



Creative Communities Scotland

Progress report

January 2026 - June 2026

INSPIRING SCOTLAND



Scottish Government
Riaghaltas na h-Alba
gov.scot

Executive summary

Creative Communities Scotland is demonstrating how community-led creativity can deliver meaningful social impact alongside cultural participation.

Since January, 11 organisations have engaged 630 people who might otherwise face barriers to participation. And early evidence reinforces the experience of previous programmes, showing creativity sparks personal and community growth.

Impact - although the programme is in the early stages of its operation, evidence highlights the positive progress made across all four programme outcomes:



People engage in creative arts, have fun and feel joy and pride - the strongest area of impact with 94% of participants discovering new talents, expressing themselves creatively and reporting improved confidence, self-esteem and wellbeing.



People build connections and feel less lonely or socially isolated - 71% of participants report projects are creating welcoming spaces where they feel accepted and valued. This is addressing isolation, building networks of support and a sense of belonging.



People gain the skills, knowledge and motivation to improve their circumstances - 47% of participants are acquiring the support, knowledge and skills to help them realise aspirations linked to health and personal development, education and employment.



People contribute to positive change in their communities - 17% of participants are sharing skills, supporting others, taking on leadership roles and helping grow community ownership and resilience.

Key learning - it is too early to be definitive about key learning, but preliminary analysis points to the following as potentially important themes:

- **Local collaboration is essential for community change and strengthening resilience** - effective local partnerships are key to unlocking local skills, resources and leadership, increasing the potential for lasting community impact.
- **Engage local creatives early** - involving local creatives from the outset aids programme design, improves delivery and can benefit local creative economies.
- **Participation cannot be assumed because opportunities are available** - deep-rooted social and cultural barriers can prevent engagement, highlighting the need for purposefully designed and culturally relevant approaches.
- **Handle identity-focused work sensitively and flexibly** - skilled facilitation and protection of safe time and spaces is vital for people exploring their identity.
- **Balance support for existing and new participants** - project growth and deeper social change takes time, so projects need to carefully balance the needs of existing participants whilst remaining accessible to new people.

These early findings suggest Creative Communities Scotland is not only increasing participation in culture and creativity but is starting to help individuals and communities build the confidence, relationships and resilience needed to thrive.



Programme overview

The programme builds on six years of learning from previous Creative Communities programmes and is founded on the belief that everyone should have the opportunity to participate in culture and creativity, regardless of their circumstances. By supporting community-led organisations to design and deliver creative activity, the programme creates opportunities for people to connect, develop confidence, improve wellbeing and contribute to positive change in their lives and their community.

11 Scottish Government funded projects in

9 local authority areas

320k Invested into

11 projects with grants ranging between £12k and £34k



Glasgow

- Empower Women For Change
- Romano Lav
- ESOL Scotland

Camglen Buddies
Leisure and Social Club,
South Lanarkshire

TD1 Youth Hub,
Scottish Borders

Gorebridge Community
Development Trust,
Gorebridge

A Place in Childhood,
Edinburgh

Forgan Arts Centre,
Fife

Hot Chocolate
Trust, Dundee

Touch of Love Outreach,
Aberdeen

Friends of Sanday Kirk,
Orkney

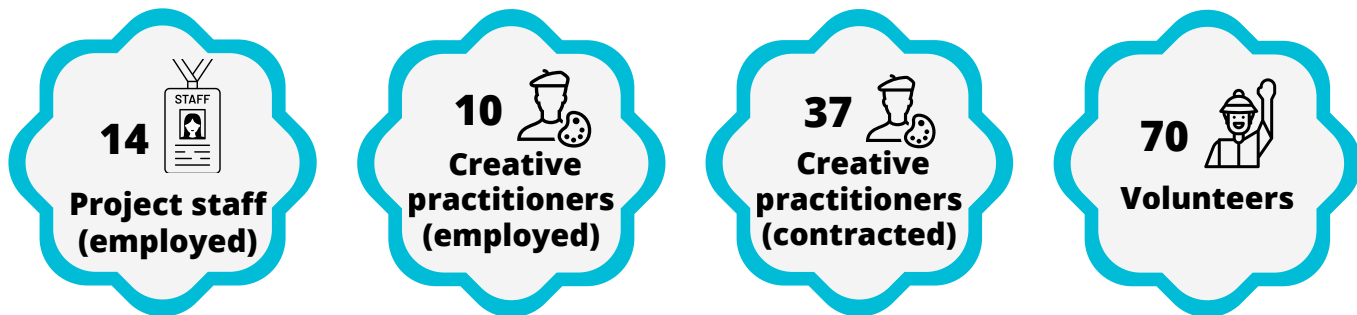
A summary of the 11
Scottish Government
funded projects is
provided in Appendix 1.



