

COHERE ARTS VISUALLY IMPAIRED ARTS PROGRAMME

EVALUATION REPORT BY CLAIRE DRIVER

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

01

In 2025-2026, Cohere Arts developed and delivered an arts programme for visually impaired (VI) people living in Suffolk. The programme successfully delivered:

- a consultation with 30 young people and adults living with sight loss
- an outreach programme of 26 workshops to 578 people across 12 Suffolk locations
- 30 VI drama workshops for 22 participants, including the production of an audio drama
- 3 training sessions for 40 county-based cultural professionals
- enrichment activities including touch tour & group trip to Protein Dance's *The Magic Flute*, a sonic walk as part of an immersive arts project and a research project with Birmingham City University

The VI arts programme brought exciting opportunities to a wide range of people, including older residents and young people. People tried new group activities such as playing the ukulele or sculpting with clay, and this made a difference to their wellbeing and what they thought they could do. Since the programme some people have taken steps to continue activities, seeing engagement in creative and cultural activities as being good for their health and general wellbeing.

The programme empowered participants by creating regular opportunities to meet and work towards shared goals. The ambition to produce professional theatre work such as the Living on Air audio drama recording pushed VI drama group members to the best of their abilities and created work they are proud to share. Participants expressed increased confidence to go to new places in their community and to attend wider arts and cultural events including cinema and theatre locally and nationally. Some people say their involvement has been life changing.

Creative practitioners and cultural workers in Suffolk developed their skills and knowledge. They applied this learning to facilitate accessible sessions, demonstrating confidence to guide participants and describe their workshops. One practitioner is in the process of setting up a community interest company because of their work on the programme, a clear legacy of Cohere's work. Suffolk's creative organisations have benefited from access assessments as part of the programme.

Additional opportunities for VI people to engage in high-quality arts and culture opportunities emerged. Participants were invited to Protein Dance's production of *The Magic Flute* at DanceEast and to take part in a touch tour with director and performers; to an immersive sensory walk with Essex based artist Anisha Thampy; and a visit to Orford Ness with Birmingham City University as part of a research project (Sonic Heritage and Environmental Change on England's East Coast 1718 - present). Participants also worked at The Hold with Suffolk Archives on the Beyond Labels exhibition celebrating the history of disability in Suffolk.

INTRODUCTION

Above all, we believe in equity of access to arts, heritage and culture and the transformative power of creativity.

Cohere Arts



Cohere Arts is a community interest company based in East Suffolk providing opportunities for communities, particularly people living with health challenges and disabilities, to meaningfully engage with arts, heritage and culture.

In 2025, Cohere was awarded funding from Suffolk County Council's Culture Fund, the Community Lottery Fund, Suffolk Community Foundation, Postcode Places Trust and East Suffolk Council to support the provision of a Visually Impaired (VI) Arts Programme.

The aim of the programme, delivered over 15 months, was to expand and consolidate Cohere's previous work with people with visual impairment and develop the creative skills and ambitions of more Suffolk-based people living with sight loss. This evaluation considers the impact of this programme.

The Programme

The VI Arts Programme was designed across 4 strands of activity:

Consultation

A Suffolk-wide consultation with adults and young people living with sight loss to understand aspirations and needs around local arts and cultural provision for this community.

VI Drama Group - 'High Spirits'

Continuation and expansion of weekly drama workshops for visually impaired adults to include 3 terms of workshops and public sharings of drama work.

VI Arts outreach programme

Partnership work with sight-loss charity Suffolk Sight to develop and deliver an outreach programme bringing arts practitioners into social club settings across Suffolk. The new programme to spark imagination, improve wellbeing and where possible signpost participants to opportunities for further engagement.

