

# Evaluation of the Art and Us Programme at MK Gallery



**MAY 2021**

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With special thanks to Bethany Mitchell (Curator of Inclusion), Anthony Spira (Director) and all current and former staff at MK Gallery who contributed to this report, as well as Associate Artists and Art and Us families for their time.



# 1 Introduction

The Art and Us programme was developed by MK Gallery in partnership with Hastings-based organisation, Project Art Works<sup>1</sup>, in recognition of the unique needs of families with a child or children with complex needs<sup>2</sup>, and the potential benefits of their participation in creative and artistic spaces. Art and Us is an inclusive and ‘whole-family’ programme of art explorations and activities in which specially trained Associate Artists deliver bespoke, Gallery-based sessions to families who have a child with complex needs .

Evidence of such benefits were published by The World Health Organisation, in a large scoping study that indicates the importance of the arts for health and wellbeing (WHO, 2019). The report signals an increasing interest in policy, practice and research in the area, although there is very little known about the experiences of children with complex needs (Watson, 2017) including their involvement in arts based activities.

This evaluation was designed to examine the impact of Art and Us on all stakeholders; the children and families that attend, the Associate Artists who work with them and the wider Gallery staff and culture. The evaluation is informed by an ecological model that locates children within cultural systems including their family, institutions they engage in and the wider society.

## 2.1 Approach to the evaluation

Participatory research with people with learning disabilities and other complex needs has been established as a research field for over twenty years (<http://www.open.ac.uk/healthand-social-care/research/shld/>. Ledger et al 2016; Liddiard et al, 2017; Earle et al, 2020). The project was informed by this field of research, as well as the approach taken by Project Artworks ([https:// projectartworks.org/](https://projectartworks.org/)) in the evaluation of their service for adults with complex needs (Ewbank and Mills, 2015).

The independent evaluation was undertaken by a team of researchers at the Open University. The design of the research study was informed by reference to a small group of advisors that include a speech and language therapist and parent of an artist with complex disabilities, with personal experience of using these research methods. Additionally, researchers from the Social History of Learning Disabilities (SHLD) experienced in designing and conducting research to facilitate participation of people with complex disabilities, Sue Ledger and Noelle McCormack, contributed to the original design (Ledger, 2012; Ledger et al 2016; Ledger 2019; McCormack, 2017; McCormack, 2020).

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<sup>1</sup> In 2016 Project Art Works were awarded an Ambition for Excellence grant by Arts Council England to deliver Explorers, a three-year programme of art and conversation in partnership with cultural organisations across the UK and in Australia. Taking place against a backdrop of increased hardship and intolerance toward people with disabilities, the aim is to develop positive relationships between cultural organisations and the social care sector and to reposition people who have complex needs at the forefront of mainstream culture.



The design of family interviews was undertaken in consultation with Bethany Mitchell, Curator of Inclusion at MK Gallery and Martin Swan, Explorers Project Coordinator. The researcher who undertook the interviews the families, Ned Redmore, is also experienced in the use of participatory methods for people with complex disabilities (Andrews, Hodge, Redmore, 2019, Redmore, 2020).

## 2.2 Ethical practice and approvals

The project was reviewed by, and received a favourable opinion, from the Open University Research Ethics Committee (reference HREC/3524/O'Dell). Participation in the evaluation was voluntary and anonymous. Accessible information and consent forms were made available to all potential participants. All contributions have been anonymised in the report.

## 2.3 Methods

During the commissioning of the evaluation and undertaking the research the Covid-19 pandemic caused significant impact on the Gallery, families and the evaluation of the Art and Us programme.

The methodology of the evaluation was, as a result, significantly changed over this period. This amended methodology enabled families to provide their feedback on their experiences of the programme but did not enable the researchers to observe the sessions in situ. It meant that the voices of the children who participate in the Art and Us sessions were mediated in the evaluation through their parents' feedback on most occasions.



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<sup>2</sup> Complex needs is the preferred term used by Project Art Works for describing the people they collaborate with: The term 'complex needs' embraces a number of neuro-diverse states of being such as severe learning disability and/or autism and/or cognitive impairments and/or behaviours described as challenging that combine to produce multiple and intersecting support needs. Sometimes these are also combined with complex physical needs as well. Project Art Works with Karikis (2020)

Methods were designed to enable the voices of stakeholders in the Art and Us programme and the wider Gallery to contribute to the evaluation. The evaluation also aimed to document the impact of the programme on individuals - families, Associate Artists, Gallery staff and former staff, and on the working culture of the Gallery itself and how the practices learnt within the Art and Us programme more widely, beyond the Gallery.

There are five elements to the research undertaken:

1. Interviews with families who have engaged in the Art and Us programme
2. Interviews with Associate Artists
3. Interviews with former Gallery staff
4. Focus groups with Gallery staff
5. Analysis of sessional feedback forms and testimonial data from families

#### **i) Interviews with families**

Families were able to contribute in one of two ways, either in a phone or online (Microsoft Teams) interview, or by completing an online survey. 4 families took part in the interview and 4 participated in an online survey.

#### **ii) Interviews with Associate Artists**

Associate Artists were invited to take part in a one-to-one interview using Microsoft Teams. 6 Associate Artists were interviewed.

#### **iii) Interviews with former Gallery staff**

Key staff who were involved in the setup of the Art and Us programme, but who had left during the last 6-9 months, were interviewed on Microsoft Teams. 4 former Gallery staff participated in the project.

#### **iv) Interviews with former Gallery staff**

7 current Gallery staff participated in focus group discussions led by the research team on Microsoft Teams.

#### **v) Analysis of sessional feedback forms and testimonial data from families**

Throughout the duration of the Art and Us programme, the Gallery collected short feedback surveys and testimonials from families for their internal evaluation and reports to funders. The survey consisted of 3 questions with Likert scale answers and was in an accessible format. There were forms from 53 separate Art and Us sessions.

All interviews were recorded and transcribed.

In addition, this report includes testimonials from a family who participated in a film 'Sharing Art and Us' that was produced by the Gallery.





