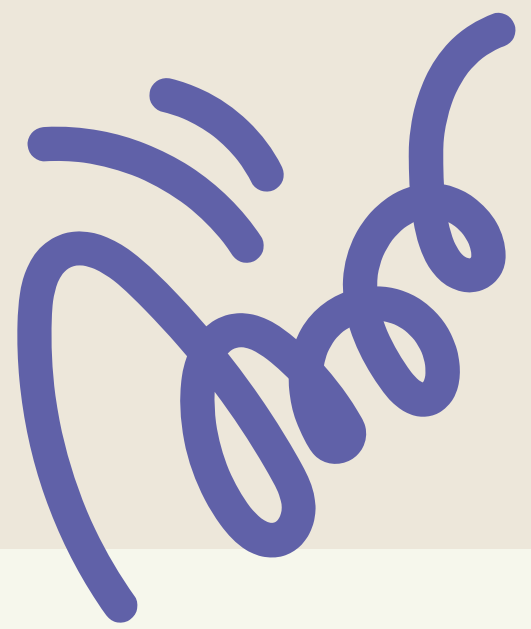
She observed notable developmental changes. One non-verbal neurodivergent child, previously sensitive to noise and unable to sit still for long, began adjusting his routine so he could attend sessions and showed excitement in anticipation. He gradually tolerated and then actively sought sensory sound experiences, engaging with musical resources and remaining focused for extended periods.

The programme also influenced Bella's own practice. Observing artists working with symbolic and imaginative play encouraged her to try new approaches, such as using scarves as pretend food. She reported that children responded well and demonstrated levels of conceptual play she had not previously expected from such young children.

Parents noticed changes too. One parent regularly repeated activities at home and discussed sessions weekly with their child, reinforcing engagement beyond the nursery setting.

For Bella, Tuneful Chatter provided more than an activity: it offered practical ideas, confidence and a creative framework she continues to embed in everyday nursery provision.

SHARING LEARNING



The programme supported engagement with cultural activity beyond weekly sessions. Approximately 5,100 people attended exhibitions and early years performances, including around 3,000 exhibition visitors at The Point and 2,100 performance attendees at Cast. Two conferences were attended by 282 professionals, and CPD activity was delivered with artists and practitioners. Programme learning also contributed to publications and ongoing research partnerships.

Audience data from performances at Cast indicated attendance primarily from Doncaster postcode areas (DN1–DN12), with a notable proportion of bookers attending for the first time. Booking patterns showed that many audiences planned in advance, with most tickets purchased online and accessed via e-ticketing. Attendance was highest for Saturday morning and festive performances, and some productions also attracted regional audiences from outside the borough.

Interpreting the wider impact

The dissemination strand indicates that Tuneful Chatter functioned as more than a locally delivered participation programme. The pattern of engagement suggests it operated as a pathway model: beginning with accessible, relationship-based community provision and gradually supporting families into wider cultural participation and professional networks. The significance of the dissemination findings therefore lies not simply in the numbers reached, but in what they reveal about how engagement with arts and culture develops in early childhood contexts.

Participation appears to depend on familiarity and confidence built over time. The programme created an initial, low-pressure point of entry within trusted environments such as Family Hubs and nurseries, and only then introduced families to formal venues. The presence of first-time attenders indicates that the activity reached people who were not already part of existing cultural audiences. In this sense, the programme did not simply increase attendance; it altered who felt that cultural spaces were accessible to them.

The local nature of attendance is also informative. Engagement was strongest among families living near venues and within Doncaster communities, suggesting that early years cultural participation is shaped by proximity and routine rather than broad regional draw. However, the occasional regional attendance demonstrates that once confidence and interest were established, early years programming could extend beyond immediate neighbourhoods. This implies that audience development may begin locally but has potential to expand when barriers of familiarity and perceived suitability are removed.

Booking behaviour for activities at Cast provides further insight into the conditions required for participation. While performances were typically booked in advance, Hello Baby sessions were more likely to see families booking on the day, with some advance booking. This variation suggests that different types of activity align with different patterns of planning, with more informal, drop-in style experiences fitting more flexibly around family routines. Preference for morning and weekend activity further indicates that attendance is shaped by childcare logistics and daily rhythms. Cultural engagement in early childhood therefore depends less on promotional activity and more on predictability and practical fit with everyday life. While digital booking was widely used, suggesting technological access was not a primary barrier, psychological and practical factors - such as confidence, routine and perceived welcome - appear to play a more significant role in enabling participation.



