

Develop Skills, Learn and Reflect (DSLR): 2023-2025

A look back over the past two years of In Focus' DSLR programme



Background & Context

Since 2015, Southampton-based charity In Focus Education & Development has provided much needed arts-based learning for young people considered at-risk or vulnerable, outside of mainstream education settings, and those not in employment or training. In Focus also works within local communities to provide a broader offering of photography-based learning for all ages and abilities.

Core Values

INCLUSIVITY. To be inclusive, fair and equitable in everything we do. Everyone is welcome, regardless of age, circumstance or ability.

CREATIVE LEARNING AND GROWTH. To provide a high-quality creative education that supports the learning and development of those we work with, from individuals to communities.

EMPOWERMENT. To use our passion for photography and visual art forms to empower people to express themselves, communicate and connect with others in new ways.

About DSLR 16-25

The Programme's Aims and Ambitions

From August 2023-August 2025, the DSLR (Develop Skills, Learn and Reflect) programme engaged young people aged 16-25 in lens-based and mixed media creative learning that encouraged explorations of self and identity and worked to increase self-confidence and enable both social and educational development.

With so many young people having their education disrupted or affected by the Covid-19 pandemic, the number of those missing out on a complete, formal education has risen in recent years. It was the goal of the DSLR programme to address this, as well as other barriers faced by young people today, by offering an accessible route into skills training and providing them with safe spaces to learn and develop.

In Focus' target demographic for this programme included:

- Young people not in education, employment or training.
- Young people struggling with their own lives and identities due to a range of factors - from gender identity and sexuality, to living with (often invisible) disabilities, including learning differences and mental health conditions, as well as facing other pressures to conform to societal norms or expectations.

- Young people in the Youth Justice system—those considered at-risk of perpetrating, becoming victims of crime, or both (with there often being a co-occurrence).

As well as working with referrals from local youth organisations, DSLR marked the first time that In Focus also offered self-referrals direct from interested young people. This was to ensure a route for those not connected under partner organisations (such as Skills2Achieve or Breakout Youth) to have the opportunity to participate. Outreach methods for recruiting participants included social media, local employment services, secondary schools and post-16 colleges, as well as the Hampshire-wide Youth Justice services and visits to local youth organisations (including No Limits and Youth Options).

We resolutely believe that allowing young people to direct their own learning means they are able to achieve better and more consistently, with longer-lasting positive effects.

(In Focus Education & Development)

Forms of Engagement

The DSLR programme engaged young people in creative educational activities, with the opportunity to gain transferable skills, earn qualifications, and work towards Digital Badges. Teaching the processes of learning practical skills, collaboration and skill-sharing with others, In Focus shaped its framework for maximum accessibility and inclusivity, by embracing a flexible approach to delivery, catering sessions to participants needs.

Every young person has the right to an education, yet they do not all access or experience it in the same way. We work to remove barriers to participation through creative and cultural education and experiences, enabling them to find ways back in to education, employment or training, and encouraging them to engage with and contribute towards their own communities.

(In Focus Education & Development)

The Lowdown: Two Years of DSLR



Beginning in September 2023, the Develop Skills, Learn and Reflect (DSLR) programme took place over two years and was made possible due to investment from Arts Council England, with added support in the form of core funding in its second year from The Blagrove Trust and Quilter, plus in-kind support and more from No Limits, Breakout Youth, Go! Southampton, Southampton Solent University and [others to add here?].

Young people taking part had left compulsory education, but not necessarily with the same levels of education or learning experiences as hoped, or as mainstream education had 'expected' of them. DSLR offered participants the chance to benefit from additional learning, and afforded them the time and space to explore and develop a stronger sense of identity as they continue into adulthood.

"I like how varied it is. Every week feels different. In school I just got bored. This isn't like that—I get to do new things."

