Groundswell ARTS

# Sing Our Story
## Impact Report 2023 – 2026

"I really had the best memory with my children and creating our family song is one of the best things that ever happened to us."

YOUTH MUSIC

LOTTERY FUNDED

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Sing Our Story

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Sing Our Story

# Introduction

Sing Our Story is a process in which children, families and practitioners meet with a professional musician to co-create and write a song for a child. The process focuses on gathering unique information about the child's loves, strengths and story to support their wellbeing and confidence, and to build closer relationships between settings and families.

Groundswell Arts has been developing and delivering this programme for over 15 years, and the past three years have allowed us to significantly increase our partnerships across London. We have delivered the project in Enfield, Waltham Forest, Brent, Barnet, Haringey and, most recently, Barking and Dagenham. We have also delivered projects in rural Somerset and in Darlington, Redcar and Gateshead, exploring the possibilities of partnering with other organisations. In addition, we have developed training sessions for the programme, with a greater focus on inclusion and music-making, and we have continued to run our course in Waltham Forest and Haringey, where we also ran a two-year professional development programme for 30 early years settings.

A major focus in recent years has been supporting the project to reach not only early years settings but also primary and special schools. We have worked with eight special school partners, two of which included secondary-aged pupils, and we have also worked with four services that support care-experienced children. We have developed a new partnership with Portage, a service that supports children with a life-limiting or special needs diagnosis by visiting them in their homes. These projects required the development of a new model, involving slightly more days for delivery, and we have adapted as we have learned. We have worked with four services for care-experienced children—three in the Northeast—and have partnered with 18 primary schools, four maintained nursery schools and one PVI nursery setting. Our two projects in SEND secondary schools involved young people taking a stronger lead in songwriting, with less parental involvement outside the sharing sessions; however, young people also performed their songs, including at the Brent Special Schools Festival at the town hall.

The programme also includes training for staff and weekly music sessions, which add value by involving more children in the project.

**The Programme offers**

- An extended variety of participatory musical experiences to teachers, carers, and children
- Improved language and communication skills of young children involved in the project
- Increased health and well-being to both adults and young children through participation in creative music making.
- Enhanced capacity in the local early-years' workforce with training and CPD for early years music-making.
- Stronger links and ongoing successful relationships between the families of vulnerable children and their school settings.

# Our Numbers 23-26

Over the past three years, Sing Our Story has grown significantly in scale, reach and depth of impact. The numbers below summarise key activity and outcomes from 2023-2026, demonstrating both the breadth of engagement and the consistency of positive outcomes for children, families and practitioners.

## Programme Delivery

592 personalised songs created, each celebrating a child's story, strengths and identity.