Taken together, these findings suggest that early years arts activity can act as an entry point into wider cultural participation when it is sequenced appropriately. Outreach and venue-based provision should not be seen as competing approaches. Rather, community-based delivery appears to prepare families for later engagement with formal cultural institutions. Without this preparatory stage, many families would likely not attend venues at all. The dissemination activity therefore represents behavioural change, where families incorporated cultural activity into their routines rather than trying it once.

The professional dissemination activity points to a second type of impact: knowledge transfer. Conferences, CPD and publications positioned the programme as a model of practice rather than a standalone project. This suggests the programme contributed to capacity-building beyond its immediate delivery network. Whereas participating practitioners learned through co-delivery, the dissemination strand aimed to enable replication by sharing methods with external organisations and professionals. The inclusion of the work within wider research and policy conversations indicates that the programme influenced not only local practice but also broader thinking about early years provision, culture and wellbeing.

The dissemination findings therefore demonstrate three interconnected forms of reach: direct participation (families attending sessions), extended participation (families attending venues) and systemic influence (professionals and organisations adopting learning). Importantly, these forms of reach depend on one another. Cultural venue attendance appears to have relied on prior relationship-building in community settings, and professional learning depended on demonstrated outcomes in practice.



There are also limits to what dissemination achieved. Engagement with venues remained more challenging than attendance at local sessions, indicating that structural barriers such as travel, routine and perceptions of appropriateness for babies and toddlers were not fully removed. This suggests that dissemination through performances alone would not replicate the same level of engagement without continued community-embedded activity. In other words, the cultural participation outcomes appear contingent on the relational infrastructure created by the weekly programme.

Overall, the dissemination evidence suggests that Tuneful Chatter acted as a bridge between community services, cultural organisations and professional practice. Its impact extended beyond immediate participants by introducing new audiences to cultural venues, supporting practitioner learning and contributing to wider sector knowledge. The findings imply that early years arts provision is most effective as a staged engagement process — beginning with trusted, accessible participation and progressing gradually toward independent cultural involvement — rather than as a single cultural offer delivered in isolation.

Case study: Trainee artist development

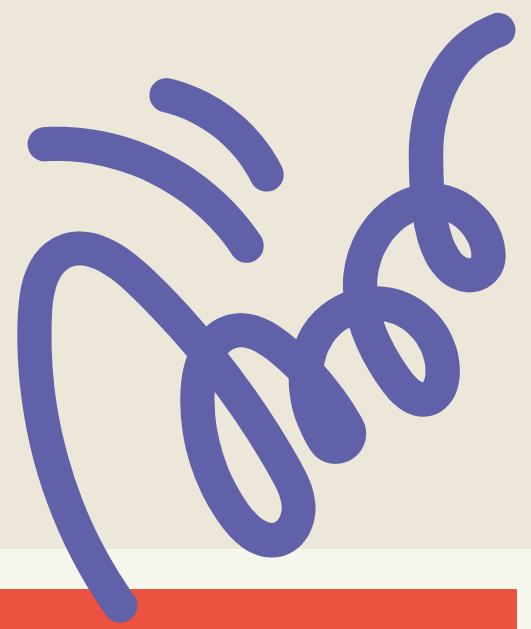
Grace joined the Tuneful Chatter traineeship at an early stage in her career, having had limited previous access to professional arts opportunities. She describes the placement as a pivotal point in her development, providing both practical experience and confidence at a time when self-doubt was common. The structure of the traineeship - observing experienced practitioners, gradually supporting delivery and eventually leading sessions - created a supportive environment in which she could experiment, reflect and refine her practice. She particularly valued being able to “try things out” without fear of failure, which encouraged a more playful and exploratory approach to facilitation.

Through working with very young children and their families, Grace developed skills in pacing, responsiveness and communication. She learned to use storytelling, music and imaginative play to engage participants and support interaction. These approaches became transferable beyond early years contexts: since completing the traineeship she has worked with babies, children, teenagers and adults using the same core principles. She reported increased professional confidence, describing a shift from questioning her ability to recognising herself as an artist capable of leading sessions independently.

The traineeship also broadened her professional opportunities. After building relationships with partner organisations, Grace became part of Cast’s freelance facilitation team and gained a funded part-time role in a community centre in Bradford, an area with low levels of arts engagement. There, she now delivers sessions for families and baby groups, applying the storytelling and imaginative techniques learned through Tuneful Chatter to encourage play and engagement with literature. Staff at the centre reported that her work held the attention of both children and adults and introduced new creative approaches into their provision.

For Grace, the programme offered more than training: it provided networks, mentoring and practical experience that supported sustained employment and enabled her to carry the programme’s methods into new communities.