## 3 Findings

The findings are divided into 4 sections:

- The Art and Us programme
- Families' experiences at Art and Us
- The Art and Us Associate Artists
- The impact of Art and Us on the wider Gallery

### 3.1 The Art and Us programme

The participants were overwhelmingly positive about the Art and Us programme, its benefits and impact. The evaluation explored feedback on the values that have become embedded in Art and Us and investigated how its structure and methods impact its delivery of inclusive arts for families with children with complex needs.

#### Values

At its core, the Art and Us programme is child-led and focused on participation of the whole family. Other aspects of the programme were also apparent in the feedback from family members, Associate Artists and staff, which, as the quotes below highlight, include being generous, inclusive, playful and open, providing safe and caring spaces, and creating artistic experiences:



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*it's not just about painting, it's more being involved in the experience – parent*

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*generosity of time, a willingness to learn, quiet and safe spaces, knowledge sharing, and I suppose it also had a calmness as well – former staff*

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*the main word that comes to mind is inclusion and just accepting everybody that comes our way and that wants to take part, and just being extremely open to people's differences and really embracing people's differences, celebrating people's differences really - Associate Artist*

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*inclusivity and I think care... caring and thinking about someone else's needs and their interests and how they might enjoy or how they might access or gain something from an art interaction at a Gallery – Gallery staff*

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## Participating in a creative process and experience

Art and Us is not outcome driven; the sessions are designed with the aim of facilitating a creative process and experience for children and families, which may result in the creation of a piece of art, or developing a particular skill but this is not an assumed endpoint of each session.

Associate Artists who took part in the evaluation discussed how the process has changed their perspectives on art, such as the purpose of doing and creating art. There is value here, as it brings fresh insights into what inclusive art can be when working with children with complex needs:

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*sometimes you just make a bit of a mess but maybe that is art and sometimes you just make a situation where lots of things were possible and participants sort of tap into one route and then perhaps another time they'll tap into another - Associate Artist*

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*it's really about not making assumptions and almost shifting, from my perspective, shifting what your expectation of success might look like, in another delivery setting when you're working with another group and there might be an outcome-oriented process or it might be engagement with all the materials or sustained attention or whatever and with these families it's just so much more nuanced and so much more about connection and what that looks like - Associate Artist*

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## Structure

The primary engagement that families have with Art and Us is during an hour and a half, morning or afternoon slot on Sundays. The slots provide an opportunity for families and Associate Artists to create a distinctive space and experience. This had the benefit of making the sessions feel unique and extraordinary:

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*I guess the value of it is creating that opportunity and that key moment of full separation from those realities that they have to face and putting it like a no barrier situation of you can do art and this is where you can do it. If there's anywhere you can do it it's going to be here and it's going to be during this hour and a half session - Associate Artist*

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The scheduling of an hour and a half sessions can create constraints, with some families finding themselves short of time and under pressure to make the most of their sessions.

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*I think for us what would happen more often than not, it would take some time for Tashi to start to engage. So, I can't remember how long the sessions were actually, I think it was an hour and a half, it could probably take her at least half an hour to warm up, at least, if not longer – family member*

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*I think another half an hour would have been very beneficial – parent*

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These constraints were noted by staff:

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*there was a different emphasis on the space that had been created, the time that people needed to settle into the programme or engage with the Associate Artist. There was definitely a different pace which was lovely to watch. But there definitely is a restriction on how much families could engage – former staff*

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*The structure also meant that families would often work with different artists each time. Whilst this worked well for many, some parents contributing to the evaluation suggested that working with Associate Artists more consistently could, for some children, encourage their participation:*

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*it possibly would have been nicer to have a bit of consistency, because I think there was always a bit of anxiety, just, oh, meeting somebody, I don't know where I'm going and why I'm going, I don't want to go, something new - parent*

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## Capacity

In creating such a welcoming and inclusive place for families with children with complex needs the Gallery has quickly attracted a significant demand for the Art and Us sessions. The families who attend the programme suggest there is little, or no, provision for activities outside the Gallery, school or family home that are suitable for their children or appropriate for their needs. Gallery staff report that the programme has reached its available capacity:

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*even designating a whole day of the week to this programme every single week, it almost still felt like we weren't doing enough – focus group*

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Associate Artists and staff reported a reluctance to spread the word about Art and Us because they understood that it would make it harder to access:

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*it's such a great project and something that we are all very proud of, but actually shouting about something that is oversubscribed can sometimes be perceived as a little bit unkind – Associate Artist*

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Some parents reported that the lack of capacity made it difficult for the child to settle into the programme, as they needed a few consistent weeks to become accustomed to the space, the people and the activities:

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*Another family said despite absolutely loving the programme and the space, they just couldn't commit because they weren't able to come every week and they needed that kind of more repetitive routine - parent*

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Others said there was a sense of guilt when their child did not want to attend their booked session, as they were aware of the demand for the programme:

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*I think there should be more of them. There is a waiting list and... we might have missed two and then with COVID, so out of those six we did half... and then there are so many other families that can't access it, because there's a waiting list. So, I think more of it really, because it does take all of the children, even with different needs, need that to get in really – parent*

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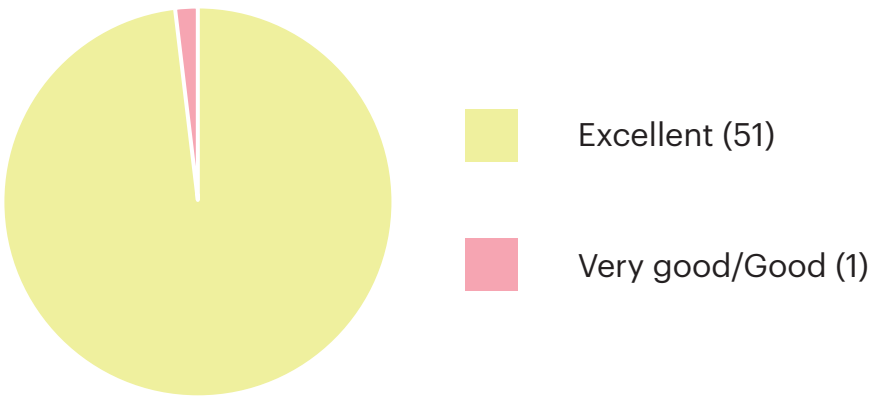
### 3.2 Family’s experiences at Art and Us

A key achievement of Art and Us is that it has been able to consider and respond to the interests and values of families with diverse needs and circumstances. This has enabled a wide range of families to have artistic and creative experiences in a welcoming and accessible space.

