

# We Belong Evaluation Report

**April and June 2021**

**Dr David Parker, Independent Evaluator**

## **Background**

We Belong was a multi-session arts project. It was designed to improve the confidence, social skills and arts capacities of children in care. In addition, it sought to increase awareness among artists of the particular needs of children in care and also to highlight for virtual schools the potential benefits of arts-based enrichment opportunities.

It arose from the observation that the arts may have particular affordances that could benefit young people in the care system, if they were mobilised appropriately.

It also responded to a widespread belief that the care system could be doing better to meet the needs of young people.

It is widely accepted that the care system in the UK is not as effective as it could be in supporting the life chances of the young people who engage with it. The recent Independent Review of Children's Social Care (2021) led by Josh McAlister tells us that in a number of domains children in care are faring badly in comparison to their peers outside of the system:

- Attainment at key stage 4 is 34% lower for a child on a Child in Need plan, 46% lower for a child on a Child Protection Plan, and 53% lower for a child in care, when compared to children with no social work interventions during the school years. It is also the case that only 6% of 19-21 year olds who left care enter university and while the rates rise to 12% by 23 years old, this compares to 43% in the general population.

- 39% of care leavers between the ages of 19 and 21 are not in education, employment, or training, compared to 13% of all young people of that age. After 11 years, four times more children in care were on benefits and less than half were in employment compared to all school leavers.<sup>1</sup>

A key enabler of future change might reasonably be expected to be delivered through improved education and learning opportunities. Children in care have a wide variety of needs throughout their time in education which arise as a consequence of being in care. There are structured ways of offering additional support that can be tailored to each child, including:

- **Designated Teachers**

Designated Teachers are responsible for the educational achievement of children in care in that education provision. They will work with other staff in the school to ensure that each young person in care is achieving. The Designated Teacher will also work with other professionals including social workers and the Virtual School Head to ensure each young person has the right support in place.

- **Virtual School Heads**

Virtual School Heads (VSH) are responsible for the educational achievement of all looked after children in the local authority and provide support to schools and carers. The VSH has responsibilities relating to Personal Education Planning irrespective of the age of the child. They are also responsible for the management of the Looked After Pupil Premium (often described as Pupil Premium Plus, PP+) for children in reception to Year 11, and for the Early Years Looked After Pupil Premium. The Pupil Premium Plus does not have to be spent on academic outcomes; it can help support children to learn and develop their interests in other ways, like music lessons or participation in sport.

- **Personal Education Plans**

Each young person in care has a Personal Education Plan (PEP). The PEP forms part of a child's care plan and is reviewed twice a year. The PEP sets out what needs to happen to make sure that a child achieves at school. Young people in care may have to leave class to attend their PEP meetings, however, this should be avoided where possible and meetings should happen outside of scheduled classes.

In light of the context set out above, We Belong 2021 aims to explore methods and approaches for engaging children in care using the arts. It is a project designed with the intention of exploring how best to design and deliver arts projects; it does not assume the arts are self-mediating without purposeful management and intervention by artists fully aware of the context they are working in. In this sense it is a project about the effectiveness of particular approaches, rather than a restatement of high-level messages about 'the arts' in general.

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<sup>1</sup> <https://childrensocialcare.independent-review.uk/wp-content/uploads/2021/06/case-for-change.pdf>, accessed on 23rd June 2021.

It is the second iteration of a creative arts project for children in care led by A New Direction. It built upon learning from the first version of the project which ran during 2020 (and which informed changes to 2021 plans).

As a result of Covid-19 restrictions it was decided to make We Belong 2021 an entirely digital experience, with all workshops, 1:1s and sharing sessions taking place online via video meeting platforms Microsoft Teams (April) and Zoom (June). It was offered as an opportunity to children in care connected with Virtual Schools in the boroughs of Ealing, Barnet, Harrow and Brent.

The aim was to offer a variety of creative arts activities carefully planned to help facilitate reflection, expression and confidence-building in fun, engaging ways. The underlying aim – encapsulated in the ‘We Belong’ title - was to use such activities to build among young people improved self-confidence, agency, a sense of connection with peers and purposeful future ambition within wider society.

The opportunity to submit work to secure an Arts Award was also part of the project design. The centrepiece of the arts sessions revolved around the concept of a ‘Hero’s Journey’. This theme usefully allowed the young people participating to create characters that de-personalised some of the reflections they shared, creating a sense of safety and collegiality which promoted engagement.

In addition to this, it was hoped that We Belong would also achieve the following:

- Improved awareness among artists of issues associated with working with children in care.
- Improved awareness among virtual schools of the affordances of the arts and their ability, when mediated well, to fully engage and stimulate positive engagement among children in care.

## Learning and Developments from We Belong, 2020

The first iteration of We Belong was informed by extensive planning and consultation which originated in 2019. A New Direction took time to understand the perspectives of young people and to ensure that the content and design of the programme reflected their interests and issues of concern. A Young Care Leaver's Collective generated a manifesto which helped inform the values and vision for We Belong<sup>2</sup>. One member of the collective acted as a consultant and critical friend to We Belong and reflected on the value of the intervention from her perspective<sup>3</sup>.

A New Direction also utilised the expertise of Bernadette Alexander, Enrichment Coordination Supplier for Barnet, Brent, Ealing & Harrow Virtual Schools. Bernadette was a valuable point of connection between the boroughs and was able to offer briefings which highlighted for creative professionals some of the key issues characterising group work with children in care.

The impact of the Covid-19 restrictions was particularly impactful for We Belong 1 in 2020, and many aspects of the original conception were shifted by moving from face-to-face work to online part way through delivery.