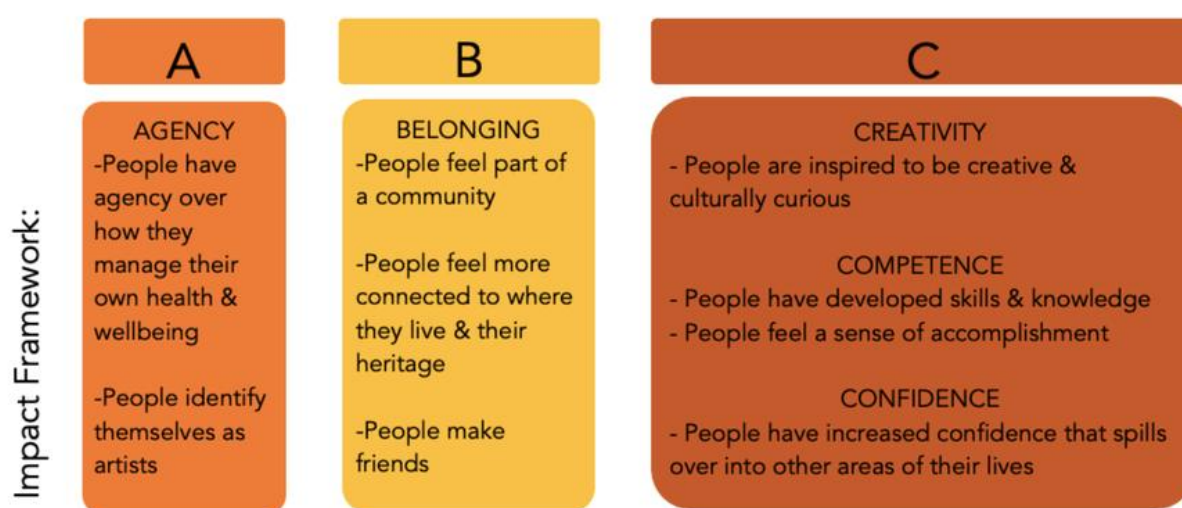
Development opportunities for local artists/organisations

Training workshops to upskill and empower Suffolk's cultural workforce to initiate more opportunities for people living with sight loss.

The programme would work with people of all ages living with sight loss across Suffolk. It was anticipated that many of the programme participants would be adults aged over 65.

EVALUATION METHODOLOGY

Evaluation planning linked the programme activities for participants and wider stakeholders to the programme's intended outcomes. Cohere's **Theory of Change and ABC Impact Framework** was used to establish enquiry areas to explore the impact of the programme:



Agency: Do participants choose to take creative opportunities for their health and wellbeing?

Belonging: What do participants value about the programme? How have people's feelings of community and connection developed?

Creativity, Competence, Confidence: Has taking part made a difference to people's confidence to try new things, be creative, visit new places? How have people's professional knowledge and understanding developed? What happens next?

An overarching question asked would this impact have happened without Cohere Arts?

Evidence used in this evaluation was collected by:

- Structured feedback conversations with 6 programme participants, 2 workshop facilitators and 2 wider stakeholders.
- Training survey with freelance artists and creative staff. 36 pre and post training responses.
- Outreach programme email feedback from participants and stakeholders (5 from ukulele workshops).
- Outreach programme comments.
- Drama group feedback comments.

Data limitations: Evidence for the impact of the programme relies on reported actions and responses of invited participants and wider stakeholders. Limited baseline data has been used where possible to determine the impact made specifically by Cohere's work.

PROGRAMME ACTIVITY

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Consultation

Cohere Arts completed a county-wide consultation with 30 adults and young people living with sight loss including 7 interviews, a focus group, a presentation/discussion with Suffolk Guide Dogs Forum, a feature in Suffolk Sight newsletter and an interview/segment for Ipswich Talking Newspaper.

The results of the consultation fed into the planning activities for the outreach programme. People expressed ambitions to take part in musical activities with other VI participants. It became clear that most were reluctant to travel to unfamiliar locations for a few reasons, including their age, access to transport and confidence. As a result, the outreach programme was developed utilising existing venues used by Suffolk Sight.

VI Drama Group - 'High Spirits'

30 drama workshops were delivered across 3 terms in 2025-2026 at DanceEast. 22 people took part, including 4 new members of the group and 2 new volunteers.

As well as developing skills in acting, voice, movement and devising, the group created poetry, hosted a sharing event and adapted a previous production *Living On Air* as a radio drama.

In addition, Cohere facilitated a group trip to watch Protein Dance's *The Magic Flute* at DanceEast, which included a touch tour, audio description and opportunities to meet the cast and creative team.



Organised in partnership with Suffolk Sight, Cohere Arts’ creative associates delivered 26 outreach workshops in venues used by existing Suffolk Sight groups. Sessions were held county wide in 12 locations: Beccles, Felixstowe, Halesworth, Ipswich, Stowmarket, Sudbury, Pakenham, Bury St Edmunds, Lowestoft, Hadleigh, Mildenhall and Haverhill. Workshops were free to take part in.