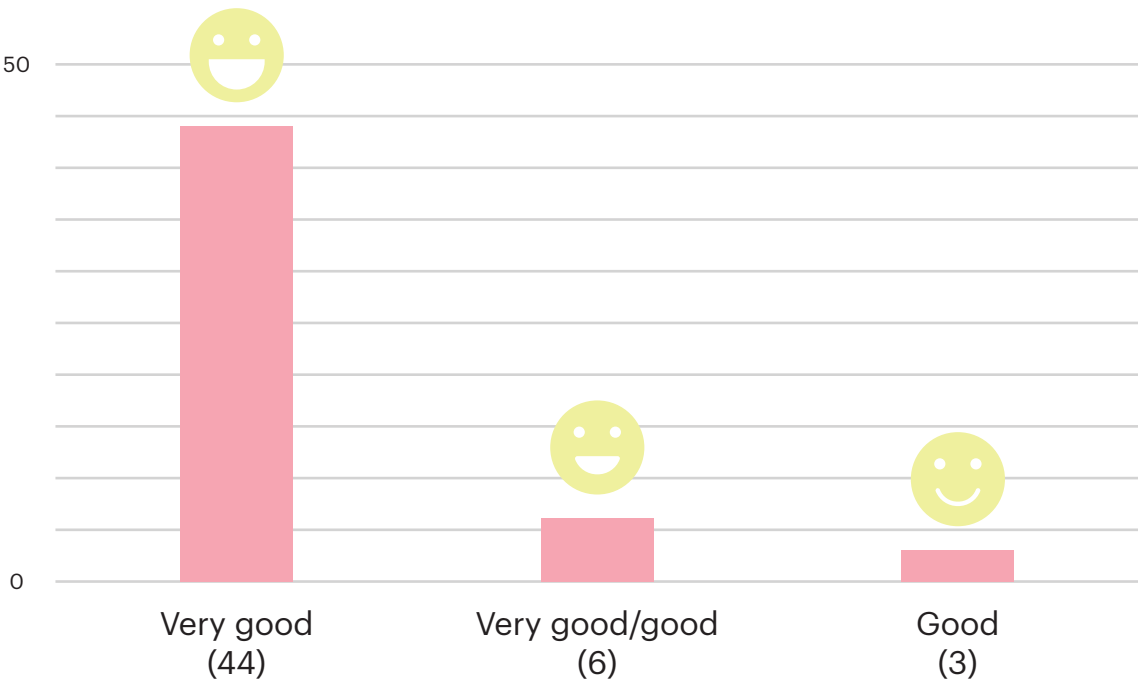
#### Feedback from the sessions

Of the 53 responses to individual Art and Us sessions, produced immediately after a session, the families rated their experiences as follows:

How would you rate the session today:



Would your child/children like to rate their experience by circling the symbol which best represents their feelings during the session?



In addition to a rating scale, families were encouraged to provide open feedback about their experiences with the sessions. The qualitative feedback was overwhelmingly positive, supporting the more quantitative findings above. This is evident in children's feedback:

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*I want to make it again, that was fun! I want to go back there – child from the Art and Us film*

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*fun! yes and I was wearing my swim shorts and I even tried to splash dad – child from the Art and Us film*

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Parents specifically noted that Art and Us<sup>3</sup> provided opportunities for families to work together, for example:

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*we worked together as a family on lots of different and exciting projects - parent*

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*we enjoyed getting messy together experimenting making fluffy paint and space art. [The Associate Artist] was great at adapting the art to both children's needs. Thank you as always – parent*

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The child-centred focus for the session was also referred to by parents, specifically noting the supporting and accommodating environment that was created by both the Gallery and the Associate Artists. For example:

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*both children absolutely loved the session. Perfect, calm environment taking it at [child's] pace. Lots of art and music to keep both children entertained. Highly recommend to families with children with complex needs - parent*

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*fantastic environment and options to be creative. Beth kept the session moving on to help keep [child] focussed and had his interests involved to allow him to try and use his imagination. He had a fantastic time. Thank you! – parent*

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The children valued the opportunity to take part in activities that they would not be able to do outside the Gallery:

“ ***I wonder, did you think that before you came to Art and Us that doing things like fancy dress would be a type of art?*** ”

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*I wouldn't have thought of it. But Art and Us and the Gallery in general has really opened our eyes to the world of art - children*

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*It was great fun making art on the walls with waterguns because it was something different. as it was unconventional but also slightly more fun - child*

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## Removing barriers

The Gallery staff, particularly the Art and Us staff and Associate Artists make significant and concerted efforts to accommodate families, taking into consideration potentially difficult, upsetting or overwhelming aspects of the Gallery space, so that the children can comfortably attend the sessions:

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*there was a really lovely time when there was a young boy who used to come in and he couldn't get past the door coming into the space because the lighting above him, it must have been, I can't remember what lighting it was but for whatever reason it was a trigger for him and he would become so absorbed in the lighting that it would take maybe 45 minutes to enter the space. So the Curator of Inclusion worked with our technician to swap the lighting over there. Next time they entered the space, he was in within five minutes and he was absolutely fine - former staff*

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## Judgement free

Families reported that the Art and Us sessions provide a space in which they feel that they are not judged for the way they act, communicate or express themselves. The families discussed how they felt that the way Associate Artists and staff engaged with them demonstrated empathy and understanding, and families reported that this was a vital and valued part of the Art and Us experience:

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*A fantastic opportunity for children to express themselves and be able to be exposed to new experiences in a safe, controlled and completely understanding and non-judgemental environment with the tolerance to allow the children to change the pace and agenda at any time – parent survey*

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Parents reported that finding judgement-free spaces for their family is rare. Art and Us represented one of the few places families were able to enjoy themselves as families:

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*It is hard to find activities where you don't feel judged by others, as you can be so conscious of challenging behaviour, but the Art and Us sessions were totally non-judgemental and that was very freeing for us all – parent survey*

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*I don't really care what people say or think or do, but it's a burden sometimes, you just kind of go, really, I have to deal with that as well... So, it's nice to go to a place where you're just welcome and you can just be yourself – parent*

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## A safe and relaxing space

In removing barriers and judgement from the space, families feel that they will be welcomed in the Art and Us sessions. In addition, knowledge that materials and activities will be hazard free, was seen to help families to overcome fears about the associated risks of art practice, as reported:

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*I think to be able to know there's going to be a safety in that we're in a space with three Associate Artists who have experience in this... I think it creates that safety for them to say that OK well whenever I'm in this space I know that the materials aren't toxic, I know the activities themselves aren't dangerous, I know there aren't any issues in that respect that may not have a guarantee of in another setting or in another format – Associate Artist*

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The effect of this is that Art and Us represents a safe space for families, and as parents commented, their concerns and responsibilities are lifted:

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*it's nice to go to a place where you're just welcome and you can just be yourself and you can chill out and I felt off duty a little, not a lot, but off duty a little, so I felt like I could hand her to them, although I stayed in the room, I didn't have to be the person doing everything, I was able to step back, which was nice - parent*

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*(we're) enjoying time together without any pressure or organising on the parents. A true break – parent survey*

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Children are also instilled with a sense of comfort and security, as they become familiar with the space and what happens there:

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*I think just seeing her have pleasure was lovely and that's nice, because we don't generally get that ...so it was nice to have something that we could go to and it was a safe place and they welcomed families – parent*

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## **Child-led**

Art and Us sessions begin with an array of ideas and activities tailored around the attending children's interests and enthusiasms. Associate Artists tempt the children's curiosities and in doing so, invite them to take the lead on the creative journey:

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*it didn't feel so structured, it flows with what the children wanted to do and listening to the children and what they're commenting on when they use the colours and the textures and a lot of experimenting and feeling – parent*

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Remarking on the Associate Artists' approach, parents drew attention to the fine balance achieved in enabling children to lead, while ensuring the sessions progress smoothly:

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*so at all points the Associate Artists were, they created an environment where the child could completely have freedom to lead, but the Associate Artists were at all points in control of all that parameter... so they created a safe place for the children to be themselves and that's really nice – parent*

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Associate Artists attend to the children's communication, no matter what form it is in, demonstrating the inclusive nature of Art and Us' child-led approach:

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*I think maybe 90% of the kids that I've worked with are often non-verbal or they'll have a minimum use of words. So it's really the physicality that's huge for them and you play off of how they're feeling or how they're acting or reacting - Associate Artist*

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## **Recognising and encouraging interests**

Part of Art and Us' child-led approach involves the Associate Artists attending to children's interests and encouraging them to explore these creatively. Parents reported that their children feel safe to take the creative processes in directions of their choosing, enabling positive expression that may be discouraged in other spaces:

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*so for example the cat world... so Tashi then wanted to obviously do something quite dark and lock all the humans away and there was like blood and I thought, oh my gosh, no, maybe not, Tashi. The Associate Artist was brilliant and said, no, come on, just let her do what she wants to do and just go with it, explore it and got really excited with her and actually managed to get a lot more out of her because she was actually encouraged to do something that she really wanted to do and that freedom of creation and actually that direct link and creating a bit of rapport actually, I think that was hugely positive - parent*

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Children are encouraged to interact and express themselves in ways that they find meaningful, with Associate Artists demonstrating patience and understanding:

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*we find it hard sometimes to get Mary to engage at the best of times, so for people who didn't know her to really take the time, like the waving of the sock and the fabric and things, not in her face, but just near her to tempt her and they were shaking things on the floor just gently, just beside her... next to her, but allowing her to have her own space. That's a really important skill for us, because that means that it's at her choosing if she engages, it's not a forced engagement, there's no pressure on her then - parent*

The close rapport Associate Artists develop with children not only helps creative expression, but also encourages social connection and interaction. Families and Associate Artists commented on the joy in seeing relationships develop:

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*In one session, Bill recorded how many buses he saw go past the window... They also took turns being the bus driver and the bus station master by having a conversation on the phone about how many buses they had seen - this was so lovely to see Bill freely speak on the phone and wanting to interact - all done to the theme meeting his motivators of vehicles! – parent survey*

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*we were both looking out the window to look at the birds, well just anything really, and then they sort of put their hand on my arm and it just stayed like that. And there was no additional engagement. But you knew that that was the way that it needed to shift... the mood has changed and it's not about bringing it back to where it was but just seeing where it goes - Associate Artist*

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## **Families coming together**

The Art and Us sessions are designed to encourage the children to lead alongside which the Associate Artists plan and facilitate activities in which all family members can participate. This is one of the programme's most compelling qualities, in that children lead sessions which encourage brothers, sisters, parents and other family members to join in creative acts and expressions.

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*we went there with the concept, oh, it's a good thing for the cousins to do together, then realised, no, it's the whole family - parent*

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Parents noted how they went to Art and Us with the expectation of it being designed to engage their children, and then became involved themselves as the sessions progressed:

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*it's nice because originally it was just my nieces and my son doing the art thing and then third, fourth session in me and my sister-in-law, we would get involved, so we're all involved with it and it was nice for the kids to see us as adults getting involved - parent*

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Art and Us provides an opportunity for families to experience a dynamic that is not always easy for families with children with complex needs, that encourages communication, interaction and understanding. It is, as one parent put it, 'very family bonding'.