As a result of We Belong reflection and evaluation activity 1 it was established that:

- The intervention showed great potential to benefit young people, helping to improve their arts and creative capacities and their self-confidence.
- The use of online technology was a viable means of delivery but needed further work and refinement to be fully optimised.
- Planning and pre-work was vitally important, but the sooner the artists could be involved in the planning process the better.

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<sup>2</sup> <https://www.anewdirection.org.uk/asset/4735>

<sup>3</sup> <https://www.anewdirection.org.uk/blog/how-i-learnt-that-we-belong>

## We Belong 2021 Design and Delivery



*An example of some of the artwork produced by the participants, now displayed in an online gallery on A New Direction's website.<sup>4</sup>*

The team responsible for design and delivery of We Belong comprised:

- Corinne Micallef, Project Manager AND
- Marina Lewis-King, Programmes Officer, AND
- Naranee Ruthra-Rajan, Senior Programme Manager AND
- Bernadette Alexander, Enrichment Coordinator, Brent, Barnet, Ealing and Harrow Local Authorities
- Shabnam Karimzada, Care Leaver Ambassador
- Kirsty Reynolds, Artist
- Sarah Pimenta, Artist
- Andrew Hammond, Illustrator & Animator
- Adisa the Verbaliser, Poet

This multi-disciplinary team pooled knowledge and experience through online workshop meetings which generated a scheme of activities that drew on the skills of each artist, while respecting the start points and contexts of young people participating.

Understanding the demands of young people was informed by the expertise of Bernadette and the experience of Shabnam; the concepts and logistics of the project were given broad shape by A New Direction, and the artists reflected on the affordances of their own practice, creating specific plans for activities which built on contextual briefings.

The artists having involvement at this early stage was a refinement not present in We Belong 2020, and the widespread view, as will be shown later when impacts are

<sup>4</sup> <https://www.anewdirection.org.uk/what-we-do/schools/we-belong/participant-artwork-gallery>

considered in more detail, was that their early involvement improved the quality of inputs immeasurably.

The conceptual premise of We Belong - the 'Hero's Journey' – borrowed a ubiquitous idea in popular culture and art, a feature from quest narratives to children's picture books, superhero movies to musical theatre. Therefore, it had the merit of resonating with artforms already popular with young people, while at the same time offering a blank slate on which to project their own ideas. It was both generic and timeless yet highly personal and rooted in the here and now. Also important was the anonymity it offered young people. Heroes are often disguised within art, wearing costumes and masks, acting as metaphors through which explorations of identity can evolve. They are a feature of coming of age narratives and stories of personal change, and it was hoped that by framing the week's activities in this way the young people would not feel inhibited to explore their feelings and express their thoughts through their making, writing and drawing.

The artists each reflected on activities that would help explore the construction of identity through mark making, poetry, use of colour and texture, pooling ideas using Padlet, an online sharing software which served as a repository of work as the week progressed.

While the week was filled with activities and demanded engagement with its ambitious aims and the need to share works in progress or finished artefacts, there was also time for reflection built in, space for 1:1 discussions, and provision to help any young person who felt they needed additional support (with Bernadette and Virtual School teachers acting as points of contact and support). The final schedule for the April sessions is shared below in Fig.1 to illustrate the flow of sessions and blend of group and individual work.

<b>Schedule overview</b>				
<b>Monday 12<sup>th</sup> April</b>	<b>Tuesday 13<sup>th</sup> April</b>	<b>Wednesday 14<sup>th</sup> April</b>	<b>Thursday 15<sup>th</sup> April</b>	<b>Friday 16<sup>th</sup> April</b>
<b>10.00am-10.45am</b> Welcome, structure and project chat - Teams	<b>10.00am-10.30am</b> Morning check-in - Teams	<b>10.00am-10.15am</b> Morning check-in - Teams	<b>10.00am-10.15am</b> Morning check-in - Teams	<b>10.00am-10.15am</b> Morning check-in - Teams
<b>10.45am – 11am</b> Break (away from screen)	<b>10.30am – 10.45am</b> Break (away from screen)	<b>10.15am -11.30am</b> Heroes Journey Workshop 3 - Teams	<b>10.15am – 10.30am</b> Break (away from screen)	<b>10.15am – 11.15am</b> How to make 3D landscape sculpture with Sarah - Teams
<b>11am - 12pm</b> Meet the artists and play some games - Teams	<b>10.45am -12.00pm</b> Heroes Journey Workshop 2 - Teams	<b>11.30am – 11.45</b> Break (away from screen)	<b>10.30am -11.45am</b> Heroes Journey Workshop 4 - Teams	<b>11.15am – 11.30am</b> Break (away from screen)
<b>12.00pm - 1.00pm</b> Lunch Break (away from screen)	<b>12.00pm - 1.00pm</b> Lunch Break (away from screen)	<b>11.45am – 1.00pm</b> Become Session - Teams	<b>11.45am – 1.00pm</b> Time to work individually on artwork - 10 minute 1:1 bookable slots available	<b>11.30am – 12.30pm</b> Time to work individually on artwork - 10 minute 1:1 bookable slots available
<b>1.00pm-2.15pm</b> Heroes Journey Workshop 1 - Teams	<b>1.00pm-2.00pm</b> How to design your hero character with Andy - Teams	<b>1.00pm - 2.00pm</b> Lunch Break (away from screen)	<b>1.00pm - 2.00pm</b> Lunch Break (away from screen)	<b>12.30pm - 1.30pm</b> Lunch Break (away from screen)
<b>2.15pm – 2.30pm</b> Break (away from screen)	<b>2.00pm – 3.00pm</b> Time to work individually on artwork - 10 minute 1:1 bookable slots available	<b>2.00pm – 3.00pm</b> How to make puppets with Kirsty - Teams	<b>2.00pm – 3.00pm</b> How to make spoken word / poetry with Adisa - Teams	<b>1.30pm-2.30pm</b> Sharing session - Teams
<b>2.30pm – 3.00pm</b> Mural and Padlet demo / tech support - Teams	<b>3.00pm – 3.15pm</b> Break (away from screen)	<b>3.00pm – 3.15pm</b> Break (away from screen)	<b>3.00pm – 3.15pm</b> Break (away from screen)	<b>2.30pm – 2.45pm</b> Break (away from screen)
<b>3.15pm-4.00pm</b> What is an Arts Award? - Teams	<b>3.15pm-4.00pm</b> Arts Award Session - Teams	<b>3.15pm-4.00pm</b> Arts Award Session - Teams	<b>3.15pm-4.00pm</b> Arts Award Session - Teams	<b>2.45pm - 4pm</b> Checkout: Reflections, feedback & next steps - Teams

