
Artsmark Small & Rural Schools Pilot

2024–2025

Delivered by Curious Minds, funded by Artsmark and Arts Council England · Evaluation by Sophie Reid (August 2025)

Overview

For schools in rural and semi-rural areas, geography can be a barrier to arts and cultural education. Limited transport, small staffing teams, distance from exhibitions and performance venues, limited family engagement with arts and access to specialist practitioners can make it difficult to provide creative opportunities for pupils. Yet evidence shows that high-quality arts and cultural engagement supports children’s development, confidence, and wellbeing¹.

The Artsmark Small & Rural Schools Pilot tested the Artsmark Framework as a practical developmental tool to help schools in these contexts identify barriers, commission creative interventions, and build or extend cultural partnerships and staff confidence needed for a high-quality arts offer. It was funded by Arts Council England and delivered by Curious Minds between 2024–2025. Four schools in Whitehaven and Copeland, Cumbria, took part: two primaries and two secondaries, none of whom were registered for Artsmark. Schools received a programme of four in-person programme/training days, plus online sessions, with cover for teachers provided by a roster of creative practitioners – plus £2,000 per school to commission a targeted creative intervention responding to their identified priorities. The programme also introduced schools to Anti-Racist Cumbria (ARC), who delivered training.

Commissioned activities included workshops in music technology, dance, digital media and photography, costume and prop making, and oracy, as well as follow-up CPD for staff.

4	347	16	£2,000
Schools: 2 primary, 2 secondary	Pupils in commissioned activities	Classes receiving Artist Cover sessions	Commissioning budget per school

¹ Bone JK & Fancourt D. 2022. [Arts Culture & the Brain](#): A literature review and new epidemiological analyses. London: Arts Council England

Key Findings

Impact on Pupils

- **Enjoyment and engagement:** The greatest impact for pupils was having more opportunities to engage in arts and cultural activities than they would otherwise have had. Pupils engaged enthusiastically across all activities, observed through body language, energy and willingness to participate and a shared sense of excitement.
- **Creative skills and confidence:** Pupils had opportunities to practise new creative disciplines and build confidence in their abilities, including oracy².
- **Wellbeing:** Teachers and practitioners observed wellbeing effects for pupils, particularly where activities gave them ownership over their work and learning. Some pupils who were less engaged in mainstream school activities found an outlet and sense of belonging through the commissioned work.
- **Subject uptake:** The secondary schools reported direct effects on creative subject uptake following their commissioned activities.
- **Behaviour:** One school reported a significant and ongoing improvement in behaviour, particularly among pupils from alternative provision who took part in music technology sessions, with positive knock-on effects at break and lunchtimes.

“Because they’re enjoying it they’re not causing issues outside, they’ve got somewhere they kind of belong, they’ve got an outlet for their lunchtime, so they’re not going into next lesson all built up. The dinner ladies love us!” **Lead teacher**

Impact on Teachers and Schools

- **Creative skills and confidence:** Seeing experienced practitioners deliver gave teachers ideas and skills they could use directly in their own lessons. This was especially significant for primary teachers, for whom arts may not be a specialist subject. Several reported already using what they had learnt in subsequent sessions. The programme

² One school whose Ofsted inspection fell during the programme partly attributed their positive comments on children’s ability to speak and answer questions confidently, to the oracy focus of their commissioned theatre workshops.

also reached beyond lead teachers, with wider staff taking part in CPD, observing Artist Cover in action and seeing the value of external creative partnerships first-hand.

- **Commissioning confidence:** Writing a project brief with support from Curious Minds meant teachers felt more confident approach commissioning in future, including a clearer understanding of what organisations can offer and at what cost.
- **Knowledge of the cultural landscape:** Teachers with less knowledge of local arts and cultural organisations at the outset saw the most change, gaining awareness of what was available, who to contact and how to advocate for bringing practitioners in.
- **New or reignited partnerships:** Schools connected with local cultural organisations and practitioners: two schools had subsequently re-commissioned practitioners, and others were actively planning to do so. Working with schools in this pilot inspired several practitioners to work on tailoring their offer for educational settings.
- **More strategic thinking:** Engaging with the Artsmark Framework prompted some teachers to think more ambitiously about how arts and culture could be integrated with their school's development plans, rather than existing as standalone activities.
- **The beginning of anti-racist conversations:** While the anti-racist working strand was scaled back during the programme, to allow the schools to focus on the primary aim of the project for Arts Council England, schools valued the initial training with Anti-Racist Cumbria, with some starting conversations about anti-racism within their schools.

*"The course has been cleverly planned in a way that it has provided us, we've made our own connections, but artists that came into school [to cover lessons] made those connections subconsciously [...] I think it's been helpful to either find new connections or reignite connections we have had with local arts organisations and certainly give us more variety array of practitioners look to work with in the future, how we can incorporate some of those experiences practically for our creative curriculum." **Lead teacher***

Learning for Future Delivery

This pilot took place over a short timeframe, with small schools facing real pressures of capacity, workload and funding. These things were learnt:

- **The Artist Cover model is a core mechanism for programme impact:** Providing experienced practitioners to cover lessons while teachers attended programme days served a dual purpose: releasing teachers without adding to their workload, while also giving pupils new and relevant creative experiences.

- **Programme day venues helped:** Local cultural and heritage venues gave teachers direct experience of what was available in their area and brokered new connections.
- **Funding opens doors that training alone cannot:** Even a small commissioning budget was described as transformative in allowing schools to approach cultural organisations with confidence, overcome transport barriers and establish continued working relationships.
- **External practitioners at the peak of their careers are inspiring:** Teachers noted the impact of pupils working with highly experienced artists, including for the visibility of arts careers. This is worth protecting even in small budget programmes.
- **Peer support works best when school contexts are similar:** Teachers found peer support from other schools more ‘nice to have’ than essential, due to the varied nature of their projects and settings. One-to-one support from Curious Minds was more valued.
- **The value of the Artsmark Framework:** Using the Artsmark Framework outside of the context of an accredited Artsmark journey was successful: schools found it a useful developmental and reflective tool to undertake a creative audit (using relevant Framework sections to map strengths, gaps and a focus for their commission). Support from Curious Minds helped teachers to think about what they were already doing and what they could work towards, rather than it being a daunting accreditation checklist.
- **Anti-racist working requires dedicated time and resource:** Scaling back the anti-racist strand (as a result of feedback from participating schools and refocusing on the main aim of the programme for the funder) reflects an important lesson: integrating equity and inclusion approaches meaningfully into a programme requires appropriate resource and capacity, plus time to build partnerships. This is the beginning of a longer journey for these schools, and the continuation of work for Curious Minds.
- **Build in structured follow-up for practitioners and pupils:** The absence of planned continuation beyond the commissioned sessions was noted by practitioners and teachers alike as a disappointment at a point of high engagement. More support to schools to consider how to build on momentum achieved may be required.

What Next?

This pilot demonstrates that the Artsmark Framework is a meaningful and accessible tool for rural and small schools that are not yet on their Artsmark journey.

- **Cultural practitioners and organisations in Cumbria and beyond:** These schools have demonstrated appetite and capacity for partnership among small and rural schools, which can be built on.
- **Rural and small schools considering their arts offer:** The Artsmark Framework can be used as a developmental tool — you do not need to be registered for Artsmark for it to be useful in auditing your provision and identifying priorities. Find out more at artsmark.org.uk

Full evaluation report available from Curious Minds. For info: www.curiousminds.org.uk