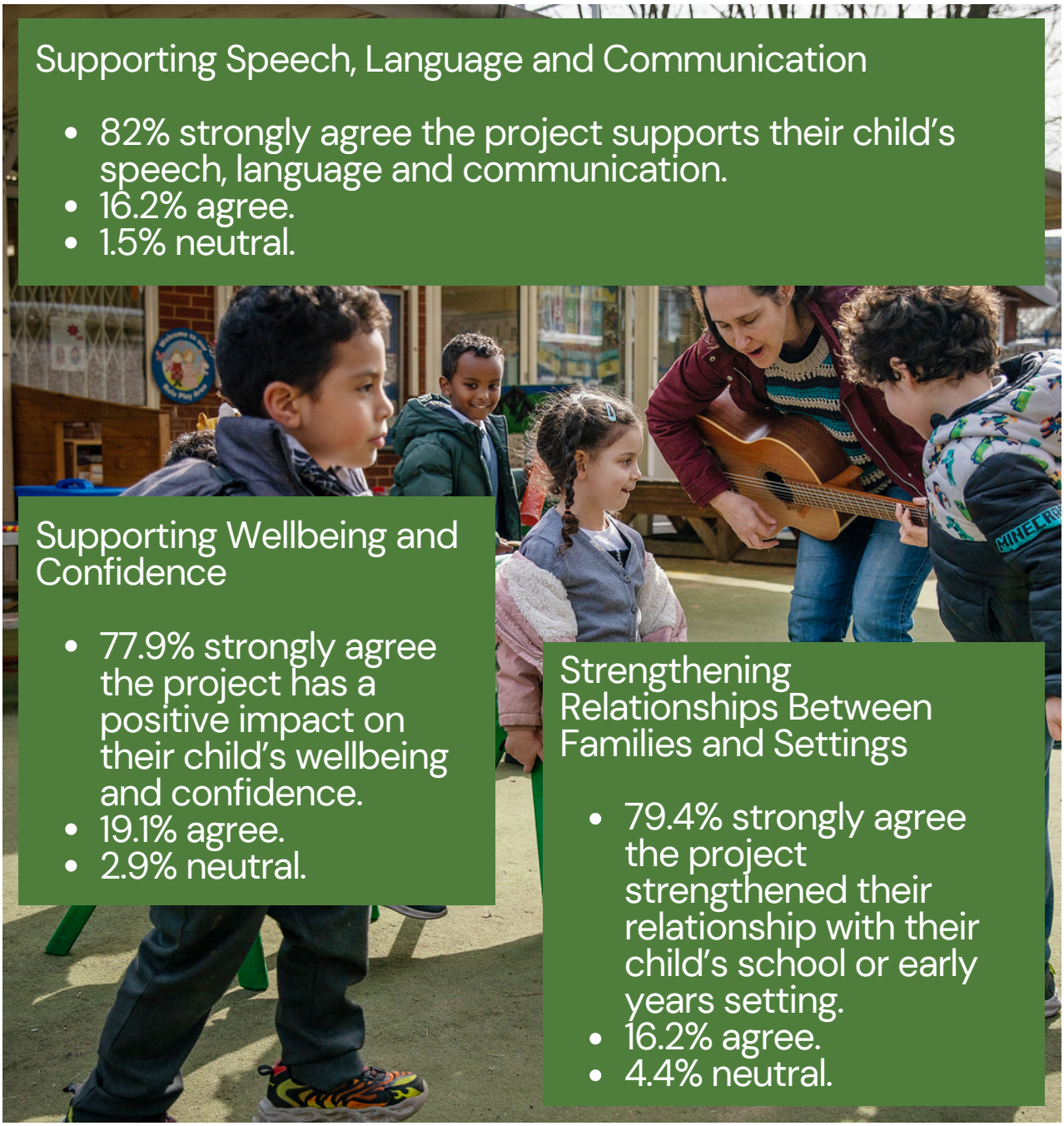
376 music sessions delivered, reaching 1,792 children and young people across early years settings, primary schools, special schools, and home-visiting contexts.

70 training sessions for schools and early years (EY) practitioners, strengthening sector confidence in inclusive, child-centred music-making.

These outputs reflect a programme that is not only expanding but embedding itself as a valued, evidence-informed practice across multiple regions and settings.

# Our Impact

Our evaluation draws on feedback from 233 families, offering a robust insight into the difference the programme makes.



## Supporting Speech, Language and Communication

- 82% strongly agree the project supports their child's speech, language and communication.
- 16.2% agree.
- 1.5% neutral.

## Supporting Wellbeing and Confidence

- 77.9% strongly agree the project has a positive impact on their child's wellbeing and confidence.
- 19.1% agree.
- 2.9% neutral.

## Strengthening Relationships Between Families and Settings

- 79.4% strongly agree the project strengthened their relationship with their child's school or early years setting.
- 16.2% agree.
- 4.4% neutral.

These findings show consistently high levels of positive impact across emotional, developmental and relational domains — areas that are both challenging and crucial for young children, particularly those with additional needs or difficult early experiences.

# Whats being said

## What families say

Families consistently describe the programme as meaningful, personal and joyful:

- "Felt increased connection with the school… impressed by the amount of work that went into our recording."
- "Beautiful and emotional… the essence of my child was captured beautifully, and it's such a gift for us all."
- "An original song just for O — something to keep a snapshot of him forever at a certain time in his life."
- "The project brought out the great things we have done together as a family… now we appreciate those things more."
- "We plan to have the kids listen to it often to reinforce our family bond and keep their childhood memories alive."
- "I was surprised by how emotional I felt hearing the song. Thank you."

These reflections highlight how the programme supports families to feel seen, heard and valued — often during periods of stress, transition or isolation.

## What teachers say

Teachers emphasise the programme's impact on relationships, classroom culture, and children's readiness to learn:

- "An incredible experience… supporting connection with school and home and driving the focus on singing within the classroom environment."
- "One child who struggled to settle has begun to have better days and better transitions in the morning — I think this has something to do with the project."
- "Parents who didn't know each other became part of a special 'club'… supporting each other when moved to tears."
- "Jas sat on the floor with her guitar, and children joined her — inclusive, interactive, and increasingly popular each week."
- "Our students on placement were very impressed — this type of session will be replicated in their practice."