**Fig. 1**

### **Safeguarding and risk assessment**

As part of We Belong 2021 a rigorous safeguarding policy was put in place by A New Direction, providing forms for reporting any incidents (distributed to carers), and with a clear policy in place for all participants to be aware of and adhere to. A code of conduct was written in clear, accessible language and shared before the project commenced. A highly detailed risk assessment was also undertaken by A New Direction, which was also shared with artists, virtual schools, consultants and project managers prior to the project commencing, clearly indicating appropriate mitigations if issues arose.

## **We Belong 2021 in numbers**

### **Summary figures to indicate volume of activity and levels of engagement**

#### Number of young people participating

Local Authority	# young people
Brent	9
Ealing	14
Harrow	1
Barnet	6
	30

#### Number of local authority virtual schools staff engaging

Local Authority	# staff	# sessions
Brent	2	6
Ealing	4	9
Harrow	2	3
Barnet	3	4

#### Planning time with artists

Artist	#sessions	#hours	#total hours
Adisa	4	3	12
Sarah	4	3	12
Andy	4	3	12
Kirsty	4	3	12

#### Contact time with young people (session = approx. 1.5hrs)

Local Authority	# sessions	# contact hours
Brent	77	115.5
Ealing	100	150
Harrow	12	18
Barnet	33	49.5
	222	333

Time spent on reflection and refinement of plans during delivery phases to meet developing needs of YP, spread across the 7 delivery days

Artist	#total hours
Adisa	5
Sarah	5
Andy	5
Kirsty	5

Number of Arts Awards sessions attended

Local Authority	# sessions	# contact hours	#arts award applied
Brent	4	6	2
Ealing	1	1.5	0
Harrow	1	1.5	0
Barnet	10	15	2
	17	24	4



## We Belong Outcomes and Impacts

Three sets of stakeholders shared perceptions which informed this evaluation:

- young people (16),
- virtual school staff (5),
- AND staff (3),
- and artists (4).

Perceptions were gathered through a mixture of live surveys (using Mentimeter), 1:1 Zoom interviews and 1:1 telephone interviews.

Additionally, the evaluator periodically joined sessions to critically observe aspects of briefings, delivery, engagement, participation and interaction. Observation of delivered sessions utilised a framework for analysis established by experienced education researchers<sup>5</sup> (see below):

<b>Introductory activities</b> (entrance, session opener, planning)	<i>Self presentation of artist</i>
<b>Resources</b> (provided and created)	<i>Artefacts Cultural, intellectual resources Use of student work Use of artist's own work</i>
<b>Classroom discourse</b> (questions, responses, feedback, professional discourse, personal anecdote)	<i>Professional and technical language Prompts, suggestions Unanswered questions Change to IRF patterns Self conscious use of affect</i>
<b>Flow</b> (rhythm, transitions, timing, lesson sequences over time)	<i>Lesson shape Thinking time Taking a break Ongoing projects over days/weeks Pace Time for review</i>
<b>Use of space</b> (by students, by teachers)	<i>Organisation of space Movement within the space Personal space Symbolic spaces</i>
<b>Behaviour management</b> (communication of rules, teacher stance, where the authority lies)	<i>Authority of the discipline/endeavour Internalised codes of behaviour Explicit teaching of conduct Humour Public/private explanation of anti-social behaviours</i>
<b>Teaching methods</b> (direct instruction, coaching, modelling, experimentation)	<i>Individualised/group/whole class teaching Skill development Use of environment, artefacts, music, movement Provocations</i>
<b>Framing</b> (disciplinary [Art, etc], self expression, vocational/technical)	<i>Focus on the individual within a community, or part of a collective endeavour? Reference to the discipline specificity, traditions School subjects v professional practice Themes (eg making something from nothing, therapy)</i>

<sup>5</sup> Thomson, P and Hall, C (2011) Signature Pedagogies, Creativity, Culture and Education, Newcastle.

What follows below are those aspects of We Belong 2021 which featured strongly across responses from all participants and which seemed, therefore, to have had marked effect or hold greatest significance for participants.

## **Benefits for Children Looked After**

### **Improved personal expression and confidence**

The requirement to work online was a productive constraint that the team worked with positively. The ability for young people to work with cameras turned on or off, to be vocal or silent, helped to foster a relaxed and egalitarian feel to the sessions which seemed to drive creative output.

Young people's agency in creative projects is vitally important. It can be tempting for artists to over-compensate for diffidence or slowness to engage among young people with complex backgrounds by intervening too much, but to do so takes important control away from young people and it was noteworthy within We Belong that artists were encouraging and ambitious without ever being controlling or overly interventionist.