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*I think that it offers, it's a destination, it's an activity, it's going as a family and doing something that makes it different to them being a family in their home... this space anchors them as a family – Associate Artist*

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## Siblings

The creative journeys of siblings at Art and Us were said to instigate social connection and understanding, as they began at the same points, sharing in one another's activities and spaces:

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*I think the other huge positive was doing something with her sister at the same time and that was new to both of them, so having that even starting point as well - parent*

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*it sort of creates that moment for families, for siblings to be able to work on the same thing and be able to do something together and play together - Associate Artist*

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Even when the different perspectives of siblings were said to cause tension or upset in the session, the experience of Art and Us helps them overcome their differences, as their initially separate creative journeys came together:

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*I know she did sometimes get a bit annoyed when her little sister would splatter paint everywhere or completely change the direction of what Tina had planned and sometimes they would do something independently, like a small version each on the paper in terms of what they were doing, but then towards the end I think they always came together and that was actually really nice – parent*

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## New and revisited opportunities

By design, every session that families attend at Art and Us is an opportunity to try something new. The variation and diversity of Associate Artists produces an ever-changing cycle of perspectives, approaches and activities, all centred on the interests of the child and the family but opening up unexpected avenues of adventure.

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*...there was this one Associate Artist when we done colour and landscape and he created a drama movement thing to transport them to the land of colour, so we were using colourful fabrics in that and inviting the kids to put it over our heads and getting us involved and twirling around and that, which they found hilarious, and they really enjoyed that - parent*

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The variety and ever-changing array of activities provided by Art and Us is important to the families that attend:

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*Since the options for activities for SEND children are limited, this is welcome. It gives us a chance do something fun without a lot of the usual variables that can make an outing stressful – parent survey*

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*I think when they come along and actually we're playing with water pistols and we're doing fancy dress and we're building things and making, I don't know, slime and stuff... I haven't really had any conversations with families where they've done anything similar before – focus group*

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## Art and Us extending home

Families' exploration of, and engagement with, creative activities at Art and Us does not stop at MK Gallery. The sessions can result in families taking activities home to inspire new creative practices in the home spaces of attending families', as many parents reported, for example:

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*it was working with various mediums, so it was mainly like different types of... and she was really keen to bring it home, some aspects of it, and have it on the living room floor for a while, so that was fun - parent*

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Skills learned at Art and Us are used at home, as 'David', a child that attends Art and Us, mentioned when telling us about the skull based art he had been doing through the Covid-19 pandemic:

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“ David: Yeah, I tried, so we did string art and I did like this skull thing.

Parent: And he done some printing on aprons, didn't you?

David: Yeah and I tried to make my own skull top, but it didn't work, so we're doing it again. ”

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The skills in interaction, communication and expression learned at Art and Us also benefit the children within school environments:

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*And I think at school they're realising his strengths and that, so anything where he can show his understanding in a visual way helps - parent*

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The experience of doing art on the programme can encourage families to explore the art world more broadly, encouraging engagement in other artistic spaces, such as events and galleries:

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*I think David would love to go to art galleries, but obviously we didn't have the chance and I would, when we can, go to London and go to the Tate Gallery and just show him different styles of art, I think he would really enjoy that - parent*

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## Transition to adulthood

The Art and Us programme supports children and young adults working with their families. An issue raised by some participants in the evaluation concerned the need to provide a transition for older children and young adults into either different activities within the Art and Us programme or an alternative. As part of developing independence and a move to adulthood some young people may not want to continue to engage creatively alongside their families.

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*thinking about some of the participants who are teenagers or slightly older and sort of what potentially... they would enjoy being part of in the same way that there is a provision for neurotypical children of that age. And I know they'd still be welcomed to Art and Us, but just whether their needs are slightly shifting and whether the dynamic of them wanting to be in a group and maybe make work without their families – Associate Artist*

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### 3.3 The Art and Us Associate Artists

The Art and Us Associate Artists draw on their practice as artists to bring a diverse range of skills and expertise to the programme. They work to bring creative and imaginative thinking to their positive and innovative practices in the sessions, benefiting participating families as well as the Associate Artists themselves.

#### Understanding the children and families

Associate Artists and Gallery staff take considerable effort to learn about attending families prior to Art and Us sessions. The bespoke nature of the programme is evident in the work undertaken to understand families' interests, needs and perspectives.

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*an awful lot of consideration was given by the Curator of Inclusion and the Associate Artists who led the programme in terms of creating spaces that were very, very personal for the families – former staff*

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By creating a knowledge of families attending Art and Us, its Associate Artists are able to instil a sense of familiarity and belonging into the programme:

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*I think that's probably quite a special feeling to go to something where you know that you've been, you and your child and your family their needs have been considered so much, I think that's probably quite special – Associate Artist*

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#### Planning for the journey

The knowledge Associate Artists build of attending families enables them to plan detailed and varied sessions that bring children's interests into creative practices and activities:

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*We get the email that says this is who you're working with, this is some of their interests, these are some of the things that worked well although this is some of the stuff that didn't and your mind just goes running. For the next week you're thinking OK would this work or maybe this. Now I need to think about that. I think that, where am I going with this? -Associate Artist*

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The importance of this planning was apparent, as Associate Artists detailed their excited and anxious experiences of beginning the process, and thinking about the possibilities of what they could provide:

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*we get scared at the moment that we get that email. Like we're excited about it of course but it's just like oh OK start from scratch. You sort of start from scratch in that way, so I think that's one of the, like we want to make that magic. And we know that we can do it - Associate Artist*

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The outcome of this planning is novel and inventive sessions for children and families, which take them out of everyday life:

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*we designed a full-scale car. And it was from A to Z of we do the sketches and then we build it in clay and then we had these cardboard pieces that we were cutting out and making it. So it was, that was knowledge that I had about automobile design that I transferred to someone who does really like cars and does like Formula One racing. So then we designed that together - Associate Artist*

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## **Being flexible**

The planning that goes into Art and Us enables the sessions to be flexible. Throughout this evaluation, Associate Artists, staff and family members highlighted the importance and benefit of this flexible approach, as it creates and contributes to the child-led focus that is so vital in giving children participants choice and control over their creative journeys:

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*then they will set up an art installation around those interests and then will offer opportunities for those children to engage within it, so they then can lead through, so it's not specifically set up so that that's all that they can achieve, they can then take it in any direction that they want to go in. That I think is the beauty of those sessions - parent*

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To be flexible meant that Associate Artists went in directions unaccustomed to them, changing the way they think about art practice and the ways that they deliver it:

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*we're all very, very accustomed to... adapting it to the families. So I've often worked with materials that I have never worked with before, but I can see that there'd be a resonance with the families and young person. So I think it's more about creative problem solving than actually bringing a toolkit of specific skillsets - Associate Artist*

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Key to being flexible was Associate Artists learning how to manage in the moment, by making on the spot decisions in response to the children's likes, dislikes, moods, enthusiasms and interests:

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*...if they don't like that activity then you're moving on. You're not dwelling on it, you're not trying to engage that activity, you're saying OK we'll turn it into something else or go to the next one or I'll blend them, and you often see that big flex when different activities start to merge together between Associate Artists - Associate Artist*

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Associate Artists reported that this was part of what made the sessions exciting and vibrant and allowed the children to settle into the space.