(DSLR Participant)

The scheme of work was shaped to teach participants transferrable and life-enhancing skills, using a range of artistic mediums, from photography to creative writing and collage. This involved learning or building on existing visual skills, understanding how to research artists and their work, and responding to this inspiration by creating their own work. Here they were able to utilise these newly-gained skills to inform their practice. They were also encouraged to reflect on and share their progress with each other, plus their wider social and familial circles and, eventually, strangers, through public exhibitions.

Sessions ran initially across two main locations — at In Focus' Creative Space in Southampton (with participants referred by Breakout Youth and self-referrals through online/physical callouts) and at a central location in Eastleigh as part of a collaboration with Enham Trust's Skills2Achieve initiative.

"I've learnt so many different things I can use in the future."

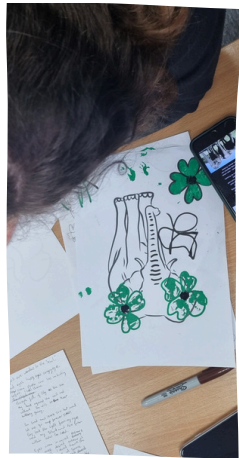
(DSLR Participant)

Through the collection of data via self-evaluation questionnaires and anecdotal evidence gathered in conversations with young people, we have been able to hear directly the positive impact taking part in DSLR has had for participants. Paying close attention to the experiences of those taking part is crucial to shaping the future of similar outreach programmes and to making a real difference in young people's lives.

Speaking to our evaluator about attending Tuesday evening sessions, one young person said: "It's like a form of therapy for me. I come here, have a rant with people, get it out of my system and then I get to do something creative. I had a love for photography before but coming here, I discovered how little I knew about my camera and how to use it—I only used its auto settings before. Now I've learnt so many different things I can use in the future."



Challenges and Successes



Working with Unexpected Change

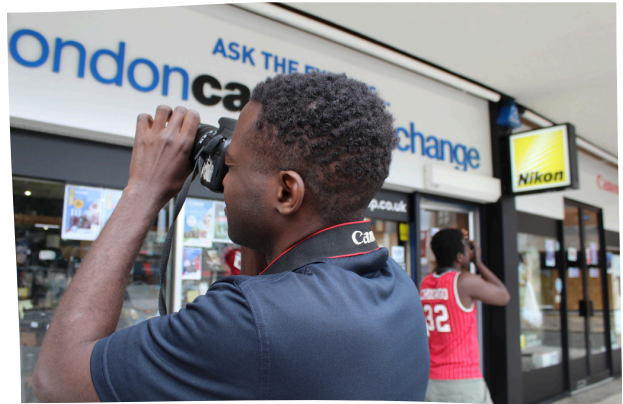
As is often the case with long-term projects, we had to be reflexive to changing parameters and how this impacted the young people we engaged with. Unfortunately and unexpectedly, Enham Trust announced at the end of May 2024 that they would no longer be running their Hampshire-wide Skills2Achieve programme. Without this collaboration with Enham, we were unable to continue sessions for this group in the same location (in Eastleigh and occasionally Andover). We invited these young people to join us at open sessions in Southampton, but didn't see a huge uptake. While this cohort had been due to finish less than two months later, we believe the sudden change in support and a difference in location likely presented barriers too.

Jem Rycraft, a former facilitator with Skills2Achieve spoke about the changes he noticed in the young people after sessions with In Focus: “You helped them understand that learning can be creative, that it doesn't have to be so starchy. I think the evidence of that in their work is clear.”

He believed the time spent with them had value beyond the sessions themselves. “They don't worry about, ‘Is this right? Is this wrong?’ They understand now that actually, anything goes, that their contributions, their creativity, are as valid as the next person's.”

He said it was encouraging to see how teaching young people such critical thinking skills and approaches “promoted debate and seeing things differently. It enabled them to develop a whole array of skills.”