Leaders also describe it as one of their most successful enrichment experiences:

- "One of the loveliest events I've ever attended… celebrating the unique talents of our special needs children in a beautiful manner." — Dawn Woodcock, The Vale Special School
- "An excellent session… the music was beautiful, the stories charming and poignant."

These insights emphasise that the programme's value extends far beyond the individual sessions — it strengthens community, fosters inclusion, and enhances staff practice.

## What children & young people say

From **102** young people surveyed:

- 93% said it felt "fantastic" to have their own song.
- 7% said "really good".

Children highlighted themes of belonging, family messages, identity, their home language, and the pride of being represented in music:

- The phrase I love you."
- "When she sang about triplets being a gift… I felt so emotional."
- "My favourite bit was when it mentioned my mum's letter, my friends, and gymnastics."
- "When the lady was speaking Albanian."
- "I got to sing part of my song and make a beat — it was so good."
- "Having my own song makes me feel special."
- "Ollie was so interested to learn about me."

Their words reflect deep emotional resonance and a strong sense of recognition and self-worth.

## What the musicians say

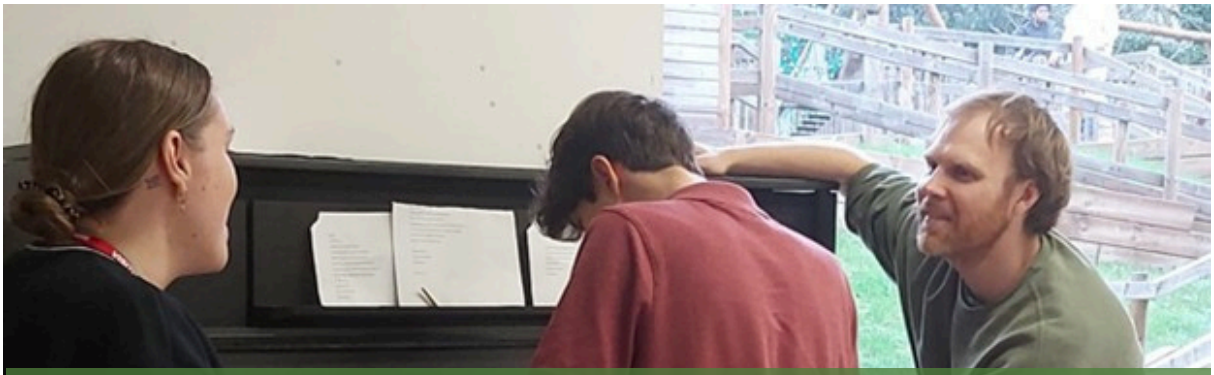
Musicians' case studies document sensitive, reflective practice and the importance of flexibility:

### Georgia

Noted the emotional challenges for a child meeting without their mother present.