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*I've had a session where everything was going great, it was really high energy and the child sort of slipped and fell. Well they weren't hurt or anything it was just the wind got knocked out of him. So the wind came out of their sails. But it just meant that it shifted. And it went from sort of throwing things around to just counting little pieces of pasta - Associate Artist*

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There is also a tension between offering something bespoke or offering something at scale:

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*It has to be as convenient and as useable for everyone in every situation. And you realise that that's not the case; bespoke situations are really key to being inclusive, offering these different opportunities. So being aware of that that you can't do things like sort of en masse - Associate Artist*

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## Communication and relationship building

In taking families on creative journeys, the Art and Us Associate Artists anticipate and understand the perspectives of children with complex needs, through empathetic and patient practice:

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*They were just completely accepting. Nothing was too much problem. The fact that she - if she'd have walked in and just left that, there was no pressure on Mary to go in the tent area, there was no pressure on Mary to do any of the tasks and when she'd had enough everybody just walked away, it was fine - parent*

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Empathetic interaction between the Associate Artist and family embeds Art and Us, enabling Associate Artists to encourage creative and interactive expressions, and social interaction:

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*they may turn your splash pad into, well you may turn it into a cape and then you're going round the space with that cape and then you tie another cape on another kid and they're playing together and they're like building things together in the space and that's what's really great about it. So yeah I agree with your analogy of they're talking but there's no words that are spoken; it's all in the actions – focus group*

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## Impact on the Art and Us Associate Artists

The Associate Artists receive training from the Gallery to support a broad understanding of accessible and inclusive communication to engage children of a variety of circumstances and abilities. Understanding communication expressed through body language, actions and interactions, is essential in creating child-led practices:

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*I mean obviously we get very focused on language as human beings don't we, verbal language, and I think the arts, you know, doing something together, making something together, problem solving together, designing something together, yeah it brings like a new way of or a different way or a different angle of a way of communicating with each other - Associate Artist*

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*I mentioned before that many of our families or at least the young people in the families rely on non-verbal communication and stuff, so the materials, the substances, the objects that we're working with are fundamentally a means of communicating without language - Associate Artist*

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Associate Artists reported also, there are rich rewards in the relationships and bonds they form with families:

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*Experience-wise it's intense, but also it has a very high reward as well, because you get to know someone in a way that you wouldn't have known them otherwise – Associate Artist*

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Being child-led and encouraging full family involvement requires a great deal of planning from Associate Artists, as well as the ability to respond within dynamic situations. While engaging in Art and Us provides Associate Artists with imaginative and absorbing art sessions for attending families, they also spoke about the workload involved in planning such personalised approaches, which can, at times, be challenging:

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*I think the fact that it does push you out of your comfort zone that you don't know what to expect, that you might spend an awful lot of time planning for a multitude of scenarios, none of which are the direction it goes in. You know, it is fundamentally quite exhausting - Associate Artist*

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Associate Artists reported that they can feel a pressure to ensure their sessions are successful. This can be difficult when sessions change in the moment, according to the children's feelings and interests on the day:

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*the nature of the programme is that... you're connected with a family to devise a bespoke offer, but what you can really do is establish a starting point and even that might be discarded quite swiftly because it's such a dynamic environment - Associate Artist*

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Art and Us support Associate Artists through this endeavour, providing a range of training, including importantly, resilience training, helping their Associate Artists to overcome and understand situations they find difficult:

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*the Associate Artists are really well trained, they've had resilience training, so everybody who works with the IPA programme and Young People programme have resilience training, because those are the more challenging aspects of our programming – former staff*

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## Learning and sharing experiences

Each creative journey that Associate Artists and families go on are learning opportunities, creating knowledge of what works for particular families and particular children, as well as uncovering unexpected activities and artistic practices.

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*...stuff can go in all directions, all you can do is plan for the unknown, because you just can't really anticipate what's going to work. You're relying a lot on things like non-verbal cues and the dynamic is just really complex and can be really, really challenging, but that just makes for a really genuine environment for learning - Associate Artist*

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Associate Artists reported that engagement in the Art and Us programme has brought them together a team to learn and develop:

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*We always sort of stop and pause and evaluate it at the end, even if it's like a kind of constant conversation that goes on trying to unpick what we could have done differently but just sort of thinking about a certain instances in which, yeah, perhaps, a participant or a child hasn't responded very well and it's challenging because I don't, having not come from a kind of background working in an SEN school or having formal training – Associate Artist*

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*just being also working alongside other Associate Artists as well is really helpful, with the format of having a couple of Associate Artists in the workshop space and a couple of families and sort of like well I think it's like peer-to-peer learning it's probably classified as - Associate Artist*

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The Associate Artists who contributed to the evaluation spoke about how the knowledge created from Art and Us sessions does not remain with individual Associate Artists, but contributes to a rich culture of knowledge sharing between them to develop their artistic and inclusive practices:

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*It's been so fruitful in terms of learning about how to work amongst people. And in terms of having a socially engaged arts practice it's just a really, really incredible site. It's such a dynamic environment. It's so vibrant - Associate Artist*

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*it was so kind of like value driven and so personal that it became kind of... its own little ecosystem if you like, this kind of bubble that was IPA, and the Associate Artists I know took so much from learning about the families that they were working with but also they passed that knowledge between them. So one family might work with one Associate Artist one week and generally the Associate Artist would stay with that family but sometimes another Associate Artist would come in... I know that Associate Artists would always share the knowledge of that family with the other Associate Artists. Knowledge wasn't kept close, it was open and they were generous with that sharing and reflection - former staff*

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The Associate Artists who took part in the evaluation suggest that this type of inclusive arts community is rare, contrasting the solitary practice that commonly frames their work. They feel that such opportunities for inclusive arts communities should be valued, as they help to further and improve inclusive arts practice across a variety of settings.