Engaging with New Groups of Young People



During the summer of 2024, we worked to deliver sessions to young people from the Unaccompanied Asylum-Seeking Children's services (UASC) in Southampton. This engagement took place over the summer months, and participants were invited to join us for our open sessions from September 2024 too. This pilot worked well for six weeks. However, at the start of the new term, all young people were offered places at college, so were no longer able to attend sessions, or had new focuses. One of the young people from this six-week group presented his work to the council, and received funding from them to be able to purchase his own camera so he could continue his own photography journey.

When we set up our newest group, running later on Wednesday evenings as an open group for any young people to attend, we wanted to offer the option for something more fully outside of school and work hours. At the time, this wasn't something we'd done before, and we hoped it would increase access and engage different young people whose other commitments made connecting with us difficult previously. Young people from any background or circumstance aged 16-25 were able to self-refer and attend these sessions. This has slowly but promisingly grown in attendance since it began.

Adapting to the Needs of Young People

At the start of DSLR, we had initially planned to run the sessions in four cohorts across the two years. However, in practice, the team realised that consistency is one of the most valuable aspects of helping young people reengage, find safety in routine and be able to flourish. “It became clear for us that you can’t stop running a programme for a month when you have young people coming regularly,” explained Kristianne Drake, CEO. “That’s when the engagement stops and people don’t come back.”

In Focus initially ran differently themed sessions for different groups in any given week. However, once the focus shifted to preparation for exhibitions, the team decided the approach needed streamlining. Faye Phillips, Operations Manager and part of the delivery team responsible for running sessions described these changes said: “We made it so that each group was going through the same topics and conversations at the same time. It really helped the team as it meant more consistency from session to session, and better continuity for the young people attending each week.”

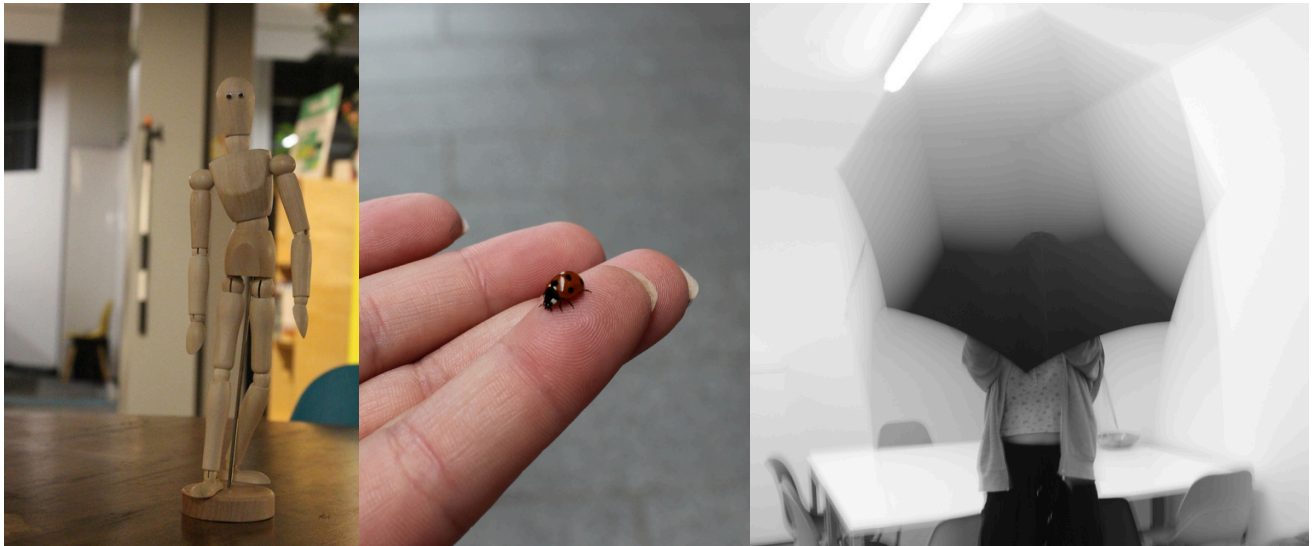


“I feel really safe here, comfortable being myself and just existing... talking about whatever comes to mind. It has the vibes of a chosen family, which is really wonderful.”