In total, 578 people took part in outreach activities

Workshop theme	no. of workshops
Clay art	6
Drama	2
Music/singing	9
Seated yoga	3
Ukulele	6

Professional Training

Cohere Arts facilitated 3 training workshops; one at New Wolsey Theatre for artists and sector colleagues and two at DanceEast for their staff. The sessions, co-delivered with VI board members and colleagues at Suffolk Sight, covered practical guidance on making venues, services and activities accessible and included sighted guide training.

In addition, Cohere was able to offer Emergency First Aid training for some practitioners and volunteers as part of the programme.

Cohere VI drama group participants were also invited by Suffolk Archives at The Hold and DanceEast to review the accessibility of their venues and services for people with visual impairment.



This has really helped me feel capable in supporting VI and blind people.

Training workshop participant



PROGRAMME IMPACT

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Cohere Arts ABC framework is used to measure the impact of the programme. There is some cross-over of the evidence between the impact areas.

AGENCY

Participants choose to take creative opportunities for their health and wellbeing

The outreach programme was well attended with a varied programme of participatory music, drama, singing, clay and yoga sessions. Feedback was positive with participants, volunteers and facilitators noting enjoyment in trying new activities and a change from the sessions usually on offer that were more based on socialising and entertainment. One person commented that they welcomed the festive singing as a change to their usual monthly quiz and another that they had actively chosen to take part in the workshop over a regular appointment.

The ambition of the programme to facilitate people to try new things was rewarded with people's enjoyment and achievement at being out of their 'comfort zone'. Clay, ukulele and drama were all mentioned as activities that took people 'out of yourself' and participants recognised the value of these to their wellbeing: *'Working with clay is very therapeutic. It takes you out of yourself. I've got a lot going on at home and it's been nice not to think about it.'* One participant expressed how important music is to them, but their sight loss meant they couldn't read music anymore. Listening to music and singing gave them a way to take part in an activity they enjoy. These sessions prompted people to reminisce about their lives, and they enjoyed talking with one another and sharing memories.

People intend to continue activities beyond the sessions. For example, participants asked the clay workshop facilitator about the materials so they could repeat this activity at home or in other settings. The choice of a clean foam clay for this audience was noted as well thought through by stakeholder staff. The ukulele workshops were particularly inspiring for participants to pick an instrument back up or to learn for the first time, and many participants bought ukuleles because of taking part. A participant who had given up playing instruments when they lost their sight has since taken up ukulele for the first time: *'I think you have reignited his spark so thank you so much.'* One person reflected on how important it was for them to play as part of a group: *'Brilliant - playing with other people was much more fun, something you just can't do on your own. I've had my ukulele for 10 years and that's the first time I've ever played it - now I want to play every day.'*

Thank you for giving me the opportunity of dipping my fingers into the world of playing music.

Ukulele workshop participant



Some people are choosing to find and take part in other activities beyond the programme, such as going to the theatre, cinema and other community events.

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One participant demonstrated her commitment to take up seated yoga outside of the programme and was disappointed to find a library session was just a one-off. This underlines the importance of regular accessible community events.

CASE STUDY

Participant R was part of the VI drama group 'High Spirits' and took part in the wider programme. Taking part has encouraged them to try new activities and go to different places.

R says the VI drama group 'changed my life'. At first, they hadn't been sure about joining but after seeing the care and time given to the group by Cohere Arts, they decided they would try it. The genuine ambition and value Cohere Arts bring to their work shone through. Being part of the programme further encouraged them to try new things, go to other theatres and performances, opening up other arts and cultural experiences.

Previously, R felt uncomfortable to go to the cinema or theatre alone as a visually impaired person, but the confidence developed from taking part in drama and the encouragement of the group made them realise that they don't always have to go with someone else. They can ask for help to do the things they want to do if they need it. They now regularly take part in meet ups for visually impaired people, social activities and have a monthly cinema pass, as well as going to productions recommended by the people in the programme: 'A few years ago I would never do all the things I am doing now.'



If you want to go to something, don't let disability hold you back.