Every project is shaped by the people and communities it supports. As a result, activities vary widely across the portfolio, reflecting local strengths, interests and aspirations. During the first six months of delivery, projects have offered opportunities including music, visual arts, creative writing, film-making, storytelling, traditional crafts, photography and community heritage projects.



Collectively, over 130 people are contributing to the delivery of the programme. This includes 61 employed or contracted staff delivering **600 days of work**. The majority of these are creative practitioners, many living locally.



This invaluable resource has enabled projects to deliver an expansive programme of activity offering **478 opportunities for creative participation**.



People participating

Creative Communities Scotland supports a diverse range of people and communities across the country. Participants differ in age, background and life experience, but many share common barriers which make participation in creative and cultural activity more difficult. These barriers can be social, economic, cultural or geographical and are often interconnected.

Projects are responding to these barriers in different ways. Some are focused on a specific place or neighbourhood, while others support communities of shared experience or identity spread across wider geographical areas. While approaches vary, all projects seek to create welcoming environments where people feel valued, supported and able to participate on their own terms.

This practice has contributed to projects successfully engaging and supporting people who are often underrepresented in cultural activity.

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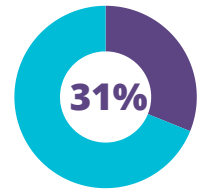
I feel valued, given so much warmth, compassion and care. I feel that I matter to the lovely women in the group and I feel I belong.

”

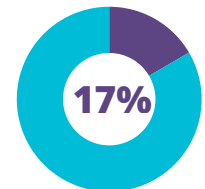
(Participant, Empower Women for Change)



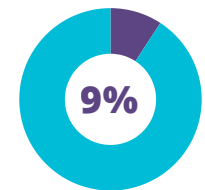
people from minority ethnic backgrounds



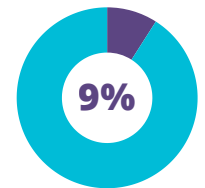
people with a disability or additional support needs



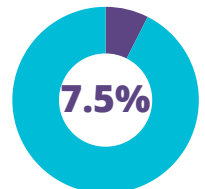
people living with a mental health condition



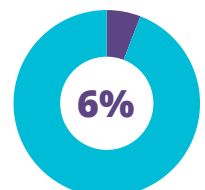
people with caring responsibilities



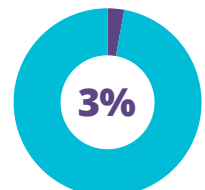
people who identify as LGBTQI+



people who are refugees or seeking asylum



young people with care experience



The first six months of delivery demonstrate significant demand for the opportunities provided by projects. Alongside high levels of participation, projects have reached many people who had little or no previous experience of engaging with creative or cultural activity. This reflects the importance of community-led approaches that actively remove barriers and create routes into participation for people who may otherwise be excluded.



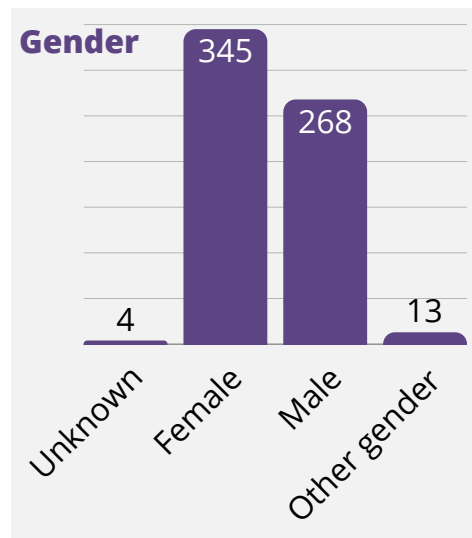
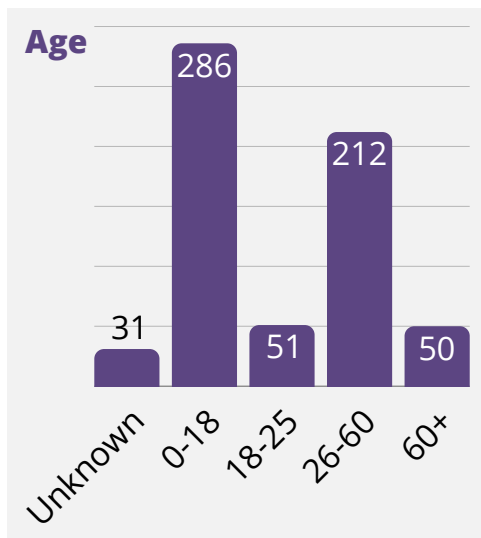
630 people participating in creative activities