*Adisa, Poet: "I did feel some young people were happier to show their emotions and vulnerabilities initially than others. Some were very quiet but would still leave their cameras on and were deeply engaged. The poetry really did get through to them and helped them express their individuality. They readily took on big emotions and issues. Over the week that helped us turn these issues into positives as a group. They really did engage with each other through the work."*

*Virtual School, Harrow: "We Belong provided a like-minded group in which children from different London boroughs could shine and share their work. Direct feedback to me has been entirely positive and it is the kind of work children would like to do more of, no question about that."*

*Virtual School Brent: "The foster carer said the girls had really enjoyed the week and they carried on with art over the following weekend, full of enthusiasm."*

*Virtual School, Ealing: "This project definitely worked. It was important that it was high quality art. The signs of success emerged as much higher levels of engagement and the ways in which the children expressed themselves. One or two young people really stood out to me and blossomed through the week. Their poetry was outstanding, and I will be following up on that when I visit them in their schools; it's something their teachers need to be made aware of."*

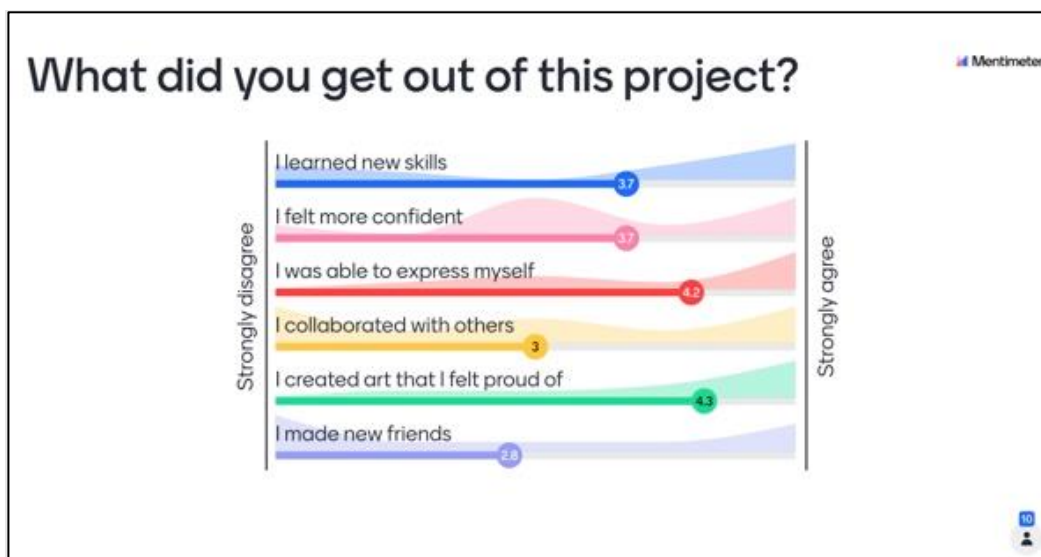
It is interesting to note that a range of different stakeholders independently acknowledged the efficacy of the project, but questions remain about the extent to which they could confidently share with others what had made it effective and how that might be replicated. Further work to help frame and describe the elements that most made a difference may be beneficial and more will be said about this in the impact and learning sections at the end of this report.

The young people participating in We Belong also responded positively (see Fig. 2 below) to the way the project was designed, enjoying the flexibility and provisionality it offered them. They were able to revise, refine and adjust their work in an environment that felt fun, safe and supportive.



**Fig. 2**

After some initial technical hitches and queries, the majority of young people were soon positively disposed to the work and engaged in the challenge of expressing ideas and feelings in ways that left them feeling proud and valued. This was observed by the virtual school staff who sat in on sessions and engaged with the young people beyond the week-long projects, and was also reflected in the views of the young people themselves who shared their perceptions via online 'live' feedback – see Fig. 3.



**Fig. 3**

**Online is a viable mode of delivery for projects with children in care**

There was some initial scepticism about the potential for sessions offered wholly online to work effectively with this cohort of young people. This doubt was shared by artists as well as virtual school representatives. It was interesting to observe that as each day passed any doubts about online seemed to lessen and were replaced with a sense of agency and control as solutions to tech issues were found and the sharing of young people’s work on Padlet served to promulgate the sense of possibility and potential the medium could offer.

There were also unanticipated advantages. The way that online participation afforded degrees of direct engagement – options for cameras and microphones to be on or off, or combined variously at different times – all of which helped young people engage on their own terms. Sometimes they embraced collegiality; at other times preferred the focus of solo work. Ultimately, these variegated levels of visibility served the artworks well because young people particularly prized their ability to express themselves through their creativity, and the options they controlled to be seen or heard throughout the week kept them on board. They affirmed that We Belong struck the right balance in survey responses (see Fig. 4).



**Fig. 4**

**Virtual Schools gained an enhanced understanding of advantages of art projects**

Virtual Schools actively seek a range of enrichment activities for children in care, and they aim to ensure that a wide array of cultural and sports offers are available. However, some Virtual School stakeholders indicated that it is often a challenge to assess the quality of input in relation to arts projects. For them, We Belong – thanks to its co-planning, effective management, and professional delivery – had helped to ‘set a bar’ for them to use in commissioning future work.

Virtual School, Harrow: *“I feel a better VS practitioner as a result of the project; I have a sharper sense of quality and I know what to look for and ask for in other projects in the future. I would definitely advocate for the arts and culture more; a lot of the enrichment offer is dominated by literacy and sport. Projects like We Belong help us make the case for different forms of cultural enrichment to meet a wider set of preferences and interests among Children Looked After.”*

Virtual School, Brent: *"Seeing how it worked in person in 2020 and online in 2021 I could appreciate better how it would work both ways. Embracing all the arts. I could really see how much organisation had gone into it and all bases were covered. And it improved my own expectations for what we should be asking of arts interventions for Children Looked After."*

In general terms virtual schools appreciated the detailed planning and the sense of care they perceived had gone into We Belong. In more specific terms it may be helpful to pinpoint some of the principles that really lifted the quality of the arts input:

- **Effective recruitment of the 'right' artists** - a complicated process which depends as much on the experience of commissioners as it does on theorised accounts of what works. However, in this case it meant artists who had some experience of working with children with vulnerabilities or complex needs, an underlying belief in building creative capacities of young people, an understanding of the importance of flexibility, adaptability, support and process over product, and vitally, an ability not only to enthuse others but to also explain the philosophy of approach in an accessible way.
- **Time to plan together** – the quality of the project was strongly influenced by the up-front preparation, briefing and project design which involved all key stakeholders. This phase of a project can be considered costly, since when done properly it necessarily involves everyone who will be part of direct delivery. However, We Belong illustrated the value of having artists on board with co-planning at the earliest opportunity.
- **Awareness of background and context** – the artists were effectively briefed by Bernadette Alexander and A New Direction were able to draw on the experience of Shabnam Karimzada, a care-leaver who had contributed to the co-creation of We Belong in 2019. The project went much further than superficial appreciation of the issues and remained alive to possible sensitivities among the participating young people. Paradoxically, the quality of preparation and that openness to young people's needs obviated the need for much in the way of remedial action – the preparation greatly aided the overall flow.
- **Time throughout the project to jointly reflect on progress** – each day ended with a rapid wash-up meeting between the artists and project manager where any adjustments to the following day's approach could be agreed, and the reasons for them understood. A commitment to reflecting on what worked and what did not, and to responding to that during the delivery phase, improves the quality of the experience.
- **Appropriate blend of group and solo activities** – the quality of work was improved by the range and nature of interactions between adults and young people, as well as peer to peer. Each morning began with a 'round-the-campfire' warm up which helped build trust and familiarity across the group; mandatory sessions where activities would be introduced and creative work set in train were larger in size and as the week went on became more interactive, with thoughtful feedback shared between young people; optional 1:1 and Arts

Award sessions created more tailored opportunities for individuals to hone and refine their work. These sessions were mutually reinforcing and created a sense of collegiality and momentum which helped knit the activities with the hero's journey theme.

**Young People benefitted from working creatively with their peers**

There was a palpable celebratory feel as We Belong drew to a close, as work was shared and feedback received, but some sadness too among young people that it had to come to an end. This was clearly a result of the fun and engaging nature of the activities but also testament to the quality of interactions between young people. There was evidence of genuine enjoyment in getting to know other young people sharing their views on one another's work.

The young people were asked to submit their written thoughts about what they had taken from the experience and a common theme emerges about the importance of art, mediated in engaging ways (see Fig. 5):

*"I loved how I could express myself and interact with others and artists, We Belong really helped me in my poetry and art."*

*"I enjoyed having the sessions because they have taught me how to express myself."*

*"Being able to work with other young people and improving my art and poetry skills was the best part."*

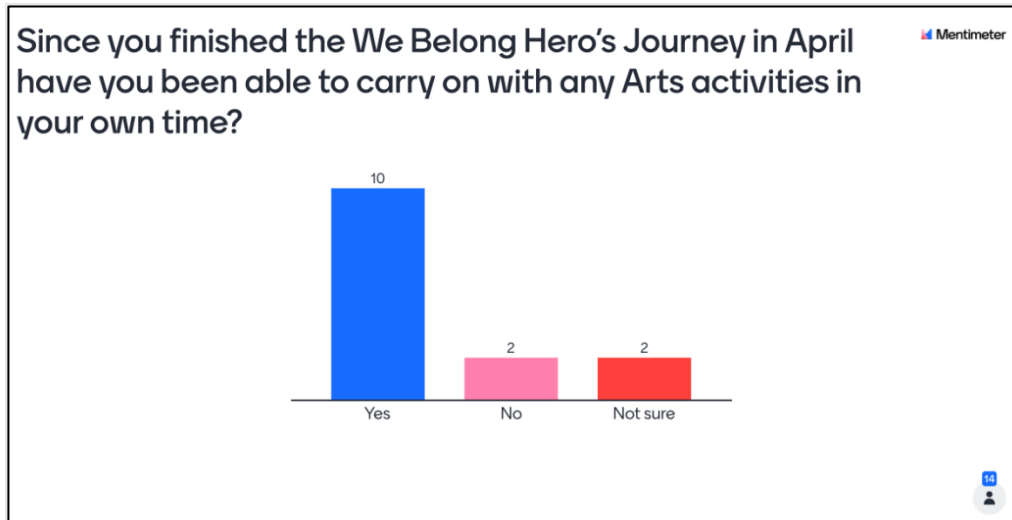


**Fig. 5**

**We Belong had some residual impact for young people**

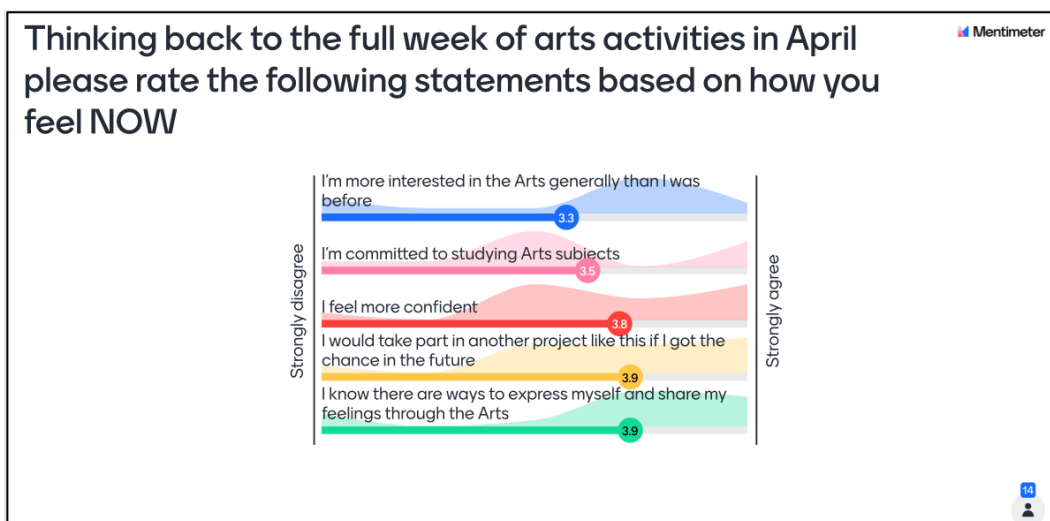
While the week-long project was immersive and was certainly well received by young people, it is always hard to know how lasting effects will be. In the case of We Belong a two day reconnect was planned in June, inviting back participants to celebrate their work, complete additional activities that built on artwork created in the Easter holidays week-long project and reflect on their experience. As part of their reflections they were asked to consider in a range of ways how lasting the effects of the project had