DELIVERY IN PRACTICE



Working Together, Embedding Change

Partnership working was central to the delivery model and a significant factor in both reach and quality. The programme was delivered through collaboration between cultural organisations, the local authority and early years services, supported by a shared understanding of purpose and complementary expertise. As Alison Tomes, Head of Early Intervention and Prevention at the City of Doncaster Council, noted, ***“Tuneful Chatter is a truly wonderful example of partnership – built on mutual respect for each other’s expertise, shared investment, and creative innovation – all leading to better outcomes for children and families.”***

The partnership brought together artists and early years practitioners, including teachers, teaching assistants, nursery leads, health professionals and Family Hub staff. Delivery took place across multiple settings - Family Hubs, schools, nurseries, cultural venues and community activities - enabling sustained relationships with families and repeated contact over time. Engagement extended beyond weekly sessions to after-school activity, early years performances and supported access to Cast’s youth theatre through bursaries.

However, the significance of the partnership extended beyond programme delivery. Evidence indicates that Tuneful Chatter became embedded within local service structures rather than operating as a standalone project. Cast and darts are now recognised by the local authority as key partners in early years development, with creative provision incorporated into local approaches to supporting children aged 0–5. The programme is referenced within the borough’s Culture Strategy as an example of effective practice, and its methods are informing future work with the South Yorkshire Music Hub.

In addition, the collaboration directly contributed to the establishment of new funded infrastructure. Learning from the project supported the creation of a Doncaster Family Arts Network to sustain and expand partnership working for families with young children, as funded by the Family Arts Campaign. This represents a shift from time-limited programme delivery to ongoing provision supported by coordinated organisations and funding. The programme therefore influenced not only services for participants but also how early years support is organised locally.

External partners further reinforced this system-level impact. The National Literacy Trust acted as a critical friend, sharing national data trends that informed local planning and understanding of need, while a new partnership with Save the Children across South Yorkshire extended collaboration beyond the borough. Regular partnership working with Concerteenies provided opportunities for sharing regional knowledge and early years arts expertise.. Targeted activity such as Barnardo's-funded Craft and Chatter sessions in Mexborough Family Hub enabled engagement with parents facing challenging circumstances and built trust in services. Participants described the sessions as supportive spaces that improved wellbeing and confidence, illustrating how partnership working supported access to preventative services.

Overall, partnership working supported both operational delivery and structural change. It enabled access to families, strengthened professional collaboration and increased the profile of early years arts provision. More importantly, it altered the role of cultural organisations within the local early years system. Tuneful Chatter therefore represents not only an implemented project but a form of policy influence, demonstrating how creative provision can become integrated within local early intervention services.

Delivery adaptations

Delivery evolved over the lifetime of the programme in response to financial pressures, participant feedback and learning from implementation. Initial plans to introduce participation fees for private early years settings were not implemented after consultation revealed significant financial constraints across the sector. Similarly, projected ticket income from sessions at The Point were not realised. In order to maximise accessibility, admission charges were replaced with voluntary donations following discussion with partners and families.

Although this reduced anticipated earned income, the shortfall was offset through additional grant income secured via fundraising and further support from the City of Doncaster Council to deliver conferences and continuing professional development activity. This enabled the programme to maintain delivery without introducing financial barriers to participation and reinforced the positioning of the work as early intervention support rather than discretionary cultural activity.

The programme also adapted how resources were allocated. Changes in darts' wider programme led to reduced investment in gallery exhibitions at The Point, with resources redirected to artist-led delivery in schools, nurseries and Family Hubs. This shift increased direct engagement with children, families and practitioners and prioritised preventative contact with communities.

Costs relating to materials and equipment were lower than forecast because the delivery team used simple, reusable and recycled resources, intentionally modelling approaches families could replicate at home.

At Cast, fewer youth theatre bursaries were required than anticipated, allowing additional time to be invested in developing early years performance work. As demand grew, bursaries were subsequently utilised, while the early underspend supported creative development and refinement of productions.



Taken together, these adjustments demonstrate a responsive and adaptive delivery model. The programme prioritised accessibility and participation over income generation and redirected resources toward community-embedded provision. The ability to adapt funding, delivery locations and resource use allowed the project to continue operating effectively despite financial and practical constraints, while also reinforcing its positioning as a preventative early years service rather than a traditional arts participation programme.

SYNTHESIS OF FINDINGS



The evidence suggests that Tuneful Chatter did not operate as a single, discrete intervention but as an interconnected system of influences surrounding the child. Changes observed in children's communication and social engagement were closely linked to changes in adult behaviour, and these adult changes were supported by professional learning, shared practice and partnership working. Rather than producing outcomes independently within separate participant groups, the programme appears to have created reinforcing conditions in which children, families and practitioners influenced one another.