359 people engaging with projects



1,005 other people engaged with related community events



“ The Care Makers has been so wonderful to push me outside of my comfort zone in talking to people. Everyone has been so friendly and welcoming. I tend to hide away at home, so this has given me so much confidence to join other classes. ”

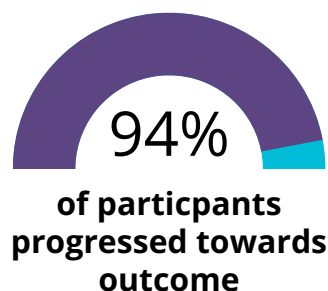
(Carer, Forgan Arts Centre)



Impact

Previous learning has shown that creative activity is not an end in itself. It provides a means for people to strengthen wellbeing, build relationships, generate a sense of belonging; all this acting as a catalyst for positive life choices and community action. This impact is seen in the positive progress made across all four programme outcomes.

Outcome 1 - People engage in creative arts that they would not have otherwise, have fun and feel joy and pride

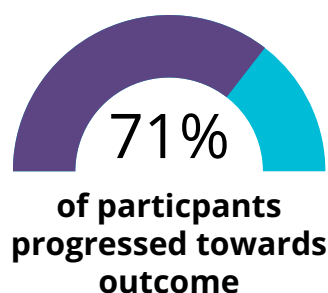


The strongest area of progress is participants' engagement in creative activity and the positive impact this is having on confidence, self-esteem and wellbeing. Participants consistently describe developing greater belief in themselves, discovering new talents and finding creative ways to express difficult experiences and emotions.

“ I learned that I am far more resilient than I give myself credit for. I also discovered that some of the most difficult experiences in life can become powerful stories when shared in the right way. ”

(Stand Up & Poetry Group Participant,
Gorebridge Community Development Trust)

Outcome 2 - People come together, build connections and feel less lonely and/or socially isolated

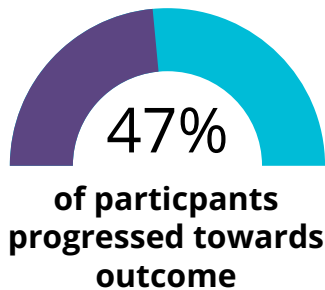


Projects are also creating opportunities for people to form meaningful relationships and reduce social isolation. Participants frequently describe the importance of belonging to supportive groups where they feel accepted, understood and valued.

“ I feel more accepted and more integrated with all the girls. The friendship was more connected between us. ”

(Woman's Group, Romano Lav)

Outcome 3 - People are motivated and acquiring the skills and knowledge to improve their circumstances



Despite the programme being in its early stages, participants are showing progress against this outcome; acquiring skills, knowledge and confidence to improve their circumstances. Creative participation is also helping people begin to pursue aspirations around education, employment, health and wider personal development. A key part of this for some has been a willingness to access support services, including 49 instances of people seeking support from project staff.

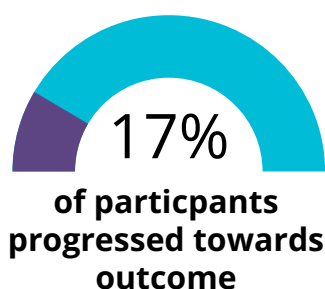
“ This place is super supportive and without it I wouldn’t have thought about doing music at college, and I’m starting this year. ”

(Young person participant, Hot Chocolate Trust)

“ I have felt my confidence grow over the week. I know I can use community services to improve my life. ”

(Carer participant, Forgan Arts Centre)

Outcome 4 - People seek to deliver change for the wider community.



While community-level change often takes longer to emerge, there are already encouraging examples of participants sharing skills, supporting others and taking on leadership roles within their communities.

“ Now I’ve started leading my own workshops to teach ladies some skills. ”

(Creative Changemaker, Empower Women for Change)

Impact stories

Evidence from the first six months of the programme highlight that individuals are often meeting multiple outcomes. Furthermore, there appears to be a progressive nature to this from initial participation to relationship development to improved mental health, and in turn, people making positive life choices to secure a better future for themselves, their family and community.