been. We were particularly interested to hear whether creative activities had become part of their own repertoire of free-time routines (Fig. 6).



**Fig. 6**

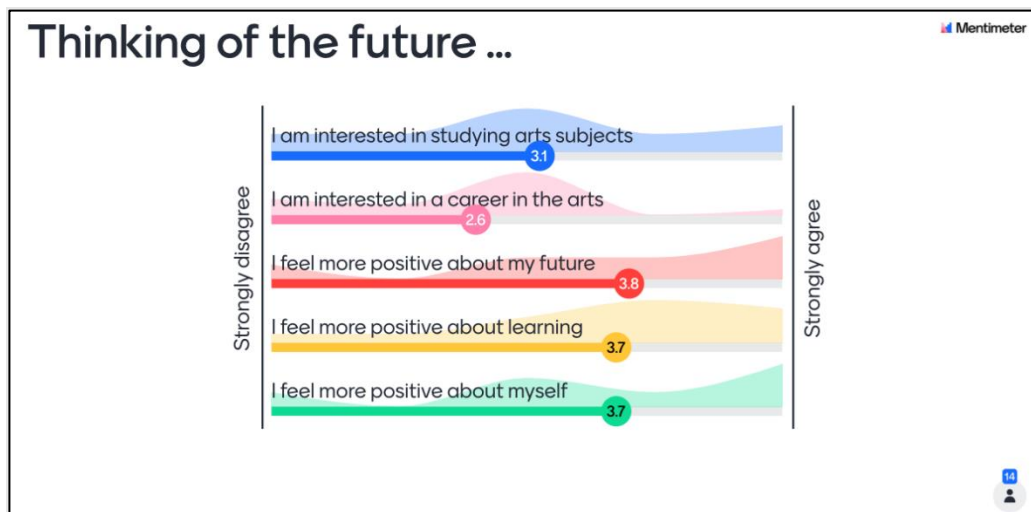
The evaluation also sought to understand the degree of *affect* (emotion, beliefs and motivation), and the strength of feeling young people reported more than a month after the project. Affect is an important dimension of learning and overall development, since the strength of positive feeling a young person associates with activities is a strong determinant of their propensity to get better at them and to benefit from them in terms of general well-being. Seven weeks after the project young people were still reporting positives in relation to their interest in the Arts, commitment to study, personal confidence, and willingness to participate in the future (see Fig. 7).



**Fig. 7**

Young people's forecasts of their own future are as much a means of assessing their current sense of priorities and interests, but nonetheless, since We Belong was conceived partly to showcase the arts as a form of work, and to raise awareness of possibilities around careers, it is worthwhile reflecting on participants' ambitions some

time after the main project activities finished (see Fig. 8). Once again, the indications are largely positive, although it is noteworthy that the future impacts are clearest in relation to studying and general well-being rather than the world of work.



**Fig. 8**

## Key Learning and Discussion Points

As part of its future plans A New Direction is looking to develop a network for professionals working in London with care-experienced children and young people, from both statutory and non-statutory organisations. The network will focus on sharing and developing practice in providing creative, arts and cultural opportunities for care-experienced children and young people, as well as sharing and developing such opportunities. The network may also involve colleagues from cultural sector organisations in London with (or developing) an offer for care-experienced children and young people.

With the ambitions for this network in mind, and in acknowledgement that the varied workforce which engages with children within the care system beyond London would also benefit from understanding better the affordances of well-structured arts interventions, the following learning points are shared.

### **Build in early opportunities for co-planning and collaborative design**

We Belong was not an off-the-shelf project, pre-determined using content recycled from prior work. It did utilise methods and approaches which had been an important aspect of AND practice many times before. The importance of co-planning and co-opting experts and key agencies, for example. In terms of content and design, however, it was genuinely bespoke, and virtual school staff and artists felt this was key to the success of the intervention.

A New Direction facilitated joint planning sessions which included in-depth briefings about the kinds of issues artists needed to keep in mind when working with children in care. This maximised the flexibility and sensitivity of the project, ensuring young



people were encouraged to stay engaged by practitioners reaffirming a working space online each day which was rooted in care, respect and appreciation. There was no doubt, based on observed sessions and testimony from the young people involved, that this up-front investment in planning and co-design improved the quality of input and outcomes.