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*I think a really good thing for myself is that it's really connected me to a wider network of Associate Artists. I think quite often as an Associate Artist you're working in quite solitary environments. So maybe you're going into a school to do a workshop or maybe you're doing an after school club or doing a Zoom workshop... just that support that we offer each other and that kind of, yeah that support network I think everybody would say has been a massive benefit to their practice, because we all kind of learn from each other - Associate Artist*

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### 3.4 The impact of Art and Us on the wider Gallery

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*I think it's one of the most important programmes that we do in the organisation – Gallery staff*

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Gallery staff that participated in the evaluation expressed their admiration for Art and Us, seeing it not just as a project that is part of MK Gallery, but rather a project that guides and influences the organisation as a whole, and which can be viewed as a symbol of who they are as an organisation.

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*...a lot of what we stand for is inclusivity, accessibility and I think that the leader of the pack if you like is Art and Us in terms of driving that message and supporting that ability to educate both internally and externally the need for more open inclusive understanding of a wider audience, our audience – Gallery staff*

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MK Gallery staff are proud of what Art and Us stands for, and what it does for the people that attend as well as the wider Gallery:

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*It feels a little bit unfair to be so proud of a project that I only watch afar, but... [family member] works with a lot of children with complex needs. And when I was telling her about the programme, she was just crowing about it, you know, wow that sounds absolutely fantastic and how, this sort of feeling that surrounds it of - it sounds really - what a great, how good it is, and it definitely is something that I'm extremely proud of as being part of the Gallery – Gallery staff*

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*...when we talk about inclusive practice I think it's something which that project has put MK Gallery quite high up on that map of somewhere that's doing good things. And I think that's really nice and it's something which I'd like to be able to communicate with people. And having worked in the sort of arts and health industry before and been involved in those conversations... this place is doing it really well and it's having such a positive impact – former staff*

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## An accessible Gallery

The Art and Us programme commenced at the time that the Gallery was designing its new building. The ideas around accessibility were coproduced across the programme and the evolving design of the new Gallery.

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*Art and Us and the thinking behind it did influence some of the design decisions for the actual Gallery building, so I say this a lot, but the fact that we have a Changing Places toilet facility, which is very unusual I think. I can't remember, but there are only a few hundred of them across the UK, or there were and that's changing rapidly, but it's something we're very proud of and I think that that signals our intention, our intent to be welcoming for everybody and so the design of the building I think was impacted by it and a lot of our programmes as well – focus group*

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The whole Gallery approach to embedding accessibility in the organisation has impacted the way exhibitions, events and Gallery spaces are designed:

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*the thought process about making the building accessible to families, we talk about the noise levels all the time, we're always talking about light levels, is this going to, you know, constantly. We put up the lights in the events space, we're like, is this going to be too bright, is this not bright enough, how is this going to affect our users – Gallery staff*

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Families who took part in the evaluation talked of how accessing the programme encouraged them to explore the wider Gallery, which they had not previously done:

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*in terms of the Gallery we did actually, it got us in there and it got us doing a little tour of the Gallery that was there, I think twice, and it was even nice just looking at the pictures, the art – parent*

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*So, it's that sort of, and then there probably would be a bit of, oh, I just want to go home now, but actually we have then been to the Gallery next door as well on the one or two occasions and just had a quick look around as well and because once we're out it's nice, because getting out is a job, it's a big job – parent*

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## Accessible events

Since the conception of Art and Us, MK Gallery has held numerous inclusive and accessible events, aimed at facilitating inclusion for people with complex needs including 'relaxed' cinema screenings, sensory tours, and accessible firework displays. These events were highly valued by families, representing a similar opportunity to Art and Us in which the entire family could share a positive experience of art:

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*I love art. I love all of, well, I like learning, so I'm sort of a weird nerd person, so it was really nice to go and enjoy something. I was able to look at the Gallery, which is why I really enjoyed it, which is very self-absorbed! I enjoyed looking at the Gallery, somewhere I wouldn't get to go because I have Mary, and Mary was quite happy because Mary was feeling and sensory and all of that too, so actually it was something that we both enjoyed - parent*

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*Sometimes places offer lights, but it's not enough for Mary. Mary needs to touch stuff; she needs to be in it... parent.*

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The consideration put into these inclusive events was demonstrated through the attention to detail around environmental and sensory triggers:

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*So, turning off the hand-dryers, we actually had somebody phone up or write to us or something and say, thank you for turning off the hand-dryers, that walking past a hand-dryer or a hand-dryer going off is one of the things that makes leaving the house just awful for our family and knowing that they're off and we can go to the cinema and we're not going to have that extra blast of sound that's really going to upset my child has really made the difference – Gallery staff*

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Accessing such events has the potential to give families confidence in other social and community-based settings, as one member of staff reported:

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*when we started to introduce the relaxed screenings, although it's not such a great business case for us, it then made them feel more confident to go to larger cinemas, because they felt like they were in their safe space with us. And that enabled them to feel perhaps more adventurous going into other places because they'd build up a bit of confidence and as a family group they knew how to manage a situation like going into a cinema and seeing a screening of a film – former staff*

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## **Staff learning**

Contributors to the evaluation report the integration of inclusive practices into the everyday culture of the Gallery. Staff are encouraged to ask questions and strive to make the Gallery more accessible for people often excluded, including people with complex needs:

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*also some of the access training that we received as part of the programme as well, it definitely has made me look at how we communicate online and on socials with families and making access information easier. So for things like the relaxed screening, making sure we have things like the social story which, without having those conversations or that expertise from [Curator of Inclusion], wouldn't have really been brought to light or to my attention that those were things to work on – Gallery staff*

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## **Changing perspectives**

Synonymous across the inquiry's respondents was the view that Art and Us has brought positive changes to the perspectives of all who work at MK Gallery. These new perspectives are focusing on how the Gallery's spaces, events and exhibitions can change to engage a wider variety of people, beginning with people with complex needs but extending to other areas of exclusion and marginalisation.