'This is not just crafting, this has invaluable layers' - 'J', a carer's story (Forgan Arts Centre)

J provides care for her elderly father, whose health has deteriorated significantly in recent years. Caring responsibilities leave little time for herself and opportunities for respite are limited. When she joined Forgan Arts Centre's Care Makers project, she was looking for an opportunity to try something creative and spend time with people who understood the realities of caring.

Through regular creative workshops, J found much more than a creative outlet. She developed friendships with other carers, gained confidence to try new activities and found a supportive environment where she could focus on her own wellbeing.

"This is not just crafting, this has invaluable layers. This is my 'respite' and gives me space so I care better for my elderly father...I don't think I'd be coping and able to care for dad right now without this group. I've got more strength to keep asking for what dad needs and what I need too."

J's experience highlights a recurring theme across Creative Communities Scotland. While creative activity is important, much of the impact comes from the combination of creativity, supportive relationships, personal challenge and belonging.



Photo: Forgan Arts Centre

'I don't wanna be in my head anymore anymore'

- X's story (Hot Chocolate Trust)

When X first attended a music drop-in session at Hot Chocolate Trust, they enjoyed music but struggled with social anxiety and found it difficult to form friendships. A welcoming introduction from staff and other young people, alongside an opportunity to connect through music, helped X feel comfortable enough to return.

Over time, X developed new musical skills, built positive relationships with staff and peers, and became more confident in sharing their creative work. Music became a way of expressing feelings that were often difficult to articulate in conversation and opened opportunities for the project team to better understand the challenges they were facing.

One song X shared included the lyrics:

*"I don't wanna be in my head
anymore anymore,
And I'm looking for a change in
my life in my life...
I need to keep believing that I'll
be fine,
I need to find the pieces for the
puzzle of my life."*

Today, X is more confident, more socially connected and continuing to develop both creatively and personally. Their story demonstrates how creative participation can provide a safe and positive route into conversations, relationships and support that might otherwise feel inaccessible.



Photo: Hot Chocolate Trust

A creative route to exploring Roma heritage

(Romano Lav)

The men's group was established in 2025 with a focus on wellbeing and an aim to reduce tensions and build relationships between different Roma communities. The group includes men experiencing underemployment, insecure work and limited opportunities to engage in creative activities or develop practical skills.

Creative Communities sought to address this by supporting the men to build a traditional Romani vardo, creating a lasting asset for the Roma Cultural Centre whilst helping to preserve Roma heritage and strengthen cultural pride.

Despite some initial uncertainty, participants quickly became invested in the project and took pride in learning new skills, much of it through peer learning e.g. existing participants showing new members how to use tools and complete tasks. Men also shared tips, encouraged one another and worked collaboratively to solve problems, making it a genuinely participant-led learning environment.

The impact on wellbeing was significant. Many spoke about the satisfaction of working with their hands, learning practical skills and seeing tangible progress each week. One participant reflected that the project had:

"Changed my normal mood entirely. Before I would always be grumpy, now when I come home from the group I feel relaxed and happy."

The completed vardo became a powerful symbol of their shared history and participants felt an enormous sense of achievement when the vardo was displayed during the International Roma Day parade.

Overall, the project has been transformative. It provided a rare opportunity for Roma men to engage in a creative artform, connect with their heritage through hands on making, develop practical and interpersonal skills, improve their wellbeing and build meaningful relationships. Most importantly, it created a sense of pride, ownership and possibility, with participants now eager to use their skills and enthusiasm to contribute positively to their community.



Photo: Romano Lav

Key learning

While it is still early in the life of the programme, clear themes are emerging. Many of these findings reinforce learning from previous Creative Communities programmes, while those below highlight new opportunities and challenges for community-led creative practice across Scotland.

Handle identity-focused work sensitively and flexibly

Creative projects provide important opportunities for people to express their identity and share experiences around relationships, appearance, gender, sexual orientation, ethnicity, mental health, autism, caring responsibilities and family history.

Worker's practice helps people navigate these matters, but it is challenging work that must be handled sensitively and flexibly. Firstly, adapting creative methods to enable expression is essential e.g. drawings, colours, symbols, places, memories or wider identity markers when verbal expression is difficult. Secondly, making and protecting time and space for informal conversation and relationship-building is critical.