VI drama group participant

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Feeling part of a group is a significant outcome of the programme for many participants who value being together with other blind and visually impaired people. Regular drama group attendees describe how important the social element of the group is for them to share news and check in with each other and reflect that this has reduced their feelings of isolation. Sometimes this is about practical support, such as advice on guide dog ownership. People have made friends and socialise outside of the group going to the pub or other activities beyond the programme: 'Some of these people have become really good friends.'

Participants welcomed the opportunities in the programme to engage in activities together, particularly at ukulele and clay workshops: 'It's what I've always wanted to do, I've played a bit before, but when you play on your own it's not the same. I could not have hoped to have done what I've done in the last hour without you guys here. Playing in a group takes you along with the time. I did better than I expected, I think I picked it up pretty well...'

Some people are interested in carrying on playing ukulele as part of a group and Cohere has signposted them to possible groups to join. There is some nervousness about the suitability of mainstream groups. Some participants would like to further their ukulele skills by setting up a regular group for VI players and this could be noted as a next step for the work.

Coming together in a group is described by one participant as 'a leveller' because visual impairment is something everyone has in common: 'the pressure is off, you are in an environment where people understand people are just people.' This encourages them to work at the best of their ability because they feel comfortable. They comment on the skills of the facilitators to make sessions welcoming, accessible and purposeful, developing people's expectations of what they can achieve as individuals and together.

CASE STUDY

It's easy for us to get locked in our own heads and worried about that thing...having something [like this] takes us away from that.

VI drama group participant



VI drama participant J enjoys how inclusive the group is and how the group takes you for who you are. J describes that focusing on the group activities is a mindful experience, that is time away from worries, especially health difficulties: 'never mind what happened yesterday or what's going to happen in a couple of hours'. Friendship and support of the group have been particularly helpful for J during a time of bad health. They turned to people outside the group setting and found support from sharing their experiences of sight loss with other people with common experiences.

CREATIVITY

People are inspired to create and be culturally curious.

New and engaging workshops focused on participation rather than entertainment.

Attendees were encouraged to try new things and to participate at their ability level. There was a sense of achievement at having a go: 'it was fun to be taken out of your comfort zone' and surprise at trying something new and enjoying it. This brought people out of themselves, and the benefits were noted by participants and facilitators: 'I've never seen T so alive! Usually he is very reserved, but it's like he came to life.'

Activities exceeded participants' expectations of what they thought they would enjoy. For example, taking part in *The Magic Flute* touch tour and attending the performance was a different experience for some people that opens up a new area of artistic and cultural interest.



I wasn't sure what to expect; I went there with low expectations, to be honest, but I came away feeling that I'd seen or rather listened to something that was, well, remarkable. I thought it was a remarkable performance.

To see something that good. I got so much out of it. I'd love to be able to see again to see that.

VI drama group members, after seeing Protein Dance's production of *The Magic Flute* at DanceEast

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COMPETENCE

People develop new skills & knowledge.
People feel a sense of accomplishment.

VI participants of all ages who took part in creative workshops often exceeded their own expectations of what they thought they could achieve. 'I felt my limited creative ability was pushed past its limit and the praise and feedback given was so encouraging.' People were also able to try activities they had not previously had access to, due to the specialist support and adaptation offered by the programme. One young member of Suffolk Sight Juniors said: 'I have never done drama before, and now I love it!'

Professional training delivered as part of the VI Arts Programme upskilled artists and cultural sector employees in how to ensure venues, services and offers are accessible to VI communities.

Pre and post-course survey results show the training helped people feel more confident to work with VI communities; developing their knowledge and understanding of aspects of sight loss.

The largest increase in knowledge and understanding was in seen in guided support, with an increased average score of 2.2 rising to 4.2. This was a particular focus of the training. Attendees valued learning about how to appropriately lead a person with sight loss and when and how to offer physical assistance.