Mechanisms of change

Across evidence sources, a consistent pattern emerges: change was mediated primarily through adults. The programme did not rely solely on children's participation in activities but altered how adults interacted with children in everyday contexts.

Parents and guardians reported greater confidence initiating communication, following children's lead and using play as interaction. Practitioners incorporated communication-focused play and responsive facilitation into routine provision. Artists developed approaches centred on observation, pacing and responsiveness to children's cues. Taken together, these shifts increased the frequency and quality of interaction experienced by children beyond the sessions themselves. This helps explain why a weekly programme could plausibly relate to developmental change. Direct contact time alone would be limited, but when adults modified daily interactions at home and in early years settings, children were exposed to repeated opportunities for language use, shared attention and social exchange. The programme's influence therefore extended through behaviour change rather than through session attendance alone.

A notable feature is how learning occurred. Adults did not primarily gain knowledge through formal instruction but through modelling and participation. Practitioners observed artists working with familiar children; parents and guardians practised interaction techniques alongside their child; artists learned through collaboration with early years professionals. This practice-based learning appears to have increased confidence because it linked theory directly to experience. The programme therefore functioned as an applied learning environment rather than a training course or service.

Integrated rather than individual outcomes

The outcomes reported across groups appear interdependent. Improvements in children's participation were reinforced by parental confidence; parental confidence was supported by the welcoming environment and modelling provided by artists and practitioners; practitioner confidence developed through observing children's responses. Each group's change helped sustain the others.

This interconnected pattern is important for interpretation. It suggests that the programme's impact cannot be understood by examining any single outcome in isolation. Developmental progress in children is unlikely to be attributable solely to participation in creative activity; rather, it appears linked to a combination of relational, environmental and behavioural factors. The programme created consistent communication-rich environments across home and early years settings, increasing opportunities for interaction in multiple contexts.

While the evaluation cannot establish causation, the convergence of developmental tracking, observation and participant accounts strengthens the case for a credible contribution to change. The consistency of patterns across independent data sources is particularly significant: different forms of evidence point toward similar mechanisms.

Organisational and system-level effects

The programme also influenced how organisations worked together. Collaboration between cultural organisations and early years services moved beyond one-off delivery toward shared planning and co-practice. Creative approaches became embedded in local provision rather than remaining external enrichment activity.

This suggests the project operated as capacity-building as well as service delivery. Skills and approaches remained within settings, artists developed ongoing early years practice, and partnerships extended into professional development and dissemination activity. The programme therefore created conditions for continuation beyond the funded period, not by replicating sessions directly but by changing local capability.

The dissemination strand further supports this interpretation. Engagement with cultural venues increased when families first encountered activity in trusted settings, implying that community provision prepared participants for independent engagement. The programme therefore functioned as a bridge between community services, families and cultural institutions.



Differential benefit and conditions for success

The evidence indicates that benefits were not evenly distributed. The programme appears to have been most effective for children and adults experiencing a confidence or participation gap rather than those already highly engaged. Children with delayed communication, lower social confidence or limited early interaction showed the most noticeable change, and parents/guardians and practitioners with less prior experience reported the greatest development.

Accessibility was central to this. Engagement was strongest when provision was local, routine and embedded in familiar settings. Where travel, time constraints or formal training requirements were introduced, participation reduced. This suggests that integration within everyday environments was a necessary condition for effectiveness rather than an additional feature.

THE BIGGER PICTURE



Several broader implications follow from these findings.

1: Where Participation Meets Support

Early years arts activity may function both as a form of leisure participation for families already engaged and as preventative support for those who are more isolated. By influencing adult behaviour and interaction patterns, the programme supports the development of everyday learning environments, rather than delivering isolated outcomes alone.

Aim 2: Learning Through Practice

Workforce development appears most effective when embedded within practice. Co-delivery and observation enabled application in ways that formal training alone often does not achieve. This has implications for how professional learning is structured within early years services.

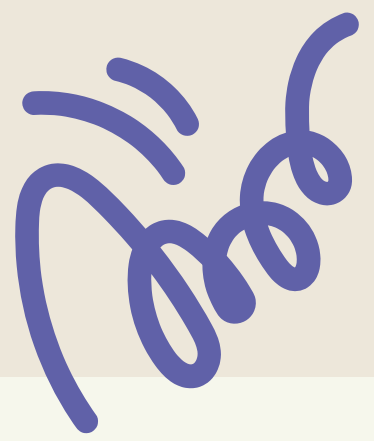
Aim 3: Why Continuity Matters

Sustained engagement was important. Confidence and participation developed gradually, indicating that short-term or one-off provision is unlikely to produce comparable outcomes. Continuity of both venue and delivery staff allowed relationships to form, creating familiarity and trust that supported ongoing participation and enabled behaviour change to occur.