(DSLR Participant)

A key strength of In Focus has always been its willingness to adapt to the needs of its participants. As Faye explained, “There’s only so prepared you can feel [before each session], because they’re all different—even if you’re delivering the same thing. You have to adapt to who is walking in the room and what they’re going through that particular day.” Faye described it as being “a lot to do with matching the energy of the young people” in the sessions. Not everyone will respond well to high-energy interactions; sometimes it can feel too much like a pressure or a demand. “It’s about letting the young people set the tone and pace of the session.” (Faye, In Focus)

More generally, having both an open group and more specifically tailored groups (for example, an LGBTQIA+specific group) has worked well. “It’s made it feel safer and more inclusive for those young people, and more accessible for other young people who can’t access a group during school or work hours if they have other things going on,” said Faye.



Seeing Positive Change in Young People

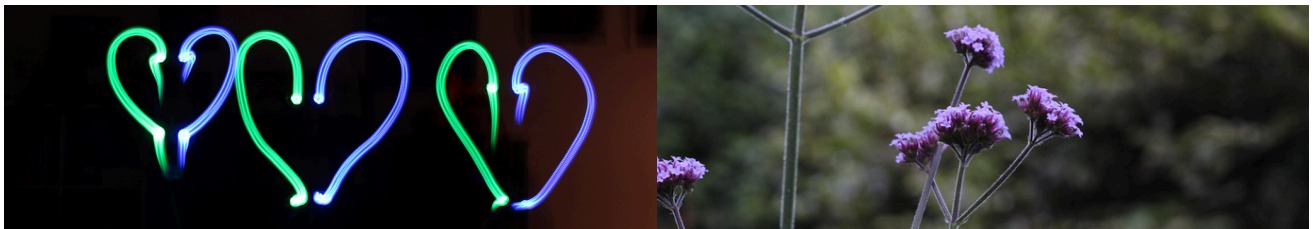
The In Focus delivery team fed back instances of positive change they’d witnessed in the young people. “They’ve definitely grown—in their skillsets, but also personally, in their confidence. I’ve watched them become very comfortable in a group setting, and in their own skin,” said Faye.

Even for those young people fairly new to the groups, there has been noticeable, positive change. One participant recently announced they were going to start their job search again, demonstrating a huge change in their self-confidence less than a month after connecting with In Focus, where before they had been low and struggling with motivation.

This is reflected in the direct feedback from the young people taking part (sent via anonymous feedback forms): “I have gained so much confidence and made so many amazing friends,” said one young person.

“I feel more confident talking to people I don’t know. I like that I get to meet new people in this relaxed way. I feel like I’m being myself.”

(DSLR Participant)



These changes have been seen in other ways too. One young person initially would only attend if they brought a parent with them. This then changed to them attending with their support dog, and by the end of the summer, they were managing a solo bus journey and attending the sessions on their own. This represented a significant personal change in what they had previously felt able and confident enough to do.

Faye has observed many participants on similar upward trajectories. “Watching this young person today, she’s gone from being quite low in confidence to discovering that she really likes showing other people how to do things—skill-sharing. This is an important transferrable skill she’s been able to work on with us.”

A change in attitudes towards learning has also been apparent. “There have been times where young people mentioned they’d touched on something before at school or college, but that in doing it here, they’ve gained a different or new level of understanding. In school, you’re being told things—here, it’s more of a discussion; you’re feeling your own way through it rather than just being told, this is the way it is.”

“I find engagement improves when we adapt to participants’ interests and reflect on past conversations,” explained Dev Place, Marketing & Communications Manager and Artist Educator. “They see that we’ve listened and paid interest in them as individuals, as well as participants of a group.”

A parent of one of the young people regularly attending sessions gave feedback on the changes they had noticed too. “My son feels completely safe and like the people understand him and he understands them. He doesn’t feel that often with others, so it’s really important. The support for his neurodivergence and for the LGBTQIA+ community, and layering creativity onto that, it’s just irreplaceable. It gives him the feeling of, I belong, and helps him when dealing with things externally.”