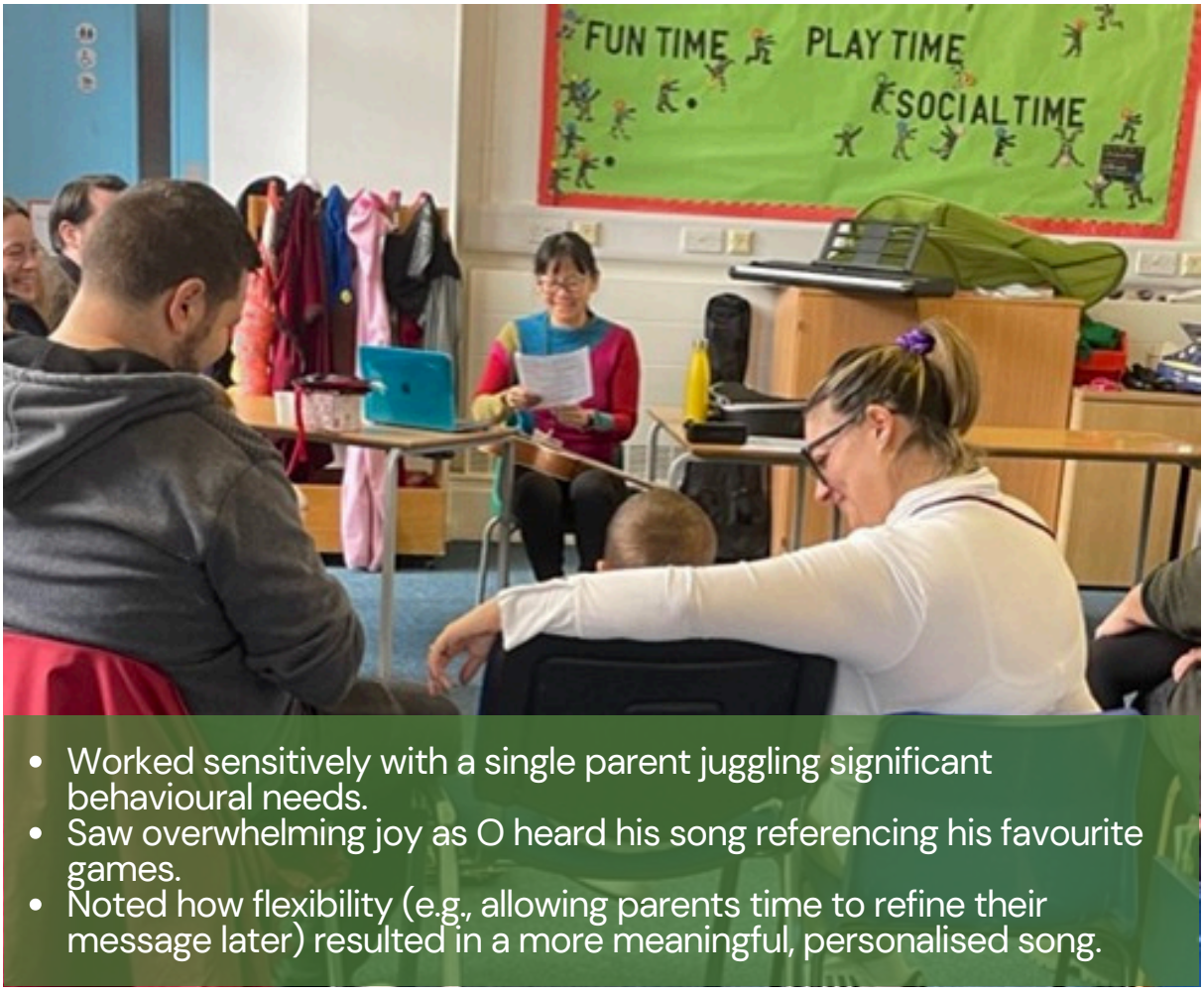
- Observed transformation between the first and second sessions — from embarrassment to confidence and pride.
- Saw how the finished song validated the child and connected family heritage across Ireland and the Caribbean.
- Highlighted the need for inclusive, adaptable session formats.

## Emily



- Saw music unlock energy, confidence and social motivation for J, who struggles with transitions.
- Noted the power of co-creation — J contributed chord progressions and themes.
- Emphasised the importance of trusted adults and shared musical spaces.

## Liz




- Worked sensitively with a single parent juggling significant behavioural needs.
- Saw overwhelming joy as O heard his song referencing his favourite games.
- Noted how flexibility (e.g., allowing parents time to refine their message later) resulted in a more meaningful, personalised song.

Across all musician reflections, a theme emerges: creating space for children's authentic voices while adapting to each family's unique circumstances.

# Case Study

## Developing work with Portage

Over the past three years, Groundswell Arts has developed a significant and deeply impactful partnership with the Haringey Portage Team, and more recently with the Portage service in Barking and Dagenham. Portage teams provide vital support for families with children under the age of two who have a special needs or life-limiting diagnosis. Their early intervention work focuses on strengthening parent–child relationships, supporting developmental progress, and helping families navigate the early years system during what is often an emotionally challenging period.

Recognising the highly relational, home-based nature of Portage practice, we co-designed a tailored model of Sing Our Story specifically for these settings. This model allows Groundswell musicians to accompany Portage workers directly into family homes and deliver extended, individualised sessions that combine musical play, guided interaction, and the co-creation of a personalised song celebrating the child. This level of embedded work goes far beyond our school-based programme and represents an innovative widening of access to creative practice for families who seldom benefit from arts-based interventions due to the complexity of their circumstances.

The extended session format has proven crucial. Families supported through Portage often experience isolation, exhaustion, and limited opportunities for positive shared experiences with their child. The presence of both a musician and a Portage worker creates a supportive and safe environment in which parents can talk openly, reflect on their journey, and celebrate their child's unique strengths. At the same time, the personalised music-making supports communication, emotional regulation, and early interaction — areas where many children receiving Portage support face additional challenges.