Further, this practice can be particularly challenging when balancing the need for a safe, affirming environment for existing participants while remaining open to newcomers. As one project noted:

“These aims can pull against each other. A space only feels safe enough to talk about homophobia, identity or mental health if the group dynamic is right, and every new arrival changes that dynamic...this cannot be left to chance. It needs consistent staffing, clear and shared expectations around respectful behaviour, and a willingness to step in early when issues arise”.

Participation cannot be assumed because opportunities are available

The Romano Lav project found that extensive outreach alone was insufficient to secure participation from Roma women. Deep-rooted barriers, including marginalisation, patriarchal expectations, stigma around creative work being good for mental health, unequal family structures and expectations on how women spend their time, prevented many Roma women from engaging with the project.

The project is addressing these challenges through a Roma female art facilitator who can relate directly to participants' experiences and help build trust. The team is also exploring ways to engage men and challenge restrictive gender norms that limit women's participation.

Engage local creatives early in the process

Early and meaningful involvement of local creative practitioners strengthens project delivery and impact. Creative Communities projects demonstrated that bringing local creatives into planning from the outset helped shape activities, clarify roles, improve communication, and identify risks early.

For Gorebridge Community Development Trust, this approach supported delivery of an expansive programme covering 116 sessions and four community events while increasing the visibility of ten local creatives, helping them create new community connections, and generating 19 days of paid work that will benefit the local economy.

Balancing support for existing and new participants is essential for long-term impact

The level of requests for funding through the programme (307 applications requesting £8.3m) and high participation levels through the 11 projects, indicate an unprecedented level of demand for community-based creative work. However, projects consistently identified the challenge of maintaining supportive environments for existing participants while ensuring opportunities remain accessible to newcomers. This is important for several reasons.

Firstly, the wider benefits we expect to see in terms of personal and community development depend on sustaining participation over time, Secondly, by focusing only on current participants we can create new barriers for others. At the same time, trying to support both groups without sufficient resources risks staff burnout and reduced quality of delivery. Projects are responding through careful management of group dynamics, stronger partnerships, and peer-support approaches.

Local collaboration is essential for community change and strengthening resilience

The Tides of Time project on Sanday (Orkney) demonstrates the power of collaboration between local groups. By bringing together the Friends of Sanday Kirk, Sanday Craft Hub, and Sanday Men's Shed, the project is engaging around 20% of the island's population in celebrating the local herring fishing heritage through creative activity.

The collaboration led to the creation of a large mosaic that transformed the entrance to Sanday Kirk. The pride generated by this mobilised the community, kickstarting a comprehensive renovation plan for the Kirk.

This 'tri-group' model has also strengthened community resilience. For example, when a specialist stonemason suddenly became unavailable, the Men's Shed enlisted the support of local builders for design advice, whilst simultaneously drawing on the Craft Hub's youth consultation and the Kirk's practical mosaic experience. This crossover of community knowledge and experience turned a bottleneck into a collaborative community success. It also emphasised the importance of prioritising local skills sets.

Photo: Friends of Sanday Kirk

Inspiring Scotland support

In addition to funding, Inspiring Scotland offers added value support, coaching and constructive challenge to our funded charities; helping them to be their best for their communities. With Creative Communities Scotland, this encompassed five elements.



Strengthening organisations and communities

- Hosted a dedicated learning and coproduction event for all projects to help develop the programme's evaluation, learning and reporting framework.
- Provided access to professional advisors in our Specialist Volunteer Network, including:
 - Guidance on dealing with a safeguarding matter, including dedicated PR support.
 - Governance training and advice on funding strategy.



Support, develop and connect people

- Initial Welcome meeting for all projects, helping to build trust and relationships, and an understanding of programme aims and approach.
- Supporting connection and dialogue between projects on shared issues and opportunities.



Making money go further

- Securing £58,177 in funding from Highland Council to support two new projects which narrowly missed out in the initial programme application process.



Encourage new ideas

- A combined event for Creative Communities Scotland and Creative Communities Glasgow teams, delivering:
 - an opportunity for Creative Communities Scotland project staff to learn from the experience of the Glasgow projects.
 - A shared exploration of what enables participatory creative work to flourish in community settings.



Inform and influence

- Extensive support for the Local Culture Scotland review, a key step towards developing a national strategic approach for culture in community settings.
- Hosted a Cabinet Secretary visit to the TD1 Youth Hub in Galashiels, helping us to demonstrate the impact of the programme and its role in meeting SG policy objectives.