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*not just for the Art and Us families, but also thinking about more general areas of access, so what different types of tours might we want and how do we make it friendly for people and non-threatening for families that maybe have concerns about if you have a child who might react differently in a space – Gallery staff*

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These changes of perspectives were seen across Gallery staff, from front of house to senior positions, as staff reported:

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*from our Facilities Manager through to, I don't know, just the team on the front desk, they're far more aware of the role that they need to play in creating a physical environment that is welcoming and accessible – focus group*

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Moreover, staff that have left MK Gallery have taken with them understanding of accessibility and inclusivity into their new roles:

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*I think it's broadened my way of thinking and my way of approaching tasks that I do now. And I'm talking about some of the really simple things. You know, for example how some of the language that I might be using, the way in which I might be presenting information, the way in which I'm now thinking about how information might need to be presented in multiple formats. Again it's quite simple things, but the things that perhaps maybe systemically we've never been trained to think, if that makes sense, in that way. So yeah it's had a huge, huge impact – former staff*

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## **Creating and sustaining an inclusive culture**

Organisational culture can be defined as the perspectives, values and practices that govern the actions and approaches of a staff team. As outlined, there is clear evidence that Art and Us has impacted the perspectives, values and practices of MK Gallery for Gallery staff and Associate Artists:

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*I have found that being at the Gallery, and whether it's the Gallery or the Art and Us I couldn't tell you, but it permeates my thoughts in terms of accessibility, inclusivity, in terms of everything that we design. And each area that we develop we then think, whether we did that before Art and Us I couldn't tell you, but from my own experience I know think OK how's that going to work for those that have complex access needs? How's that going to work for, how will they, will we be able to caption it – Associate Artist*

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*we did a lovely Halloween family weekend as much as we were able to in COVID last year, and all of those areas that we dealt with, inclusivity and accessibility, were primary discussion points for each activity that we did. OK if we do that, well that's great, but how will that work for wheelchair users? Oh OK so we need design something that means that it doesn't limit that activity for able bodies, and I don't know if that's the appropriate terminology so my apologies if it isn't, but equally how can we include everybody? So you design things that incorporate as much as possible so that everybody can get involved really. And I think that comes from Art and Us – Gallery staff*

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The Art and Us programmes' focus on accessibility in regards to people with complex needs and the attention on accessibility has contributed to the Gallery's approach for other marginalised groups:

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*I think also just psychologically the attitude that the organisation has and is developing about welcoming and supporting this idea of, which is I think a bit of a guide for all of us, to try and bring the marginalised into the mainstream – Gallery staff*

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*...simple things like we've discussed on Instagram doing the image descriptions for people that are visually impaired and that came from conversations which are like a wider conversation which had come about because of Art and Us, it's not yeah specific to that programme, but it feeds into the rest of it – focus group*

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## 4 Recommendations

The evaluation has shown that the Art and Us programme is highly valued and provides a significantly positive impact on the lives of families with children with complex needs, and more widely on the associated Associate Artists, Gallery staff and the broader culture at MK Gallery. The report has also highlighted a number of areas which may further develop the project and its capacity to reach and engage stakeholders, these are summarised below in a series of recommendations:

### The programme

- The most apparent issue highlighted in the evaluation was the demand and desire for Art and Us to expand its capacity. If funding is available for expansion, the programme team should consider how to retain the bespoke, personalised and child-led elements of the programme.
- Associate Artists work with families interchangeably, and while this provides a diversity of activities and experiences, some families and children may benefit from working with particular Associate Artists more consistently, particularly when settling into the programme or where the child has an interest in a specific technique or medium. The research team recognises the inherent complexities in programming sessions that impact on changes of this kind.
- Providing families with the option to adapt the length of sessions could support children who may struggle with transitions to have appropriate time to fulfil their creative journeys.
- The flexibility of Art and Us was highlighted by the support offered to families during lockdown through online Zoom sessions and the creation of Sensory Boxes. This suggests a number of potential areas for development including an adapted version of Art and Us for families whose child finds it difficult to leave the house or access public spaces.
- Consideration needs to be given to the resilience of the current programme to ensure it could survive changes in key personnel.

### The families

- There was some suggestion that the programmes' activities (and whole family focus) may be less appropriate for older children and young people. While we do not advocate for an 'age-appropriate' focus to planning, which may result in normalisation over personalisation, there may be benefit in the programme team developing an approach specifically for older children and young people.
- Children, particularly those that are older, may appreciate or prefer, the option to attend Art and

Us sessions without their family, or with a group of peers. While this may contrast with the ethos of full family involvement, it may appeal to the interests and preferences of some participants.

- Consideration could be given to providing programmes for young people to transition into when they are too old for the Art and Us programme. This could include the Gallery offering support to further their skills and establish themselves as young disabled artists.

### The Associate Artists

- Associate Artists continue to develop a range of inclusive and novel art practices which could be documented, for example in an inclusive activities ideas book. This may enable Associate Artists to expand the tools with which they plan sessions and could also be provided to families to help their creative explorations at home.
- We recommend that Associate Artists help document the history and ongoing development of Art and Us, to ensure important experiences, stories and events are not lost.

### The wider Gallery

- Inclusive and accessible practices have become embedded in the focus and activity of MK Gallery, such as in the relaxed screenings and accessible fireworks. To help guide and improve this, we recommend that the Gallery continues to draw on the lived experience of families involved in Art and Us, as their insights and understandings can support the Gallery's commitment to integrated accessible environments.
- The expertise the Gallery has built up has put the organisation in a strong position to train and advise other organisations that engage children and young people with complex needs. This could be considered as a future area of development, with the Gallery being a catalyst for expanding capacity through work with other settings.



“

***It is of course right, fair and an ethical responsibility to operate in truly inclusive ways. But it is also more fun and joyous and more expansive to include all people in creativity and it makes us more creative.***

***Curator of Inclusion, MK Gallery***

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