A case-study submitted by musician Jess Shaw illustrates the profound impact this model can have. In this example, Jess and the Portage worker first met with the child's mother alone, as the child was only just beginning to attend nursery after a long period of distress and refusal to leave the home. This approach respected the mother's need for focused time to reflect and share her story without fear of the child becoming overwhelmed. The song-gathering process enabled the mother to articulate both the difficulties she had faced and her hopes for the future, while highlighting the many special moments that might otherwise be lost amid the pressures of daily care.

By the second visit, the child was present, and the transformation was striking. Contrary to expectations that she might become distressed or attempt to ask Jess to leave, she instead showed curiosity, engagement, and joy. She interacted with the guitar, sang along to familiar songs, and explored sound with confidence. Her mother was visibly moved, both by her daughter's response and by hearing the completed song. She described Portage as "a godsend" and noted that the introduction of music into her daughter's life was clearly supporting her developing language and emerging sense of confidence.

This case typifies the core strengths of the Portage partnership model: the need for sensitivity, flexibility, and non-judgemental practice; the value of working alongside trusted Portage workers; and the significance of providing families with a lasting, meaningful artefact in the form of the personalised song. For families experiencing ongoing uncertainty, medical complexity, or significant behavioural challenges, the song becomes both a record of resilience and a celebration of identity — something to share with extended family, nursery staff, and future professionals involved in the child's care.

The learning emerging from this partnership has been substantial. We have deepened our understanding of how creative practice can complement therapeutic, developmental, and family-support programmes. We have also refined our approach to ensure it allows:

- Greater flexibility in session structure, acknowledging the need for sensitive timing, parent-only reflection, or additional breaks.
- More tailored communication, especially where parents feel overwhelmed or anxious about their child's behaviour.
- Enhanced collaboration with Portage practitioners, ensuring our work aligns with the family's current developmental goals.
- A trauma-informed and strengths-based approach, essential when working with families facing significant medical or emotional pressures.

This partnership has demonstrated the enormous potential for Sing Our Story within early intervention and home-visiting contexts. Demand from Portage teams continues to grow, and families describe the programme as transformative — deepening their connection with their child, strengthening their confidence as parents, and providing moments of joy during otherwise challenging periods.

As we move into the next phase of development, we hope to extend this model to additional Portage services and to embed learning from these pilots into our broader programme design. With continued investment, we are well-placed to scale an approach that is both artistically rich and emotionally meaningful, offering high-quality creative support to families who often face some of the greatest barriers to participation.

# National Pilots

## Blue Cabin

We worked with three musicians and three settings through the organisation Blue Cabin in the Northeast of England, focusing on care-experienced children in Darlington, Redcar and Cleveland, and Gateshead. Angeline Conaghan and Emily Stratford delivered training to two of the musicians alongside Blue Cabin's project manager; due to staff illness, additional training was cascaded internally by the Blue Cabin team. We were pleased with the quality and outcomes of the work that took place.

Following the pilot, Blue Cabin expressed a strong desire to develop work inspired by our practice, creating a model that aligns with their existing programme and their focus on creative life story work. As a direct outcome of this collaboration, we have developed a partnership agreement which formally credits Sing Our Story as the inspiration for their new model.

This pilot also helped us to secure independent funding from the Rayne Foundation to further research and explore models for delivering Sing Our Story with care-experienced children. The work with Blue Cabin strengthened our understanding of the benefits this approach can bring to children within the care system and helped us consider new models and partnership strategies for the future.

Some Blue Cabin artists fed back that they felt they needed additional time in the recording process and more time to fully produce the songs. Their future model may place greater emphasis on production, which represents a notable difference from Groundswell's approach. While the songs produced through the Blue Cabin pilot were high quality — as is consistent across our school-based, virtual school and hospital programmes — the suggestion was that songs linked directly to children's life stories and records might warrant extended production.

We have reflected on this feedback and acknowledge a balance may be needed. While it is important that artists are recognised and appropriately paid for the time required to ensure high-quality recordings, there is a risk that an overemphasis on production could detract from the co-created, relational process that is central to Sing Our Story. We would prefer that any extended project timeline prioritises more time with the carers and children, alongside any additional recording time, and includes a deeper exploration of how both children and carers can meaningfully influence production decisions. This learning has been valuable and will inform future planning.