Looking ahead

Over the next 18 months, the programme will continue to build evidence and understanding about what supports active participation in culture in community settings. However, based on the evolving national policy agenda and experience from the first six months of Creative Communities Scotland, we will also prioritise the following:

Local practice

- Strengthening identity-focused work.
- Delivering growth whilst balancing the needs of existing and new participants.
- Exploring how local approaches can contribute to prevention and early intervention based support for individuals and families struggling with poverty, cost of living crisis, debt, poor mental and physical health.

“...art is the way in rather than the whole point...we treat the creative programme as the structure that holds the relationships, not the outcome in its own right.”

(CEO, TD1 Youth Hub)

Supporting wider community level change

- Improving understanding of how creative participation contributes to deeper and wider social connections, local leadership and active citizenship, strengthened community resilience.
- Beginning to understand the regenerative potential of programmes like Creative Communities to turn around the fortunes of deprived communities.

Integrating new projects

- Supporting our two Highland Council projects, and any others that join, to integrate with the programme.

Delivering impact at scale

- Developing sustainable models of partnership and investment that enable long-term participation in culture and creativity at a community, place and national level.



Photo: TD1 Youth Hub



Photo: Touch of Love Outreach



The Creative Communities Scotland fund is supported by the Scottish Government's Culture Directorate, and managed by Inspiring Scotland as part of the Creative Communities programme.

Inspiring Scotland

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INSPIRING SCOTLAND



Portfolio organisations

A Place in Childhood

EDINBURGH CITY



Working with young people in Craigmillar to provide a professional-grade experience of all aspects of film making. this includes: script development, filming, production, post-production, editing and finally a screening of their work.

[Website](#)



Camglen Buddies Leisure & Social Club

SOUTH LANARKSHIRE



Working with a videographer and a theatre professional, adults with additional support needs have the opportunity to produce their own film, addressing key aspects from storyboarding, creating sets/props, filming and finally, celebrate their production.

[Website](#)



TD1 Youth Hub

SCOTTISH BORDERS



'Chromonauts: Demolition Art' is a year-long, youth-led visual arts programme for young people who face multiple barriers to creative participation. The project will work with young people to reclaim 'overlooked corners' of Galashiels to create new art-works/civic spaces.

[Website](#)



Empower Women for Change

GLASGOW CITY



Participants co-design and co-facilitate a programme of creative arts activities called Freedom in Expression: Joy in Creativity. This provides safe, culturally relevant spaces where women can express themselves through creative writing, painting, clay, glassmaking, collage, yoga, mindfulness, and storytelling.

[Website](#)



ESOL Scotland

GLASGOW CITY



This year-long programme of workshops integrates English language learning with film making and photography, contributing to a community exhibition and screening that 'celebrates the voices and journeys of our learners'.

[Website](#)



Forgan Arts Centre

FIFE



Building on a previous pilot, the organisation is running two strands of creative workshops for adult and young carers. Working with professional artists, the workshops focus on building creative participation, wellbeing, and connection between carers.

[Website](#)



Portfolio organisations

Friends of Sanday Kirk

ORKNEY



Focused around Sanday Kirk and a Craft Hub, the project will create three separate pieces of art using different techniques: community mosaic project, a mural project on Craft Hub's gable wall, and the design and construction of a herring-shaped public bench to celebrate the island's fishing heritage and its former herring yard.

[Website](#)



Gorebridge Community Development Trust

MIDLOTHIAN



The Create365 arts project aims to improve wellbeing for the whole community and reduce isolation through four strands of work: 1) weekly rhythm sessions focused on art, music and writing; 2) monthly themed sessions; 3) seasonal sessions; and, 4) a 'big year' showcase presenting the output from the three other strands.

[Website](#)



Hot Chocolate Trust

DUNDEE CITY



This project provides a year-long set of music producing activities aimed at 12-21 year olds. These sessions offer young people the opportunity to begin their engagement with music all the way through to exploring professional music pathways.

[Website](#)



Romano Lav

GLASGOW CITY



Co-produced with community members and co-facilitated by Roma staff, this community arts programme supports participants of all ages and genders to take part in a range of art forms including visual/digital arts, storytelling, ceramics, film and photography. It will culminate in a final exhibition as part of the Govanhill International Festival.

[Website](#)



Touch of Love Outreach

ABERDEEN CITY



The 'New Young Scots: Fix & Design Lab', will work with young people to collect, repair and redesign everyday items. Its aim is for the young people involved to gain practical and social skills, reduce isolation and celebrate identity and culture through arts-based upcycling.

[Website](#)