Visual Artist, Kirsty Reynolds: *"I think the programme design was exceptional and believe it should continue to be rolled out. It was unusual to have team wide meetings across organisations and I think this really helped. It was a great example of how artists and other practitioners can work together in line with the needs and interests of Children Looked After. I think the mixed media approach also ensured the programme would be engaging to a diverse group of young people. This was certainly reflected in their artwork they created."*

Virtual School, Harrow: *"The artists were very well suited to the needs of the young people. Pace and pitch was absolutely right for the group and the coordination by AND was just the right tone; it felt creative but also therapeutic; a good 'family' vibe where some ground rules were agreed and guidelines were observed through the week – the daily camp fire sharing for example, felt highly inclusive and reflective."*

Virtual School, Brent: *"All the artists were great –they gave the young people proper stretch but didn't over-push, respecting sensitivities to pressure and exposure. I sat in on one artist session in particular – they were great in terms of their disposition and calmness and it was really conducive to strong work. They were persistent but never pushy, and this led to some high-quality work by the young people taking part."*

### **The potential of online projects to enable lasting engagement and self-expression**

We Belong showcased the potential of the arts, showing that *when mediated well*, they are able to effectively hold the full attention of participants, and to encourage them to express themselves in ways that enhance their own skills and capacities. The fact that the project did this successfully using online media only was useful affirmation of the potential of internet-based delivery.

### **The importance of mediation of the project – the role of A New Direction as coordinating and facilitating artists and young people**

A New Direction occupied a crucial intermediary position throughout the project. They anchored the process of delivery by framing each day's activities and bringing participants together to reflect, share and celebrate work. They also managed the technical aspects of online delivery. This had a freeing effect on the artists who were able to focus all of their energies on shaping the learning experience for the young people, improving the quality of the activities and the final products made by the young people.

In addition, the incorporation of Bernadette and Shabnam as part of the delivery team helped underscore the importance of sensitivity toward backgrounds and contexts of young people taking part. Artists reported that this was of value to them in their interviews, and the general view is captured well by Adisa, who remarked:

*"The briefings and chats in between sessions as a group were very helpful to me. For example, much of my own work relates to quite personal themes, rooted in identity and sometimes with overt references to family. It was good for me to be reminded of ways to keep some of that less in focus than I usually would, and to give the young people a chance to come at topics from different angles, in ways that felt comfortable and empowering for them."*

**The arts, when mediated purposefully, are able to deeply engage and motivate children in care**

Children in care expressed themselves powerfully and effectively throughout We Belong, chiefly through their own creations, both verbal and visual. They were often more diffident when reflecting on their work and needed time to consider what they had made and how it had been effective. One of the benefits of We Belong was rooted in the moments of dialogue between artists and young people as they wrestled with this. Such moments were not only celebratory but also demystifying and empowering. Young people were encouraged to identify their own agency in the process of artistic creation and to value their own voices and aesthetics. For example, quotes below taken from a creative exchange between two young people collaborating show how originality and developing ideas had been sensitively nurtured by the We Belong artists:

YP1: "I'm worried about getting it wrong."

YP2: "There's no such thing as wrong in art."

YP2: "If all the artists did the same thing, it would be really boring. .... It would look weird."

YP2: "It's your picture as well so I want you to be happy too. I want your input too. Like Sarah [Pimenta, visual artist] said, take the ideas on board but it's still yours."

Inculcating this sense of agency and expression among young people for whom control and communication may often have been limited or challenging, brought a great sense of uplift to the week. The young people moved from initial reticence, to authorial ownership, to great personal pride in the poems, artefacts and drawings they had made.

**High quality mediated arts activities have identifiable characteristics which can be learned and shared**

Young people exhibited and reported improved confidence and self-expression throughout the week of We Belong activities. While many arts projects will point to gains in relation to personal efficacy it is often unclear how the arts have helped bring them about. In the case of We Belong we can point to some discrete aspects of the project design and delivery which illuminate how the arts can be most effectively mobilised. These include practices by artists which are sensitive to the needs of the participating young people and which conform to the following principles outlined by Hall and Thomson (2011)<sup>6</sup>:

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<sup>6</sup> Hall, C and Thomson, P (2012) The Signature Pedagogies Project: Final Report, Creativity Culture and Education, [https://www.ioe-rdnetwork.com/uploads/2/1/6/3/21631832/signature\\_pedagogies\\_culture\\_creativity\\_and\\_education.pdf](https://www.ioe-rdnetwork.com/uploads/2/1/6/3/21631832/signature_pedagogies_culture_creativity_and_education.pdf), accessed on 2nd July 2021.

- a universalist approach to inclusion
- a commitment to genuine choice and agency
- a willingness to confront challenges
- a readiness to use and sanction the absurd and carnivalesque
- a focus on the lived experience of the present

### **The need for signposting and follow-up opportunities**

There is a need for follow up opportunities when enthusiasm has been nurtured among young people through projects such as We Belong. There were some positive signs of this which emerged through the evaluation. Virtual Schools expressed a likelihood to seek out projects in a similar vein in the future. Young people suggested they would like to participate in similar projects in the future. Artists felt better prepared and more skilled to work with children in care.

However, ongoing challenges relate to the variegated nature of the arts offer. Schools continue to struggle to find time to provide recursive, regularised opportunities to explore the arts. Covid and pressures to 'catch up' have only compounded this challenge.

While there are some useful outlets, free at the point of use, such as the National Saturday Club, these too are often limited to one term or one year of membership.

Longer term, the practices of A New Direction might be effectively shared with arts education teams in venues or National Portfolio Organisations as a way of positively influencing the design of interventions aimed at children in care, but this would require further investment and assessment of current capacity.

### **Improving Commissioned Services: Knowing what Quality Looks Like**

The Virtual Schools across the four participating boroughs independently reported that We Belong had improved their understanding of what to look for in high quality arts projects for children in the care system.