Songs from the pilot were showcased at a UN event attended by Blue Cabin. The following message was shared with the child and carer as part of the event:

***"This isn't just a song — it's a tribute. It honours a young woman's journey, her relationships, her quirks, and her growth. That's a rare and beautiful thing. You've shown that songwriting can be a way to celebrate someone's soul, and you've done it with grace and creativity. We love how authentic and heartfelt the song is and how every line feels personal and full of love. We love how T has used imagery and detail from Flamingo Land to Greece, from Roblox to horror films. Her message is very empowering. The chorus is especially powerful — celebrating self-love, kindness, and emotional strength. It uplifts anyone who hears it. This isn't just a song — it's a tribute."***

Children's Care Reform Campaign | Education, Gender and Equalities Directorate, Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office

100% of carers (sample of 9) said the project supported the child's confidence and wellbeing.

100% of carers felt the project and song strengthened their closeness to the child.

## What carers said

**"This is a big part of Ria's life story and will help her grow and love knowing that Carol took time to get to know her and write her very own song. This is a lifelong memory."**

**"It will be part of CP's memory box, which will travel with her when she joins her new permanent family."**

**"It will be part of CP's memory box, which will travel with her when she joins her new permanent family."**

**"If I had to sum it up in one word it would be AMAZING — but it can't be summed up in one word. It was truly magical. It was emotional and brought back so many memories, especially of one of the children who has recently moved from our care. Now he and his adoptive parents have those memories forever, and so do we. You can't put a price on that. Katie did a remarkable job at capturing them all. She is incredibly talented — her voice is constantly on repeat in our home, even my husband sings 'shake your maracas' on shopping trips! We will never be able to thank you enough. This has been truly inspirational."**

## Take Art

We worked with Take Art on a pilot programme at a rural early years setting in Somerset, where 11 children took part. This partnership involved us from the very beginning, including participation on the interview panel, where we jointly interviewed practitioners (there were 50 applicants for the programme). We engaged two musicians who attended training together in December 2025, led by Angeline Conaghan and Jess Shaw. Musician Sadie Fleming delivered the work in the school in Spring 2026, and the second musician will be supporting upcoming work with care-experienced children funded by The Rayne Foundation.

The school was highly engaged and has expressed a desire to repeat the programme in the future. The final sharing event was attended by Groundswell Arts, Take Art and a member of the local Early Years advisory team. We believe this collaboration has strong potential to lead to further partnership opportunities, as it proved to be both valuable and well-aligned with our approach.

## What families said

7 families strongly agree that the project supported their child's confidence and wellbeing, and 2 agree.

7 families strongly agree that the project strengthened their relationship with the school, and 2 agree

## What the school said

**"Thank you for allowing us to take part in this wonderful project. It has definitely strengthened our relationships with our parents and allowed us to deepen our relationships with the children. I can't wait to hear the rest of the songs and share them with the rest of the children. I feel T's dinosaur song will become a firm favourite! Until next time..."**

## What the families said

**"Without doubt, one of the most special and deeply meaningful experiences that I have shared with C — a truly unique experience that I will treasure always. Sadie is not only incredibly talented but full of warmth, heart and soul. The process of steadily sharing and hearing the song was amazing."**

**"What a lovely experience and opportunity to give to parents and children. Sadie made me feel at ease in our first session and made a lovely song about C. I am going to share it with my family and play it often. Thank you so much!"**

**"Fantastic experience from start to finish. Sadie is brilliant and very talented. T really enjoyed it — it was more rewarding and emotional than we expected at the beginning. We will continue to play the song and enjoy it as a family; it will last forever!"**

# Summary

Over the next two years, we have received further Youth Music funding to consolidate our work in London, building on existing partnerships and strengthening and stabilising our organisation's work during the current cost-of-living crisis.

We have developed a new theory of change and see this programme as part of our core delivery.

We are wanting to expand into new locations and continue to grow new partnerships, for example, expanding our work with Portage and potentially continuing work with Take Art and other partners.

We will also be expanding our work with John Lyons' charity in London and through our current pilot and potentially future work with the Rayne Foundation for care-experienced children.

We know that this work can make a significant impact in the lives of children and their families and continues to make a difference to children and young people and those who care for them and work with them. Youth Music's support for our programme has enabled us to continue to reach hundreds of children each year.

Groundswell ARTS

YOUTH MUSIC

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