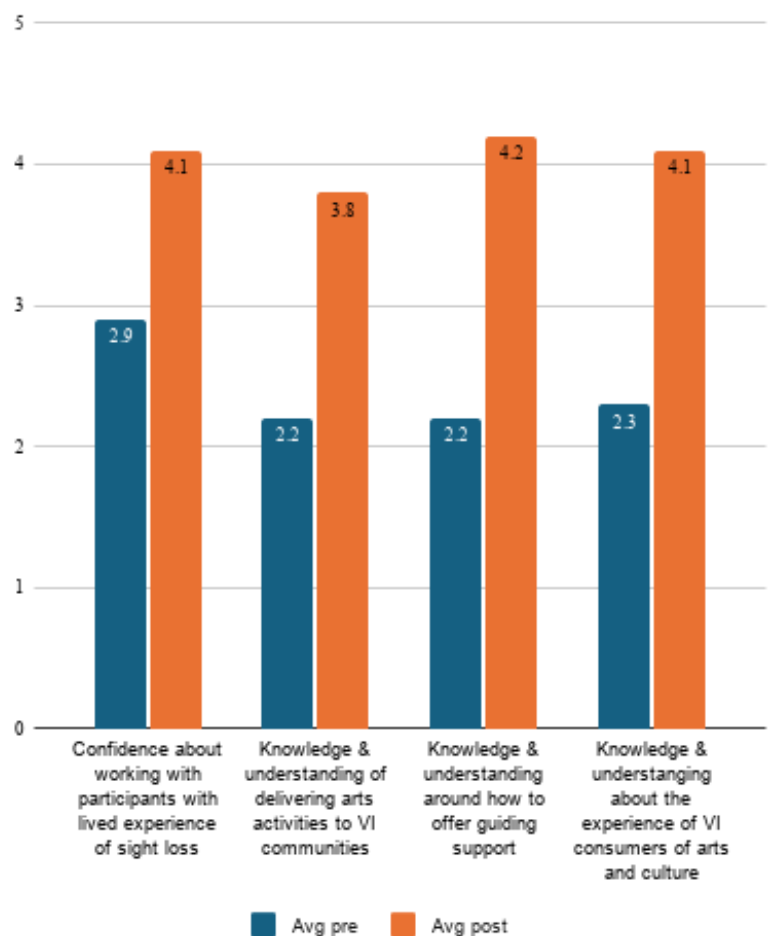


Figure 1: Results of training survey show increased participant scores for confidence, knowledge and understanding. The area showing the largest increased score was offering guided support.

Access can be as simple as a question.

VI professional training workshop participant.



The training workshops took an honest and open approach to access based on a willingness to take time to understand the barriers and to be prepared for making mistakes. Attendees' comments demonstrate increased awareness of VI people's experiences and how to assist people with respect, asking a person about their specific needs rather than making assumptions about them.

Training provided an understanding of the range of sight loss and perspectives and recognised that adjustments such as clear signage and verbal directions can benefit all audiences. Techniques such as including a verbal physical description of people and spaces was helpful advice and put into practice in facilitators' workshops. Attendees are more aware of VI accessibility for their organisations, with some people asking what more they can do to improve online and booking experiences. This could be a focus of future training.

As a result of the Cohere Arts programme one workshop facilitator is in the process of setting up a new CIC to offer music workshops. This develops the work of the VI arts programme and can be seen as a successful result of the training and support offered.



It was the perfect mix of practical
& absorption learning.

VI professional training workshop participant



CONFIDENCE

People have increased confidence that spills over into other parts of their lives.

Taking part has given people the opportunity and confidence to try other activities outside the programme. Over the course of the programme, the Cohere team has signposted people to activities such as a ukulele band, performances, workshops and classes. Participants share their experiences of different events and venues, and encourage each other to go.

I think drama has given me confidence to go on to do other things that I probably wouldn't have tried. Not only do I really enjoy [drama], it's a stepping stone to other things as well

VI drama group participant

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Participant F has previously tried to access classes and other activities but felt their sight could be a barrier in those classes and felt uncomfortable when needing extra time to take part. Cohere's VI drama group is totally different: they feel welcome and comfortable: 'none of it is stressful'.

The group is a constant part of F's schedule. They enjoy the routine and the company the group offers, especially feeling isolated by working from home. This has helped support F at times of change and has practically provided guide dog sitting. A particular highlight of the friendship and support offered is the age range and diversity of life experience of participants: 'I learn so much from the different age groups...it adds an extra layer...I really value that unique factor in the group, it makes it very special'.

F feels their social confidence has really improved from being part of the programme. They are more familiar with the Waterfront in Ipswich and the cafes there, and as a new guide dog owner they are more confident to go to these places with their dog. They have taken up activities beyond drama, for example, playing ukulele and visiting Orford Ness, and engaging with other arts activities in the community, for example at the New Wolsey Theatre or DanceEast. They know from experience that they don't have to worry about asking for help at those places: 'I know there are helpful staff there because they've been helpful before.'

