

Take Art Early Years Specialism - Context and Background

Take Art is a pioneering Somerset-based charity that delivers a transformational, high-quality arts programme with a local, and growing national and international, focus. We do this by providing fantastic, life-changing opportunities for people of all ages, backgrounds and abilities to experience, participate and work within the arts.

The Early Years Creativity specialism sits alongside four other key areas: Rural Touring, Dance, Theatre and Participatory Music. Early Years Creativity is a well-established, well-respected area of work and Take Art is the only Arts Council National Portfolio Organisation in the South West, to receive core funding for work with the under 5's.

All specialism areas contribute to Take Art's overarching vision:

By 2024, individuals and communities in Somerset will enjoy and share access to memorable, safe live and digital arts experiences with kindred spirits nationally and internationally. People will take part in life-changing opportunities that enrich and transform their lives. Artists, companies, venues, promoters and the early years sector will be well-resourced to create, produce and present extraordinary work.

Take Art will be a thriving, collaborative organisation, recognised for our ambitious leadership in nurturing and advocating the very best in dance, theatre, music, rural touring and early years creativity.

The Early Years specialism is in a healthy position, having recently been awarded funding for two large scale initiatives each with their respective project managers in post. The team also includes a highly competent administrator. Both programmes follow a similar structure and share a commitment to listening to the voice of the child, artist and early years practitioner. Both programmes have the support of Dr Susan Young as their lead researcher.

The role of the Director will, not only be to oversee the successful delivery of these programmes, but to observe, develop and sustain further creative ambitions for the youngest audiences and participants in the county and potentially beyond. With supportive links within the local authority, the specialism is in a strong position to respond creatively to the needs of the sector, including reforms to the EYFS and post covid challenges facing children and families.

Working across specialist areas:

Participatory and touring work run through most of the Take Art's work and as such there are numerous opportunities to share systems and approaches: from tour design to contracts through to collaborating on opportunities for children and families across agendas such as health, community and education.

Take Art has a growing portfolio of international work with a range of live projects and partnerships with colleagues across Europe, these include performance and touring opportunities bringing high quality live experiences to theatres and early years settings.

Little Big Dance (LBD), led by our Dance Director Alison Lord, supports and promotes touring early years dance work in collaboration with partners in Yorkshire and the South East and will be presenting work in Spring 2022. Other cross specialism themes include our commitment to diversify the work we present, the artists we collaborate with and the staff who support our delivery. Kickstart is an initiative where we anticipate working with a young musician and our Soundwaves programme will actively look to address the gender disparity in the early years workforce. At a county level we work in partnership with Somerset Film and Somerset Art Works to deliver events and information through a joint diversity forum.

As part of the specialism, we are committed to identifying and delivering high quality professional development opportunities. This ranges from regular training programmes through to ambitious conferences celebrating project outcomes and discussing sectorial challenges. Our staff are regularly approached to contribute to national training programmes and conferences.

Context

The Early Years specialism began with an initiative led by the current Executive Director called Take Part in 1998, offering a menu of Early Years Artist who went onto work in 250 settings, the learning from each year's delivery feeding into the planning of the next year's offer. That led to a more developed early years programme.

From 2001 a performance focus began to develop with Director, Gina Westbrook. Gina had a special interest in theatre, particularly European companies many who presented work at the Bologna Testoni festival just up the road from Reggio Emilia. Gina was instrumental in supporting companies and work which was visually compelling, humorous, calm, had few words and simple sets. Pieces were empathetic, thoughtful and respectful. Most of them were researched in settings with children. The interest in this work continued through the biennial festival KinderGardens and more recently Hopper, Hopping Higher and currently Little Big Dance and Making & Believing.

Beyond performance large scale projects have included Little Big Bang - an intensive artist in residence program working with researchers and artists in Children's Centres. This way of working was followed up by Creative Elements that forged the beginnings of a long-term relationship with one of our key funders: The Paul Hamlyn Foundation. Creative Elements brought practical and strategic opportunities for the team to combine programmes and became the forerunner to the current Making & Believing.

Current Major Projects Programme

Making & Believing(M&B)

A three and a half year programme to January 2024 which has been informed and devised from the learning from previous projects. The strapline for M&B is "*children make-believing, artists belief-making*" and the ambition is to combine performance and participatory opportunities for children, artists, and practitioners to explore their own creativity and learn together. By focusing on the overlap between performance and participation the aim would be, once this is understood, we could make more meaningful EY performances and more ambitious EY participation. This is a national project working with partners in Surrey Arts and Derby Theatre as well as here in Somerset.

Covid has meant a delayed start to the project, but initial activity, in the form a short tour of Beeja Dance, has been delivered in Somerset and one date in Surrey. To date, the project has appointed a project manager, lead researcher and secured internal staff resources including Jane Parker as project pedagogue. Partners have been involved in the recruitment of artists, local authority contacts have supported the selection of settings and two performance companies have been selected to take part in a creative lab in January 2022.

The majority of creative practitioners have now been appointed and they all came together for the first learning seminar at Centre Research in Early Childhood (CREC). Regular learning seminars, led by Dr Susan Young, run throughout the timeline and are a vital way of sharing and understanding the impact of the activity on the ground. Creative practitioners will have 10 weeks before Christmas to run their residencies in pairs, before the next block of sessions runs in the Spring Term. Running alongside these practical residencies are a series of tours, the next being scheduled for Spring and Summer Term 2022.

SoundWaves Network SW4

Starting in November 2021 for a 3 year period and following on from three successful Youth Music funded programmes, SW4 brings together a depth of knowledge and experience in delivering high quality music provision and CPD for the sector. This three-year programme has just been awarded funding by Youth Music. It was born out of Take Art's Soundwaves Extra project and aims to support and engage the South West's Early Years workforce and everyone involved in the education of young children through music, so that all young

children have the very best musical opportunities to learn and develop. Previous projects have had a critical role in how we design work, with an emphasis on paired delivery, modelling good practice, collaboration, and a commitment to thorough research. SW4 sees pairs of musicians working in collaboration with creative champions in settings to increase confidence, skills and knowledge across the workforce. It is about embedding and recognising musicality in all aspects of a child's play and development. SW4 is innovative and progressive network that partners ten Music Education Hubs across the SW for the first time, supporting and developing EY music strategies, CPD and practice ahead of potential changes to the National Plan for Music. Dr Susan Young is the lead researcher working alongside project manager Jane Parker.

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