Follow up discussions with virtual schools staff featured recurring descriptions of the 'understanding', 'care' and 'thoughtfulness' of the project design. This attention to detail impressed the virtual schools. Breaking that down to particular aspects or principles was not easy to do, since schools had not been actively involved in the planning process and were identifying a quality of delivery without being able to tie significant features back to original plans. However, it is possible to infer from virtual school observations that the following aspects of We Belong seemed to add quality and improve impacts from their perspective:

- **Understanding context** – through a combination of briefings about the care system and listening to young people in care We Belong was able to meet the needs of young people more effectively.
- **Building the right team** – it was important to have a blend of skills within the We Belong team; expertise around the care system, experience of project management, dedicated tech back up and the ability for artists to 'not have to

think' too deeply about technological aspects of delivery and artists who could share 'how' as well as 'wow' when it came to their practice.

- **Structuring the sessions** – building in breaks, making some aspects mandatory to build a group ethic, balancing group work with opportunities for 1:1 guidance and support. Structure was important because it was both the means of setting ambition and expectation, while providing flexibility and chances to opt-out as well as opt-in.
- **Hearing one another** – We Belong was more collaborative than didactic. Key to this was active listening, an overt feature of A New Direction project management which was exemplified by the 'campfire' introductory activity each day. Young people were encouraged to air their views and share their impressions; their ability to do so grew as the sessions evolved. The more they heard from one another, the more they valued the work with increasingly sensitive feedback.
- **Celebrating talent while developing skills** – virtual school staff appreciated the way We Belong created a forum for young people's talent. It was uplifting for participating children to hear their talents win recognition by artists and their peer group. Artists were always trying to get young people to recognise when they were at their best, where and under what circumstances. However, it was also important to virtual school staff to see the ways artists were able to break down their own practices in order to allow young people to build their own capacities. From mark-making to word-finding, the artists were effective at simplifying techniques to make them accessible and transferable.
- **Sharing creative work appropriately** – the use of Padlet and the Hero's Journey online landscape on Mural valued art works and situated it in ways that added status and meaning to young people's creativity. Sharing work was not an afterthought, but a crucial means of charting development across the sessions.

## Conclusions

We Belong was an intensive but ambitious project and sought to achieve some important outcomes:

- Improved awareness among artists of issues associated with working with children in care.
- Improved awareness among virtual schools of the affordances of the arts and their ability, when mediated well, to fully engage and stimulate positive engagement among children in care.
- Improvements in the well-being, confidence and self-expression of young people and a greater understanding of the role the arts might have in their lives.

It would be hard to conclude that the project had not made significant contributions to all three of its stated objectives, and testimony provided in preceding sections attests to this.

It is worth keeping in mind that it was comparatively labour intensive with a ratio of adults to young people that would often not be possible in many learning contexts. However, as a means of identifying talents and providing initial stimulus to continue with creative work, it was an unqualified success.

Linked to this is the importance of acknowledging that there can be no short cuts. The time and resource deployed in properly recruiting artists and co-planning was unquestionably the vital component in delivering and managing the week of creative activities.

A New Direction may wish to consider mapping their project design and timings, so that in the future proper estimates of capacity on interventions such as this can be justified, and a business case be made for them. It seems clear that time invested up front to plan, and additional time to reflect mid and end project are not indulgences, but crucially important elements to be held onto.

Bringing experienced workers from within the care sector and care leavers into the team also paid dividends and would be an element worth replicating in future projects with a similar scope. Not only did this inform the intervention design, making the concept one that was more accessible to children in care, it also improved the day-to-day management of sessions; if issues arose, experienced professionals could help limit their seriousness and effectively de-escalate where required.

An aspect that was less sharply defined was the recruitment of young people. There are many sensitivities around the recruitment of children in care to enrichment projects, and it makes sense from a safeguarding perspective to route such processes through virtual schools. However, questions then arise about how young people are identified as potential candidates, how directed that invitation is and whether there

are chances of self-selecting children missing out because their interest in the project theme or area of activity simply isn't known about.

There was an impression from virtual school interviewees that the We Belong invitation was in many cases channelled toward those young people who were already known to be interested in or involved with the arts. This may be an advantage in the sense that motivation levels may be higher throughout the project, but is potentially double edged.

If a project that may have been a break-in moment for a child not currently involved in the arts is not as accessible as a result of targeted recruitment aimed at the most keen young people, then that may be a cost worth reflecting on further. Such projects, where recruitment is effectively a moment of matching or gatekeeping by VS staff, may unconsciously risk supplying opportunities to young people whose interests are already clearly defined, but miss others whose engagement is less obvious or more emergent. Reflecting on alternative ways of reaching young people in care may be worthwhile – is direct contact with social workers and carers an additional possibility? Would communication with mainstream schools also pay dividends?

The artists selected for this project were well matched to the demands of the young people and the criteria used in that process internally by A New Direction might usefully be formalised as categories or principles for application in the future.

The methods and approaches used while the project was live were of the highest quality and would be a useful focal point for any future network of practitioners seeking to work in this sector. The practices showcased in We Belong exemplified those already well documented in creative learning environments where the following key features recur<sup>7</sup>:

- Opportunities for play, experimentation and exploration
- Children feel comfortable in taking risks and making mistakes
- Exciting or unusual contexts are often used for learning
- Opportunities for free-flowing thinking and ideas generation
- Opportunities for critical reflection that is supportive and formative
- Children encouraged to take ownership of their learning
- Children able to make choices in terms of tasks and approaches

Virtual Schools instinctively grasped that this project was a high-quality intervention and indicated that they had a better idea of what to look for in the future when directly commissioning work. However, quite how consistently that impression of quality may translate into practical criteria is less clear. It may be worth adapting some of the observations from this evaluation which articulate the principles and practices that seemed most effective and sharing those with virtual schools as consistent and evidence-based criteria for building partnerships or procuring artists' services.

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<sup>7</sup> Harrington, D.M. (1990) The Ecology of Human Creativity: A Psychological Perspective. In M.A. Runco and R.S. Albert (eds) Theories of Creativity. Newbury Park, CA: SAGE Publications pp 143-169.