- Bespoke development of artist Francis Goodhand's popular 'TV & Me' music participation workshop featuring music from TV and film
- Collaboration with artist Anisha Thampy's Immersive Arts project
- Participation in Birmingham City University's research project with National Trust Orford Ness: *Sonic Heritage and Environmental Change on England's East Coast 1718 – present*
- VI Group High Spirits Featured as part of Suffolk Archives' *Beyond Labels* exhibition at The Hold
- Adaptation of High Spirits' previous theatre production *Living On Air* as a radio drama
- High Spirits group member to be interviewed on RNIB's Connect Radio
- Strong interest in establishing a new ukulele group for VI adults

WOULD THIS HAVE HAPPENED WITHOUT COHERE ARTS?

The VI arts programme has made a clear difference to participants and creatives in all the impact framework areas.

Cohere's commitment to high-quality provision for visually impaired people meant they designed a programme with care and ambition. This ran through the programme from scoping activities in consultation with beneficiaries and stakeholders, facilitating engaging workshops that stretched what people thought they could do, valuing participants by giving them space and time, and developing skills and understanding of local creative practitioners. This profound understanding and belief in arts, heritage and cultural engagement as a way for people to live enjoyable and creative lives was key to the programme's success.

The programme built upon Cohere's previous work with communities and benefited from experience and understanding. Part of this was about understanding the diversity of VI communities, that it is made up of different age ranges, interests and experiences. This put them in a trusted position with participants and stakeholders who knew that if Cohere was involved the quality of the offer would be high. This was recognised in terms of accessible workshop content, skilful and professional leaders and suitable locations. This trust extended from the programme itself to wider recommendations of cultural activities in the area. People have acted upon these to attend theatre performances, cultural events or general community activities.

Cohere's work stands out for the care and time given to listen to what people want and the ambition for a programme that means people exceed their creative expectations. Outreach and regular drama participants took part in purposeful activities with professional expectations of the work. A varied creative programme gave people the chance to choose activities and fully engage and participate at their own ability and skill level. This changed the mindset for some participants from 'we don't do things like this' to 'let's go'.

Creative practitioners were empowered to develop their skills and practice. A network of skilled facilitators enhances provision for creative workshops across the county that providers can call on in future.

CONCLUSION

The Cohere Arts VI art programme successfully delivered quality creative engagement across Suffolk, boosting people's confidence, feelings of community and agency. People feel more confident to access wider arts provision including theatre and film because of their experience of the programme. Some people have joined other community classes or are interested in keeping up activities at home or as a group. The programme has supported people to try new things and to find things they enjoy doing.

The work has been life changing for some participants: they have rediscovered joy at playing an instrument, made new friends, and felt part of a community they can call on socially or for support. Participants are aware of their creative abilities and want to choose creative activities for enjoyment and wellbeing. The consultation and outreach programme has demonstrated to stakeholders what VI communities want and what can be achieved. Cohere Arts have a reputation for care, taking time and effort to treat people with respect as creative individuals who can achieve often beyond their expectations. Cohere recognises the barriers VI people face in accessing arts programming and this programme applied their knowledge and understanding to show what is possible in future work.

NEXT STEPS

Based on the successful outcomes of the programme some next steps could be:

- Use the programme as a model for future work. Ensuring that time and staff resources are maintained for participants to fully engage with the programme. Recognising the physical barriers to participation including access to transport and confidence to access new locations. Booking Cohere trained facilitators to continue working with VI communities as part of any ongoing work and providing training to further upskill creative practitioners. Continued discussion through VI networks to ensure any future programme is varied, inclusive, provides ways for people to be active participants and recognises there can be surprises in trying something new.
- Continuing to offer group sessions for hands-on activities such as clay and ukulele. Setting up a ukulele group or lessons and including a social element of playing together at a sharing event.
- Continued support for the regular VI drama group building upon their professional success. This group should meet regularly and include events or a performance element for participants to share and take pride in their work. Continue to include opportunities for sharing news and 'what's on' locally so that people can choose to engage with arts, culture and heritage beyond the workshops.
- Offering training refresher sessions for creative practitioners and access audits for organisations. Access audits could build upon those from this programme to include booking and online experiences.

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