Aim 4: Opening the Door to Culture

Early years activity can contribute to wider cultural engagement. Families were more likely to attend cultural venues after building familiarity in community settings, suggesting that outreach and venue-based provision should be seen as sequential stages rather than alternatives.

CONCLUSIONS



Overall, the evaluation indicates that Tuneful Chatter substantially achieved its intended aims. The strongest evidence relates to children's developmental progress and dissemination reach, supported by participation data and measurable outputs. Evidence of practitioner development and increased parental confidence is also consistently positive, although based primarily on self-report and observation. While the evaluation cannot establish causation in an experimental sense, the convergence of developmental tracking, participant feedback and practitioner observation provides credible evidence that the programme contributed to the changes observed.

The programme was most effective where there was a developmental or confidence gap. It particularly benefited children with delayed communication or lower social confidence, parents and guardians needing support with interaction and play, practitioners developing creative practice and early/mid-career artists developing early years practice. Engagement was more limited where participation depended on travel to venues or practitioner release time for formal training, reinforcing the importance of local, embedded provision.

Taken together, the findings indicate that Tuneful Chatter functioned not simply as an arts participation programme but as preventative, community-embedded early childhood support. Its effectiveness relied on accessible local delivery, sustained weekly contact and co-delivery between artists and early years professionals. Through modelling interaction and strengthening adult confidence, the programme changed everyday communication between adults and children, increasing children's opportunities for language use, social interaction and participation in learning environments.

The impact extended beyond individual participants. Partnership working, workforce development and local authority recognition indicate that the programme influenced how early years support was organised locally, with cultural organisations becoming part of the early intervention landscape and creative activity incorporated into service approaches for children aged 0–5. In this sense, the programme operated as part of preventative support infrastructure: a trusted, regular provision that strengthened relationships, built adult capability and supported child development before specialist intervention was required.

Tuneful Chatter therefore demonstrates that effective early childhood support can be delivered through relationship-based community provision that changes adult behaviour and service practice, rather than through targeted child intervention alone. Similar programmes are likely to be most effective when locally delivered, collaboratively implemented and sustained over time, with accessibility, partnership working and workforce development embedded from the outset.

RECOMMENDATIONS

THE FOLLOWING RECOMMENDATIONS ARE INFORMED BY THE EVALUATION FINDINGS



PROGRAMME DELIVERY

- Provide regular, sustained provision (e.g. weekly sessions) rather than short-term or one-off activity, as engagement and outcomes developed gradually through familiarity and relationships.
- Prioritise local, trusted settings (Family Hubs, nurseries and schools) as the primary delivery sites, using cultural venues as a progression opportunity rather than the starting point.
- Retain co-participation, ensuring parents and guardians take part alongside children, as adult behaviour change appears central to child outcomes.
- Maintain a low-pressure, inclusive approach, allowing children to observe and join at their own pace.
- Use simple, low-cost and replicable activities so families can continue them at home.

WORKFORCE DEVELOPMENT

- Embed professional learning through co-delivery and observation, rather than relying primarily on standalone training sessions.
- Establish artist development pathways (traineeships, mentoring and supported delivery) to build early years facilitation skills.
- Support practitioner participation by enabling protected time and cover where possible.

ACCESS & ENGAGEMENT

- Keep provision free at the point of access, as cost remains a barrier for families and settings.
- Continue outreach delivery, particularly for families unlikely to attend cultural venues independently.
- Strengthen referral routes via Family Hubs, health visitors, nurseries and early years professionals to reach families who may benefit most.

PARTNERSHIP WORKING

- Maintain cross-sector partnerships between cultural organisations, early years services and local authorities, with shared planning, delivery and accountability.
- Position similar programmes within early help and school readiness strategies, recognising their preventative role.

FUNDING & POLICY

- Fund early years creative programmes as preventative support, not solely arts participation.
- Support longer funding cycles (multi-year where possible), as short-term projects are unlikely to achieve comparable outcomes.
- Encourage joint commissioning across culture, education, health and family support.

FUTURE LEARNING

- Track longer-term outcomes, including school readiness and sustained engagement.
- Collect consistent baseline data where feasible.
- Explore potential cost-effectiveness as an early intervention approach.

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March 2026

Commissioned by Tuneful Chatter Consortium Leads, darts, Cast and the Early Years Intervention and Prevention Service at City of Doncaster Council

With thanks to participating families, practitioners and partners

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