[You can watch the full video of this conversation with a DSLR participant’s parent here](#)

“We’ve seen growth in technical ability, confidence, social interaction and creative identity,” said Dev. Many of the young people arrive at their first sessions quiet and reserved, seeming “slightly intimidated to learn new skills or to speak out with ideas and opinions.” But over multiple sessions together, Dev has observed real positive change:

“The contrast in many participants from our first interaction to today is something we’re immensely proud of. It reminds us why programmes like DSLR are so impactful.”

Dev Place, Artist Educator

Achieving Charity Status

In 2024, we were successful in our application to become a Registered Charity. Reaching this milestone is something we wholeheartedly believe would not have been possible without the support of Arts Council England. In becoming a charity, we were then eligible to apply for further grants and were awarded core funding support from the Blagrove Trust for three years; the impact of this continues to help us thrive and grow as an organisation, strengthening our offer for young people.

This same year, we also become an official Living Wage Employer. Being able to pay our team fairly means they are better equipped to help with our mission and focus in the coming years. We also believe that positive environmental change begins with fair pay, as this increases people’s capacity to make more environmentally-informed decisions.

(Kristianne Drake, CEO)

“Being supported by Arts Council England has elevated other people’s perception of who we are and what we offer as an organisation. We have been able to reach further than anticipated because of this, and are being invited into more spaces where we have the opportunity to engage with more young people in the city.”



Offering Further Opportunities for Young People Work Experience and Employment

Following the end of Enham’s Skills2Achieve programme, the parents of one young person asked if we could support their child with some work experience, as they were struggling to gain employment due to lacking real-world experience. We were able to engage with two young people on this basis, as well as employing another through a six-month paid position (through Artswork’s Breakthrough scheme). We believe the support we received from Arts Council England truly improved our visibility as an organisation. This in turn has led to further opportunities becoming available for the young people we connect with.

“Volunteering and work experience with us means young people are able to build a skillset they didn’t previously have. It’s not just about filing or sorting, it’s also about curating exhibitions, attending meetings and hearing from heads of organisations, which can in turn lead to further opportunities,” said Kristianne.

With this support from Arts Council England, we were also able to hire a freelancer basis to run our social media and raise our profile online. We have invested in their development over the past two years too, up-skilling them to be able to deliver workshops to young people, something they had never done before but are now thriving in. In September 2024, they joined the team on a permanent contract as our Marketing and Communications Manager, as well as an Artist Educator working directly with young people.

“Leading DSLR sessions has been really fulfilling,” said Dev, Marketing and Communications Manager and now Artist Educator. “I’ve been able to see the progression that a long-term project can provide for a young person, but I’ve also witnessed the strength of a community of young people who create and build skills together.”

As a contrast to Dev’s previous experience in more behind-the-scenes roles, she says it has provided valuable experience. “It’s made me learn a lot about my own approach to leading and how I can facilitate a range of young people. Different individuals need different communication styles. I’m striving to become more comfortable in all these scenarios; communication is really important to me, particularly as an Autistic person.”



“I think not being much older than some of our participants helps me in terms of approachability but sometimes I find it harder to come across as a leader. It can be a challenge balancing authority and approachability,” she explained. “I’m still learning and adapting these new skills.”

Establishing a Youth Leadership Group

As part of In Focus' commitment to ensuring authentic youth voice is at the heart of its mission, in October 2024 we set up a Youth Leadership group to help shape and inform the charity's future engagement with young people.

This group consists of two In Focus staff, our Trustee lead for Youth Leadership and Participation and a second trustee (both under the age of 25), and five young people (aged 16-25) who have either participated on our programmes (including DSLR) or taken part in work experience with us. The group meets quarterly to discuss all that In Focus offers young people, and how we can continuously improve this offer as we look ahead to future projects.

This group was set up as a result of direct feedback from our young trustees, who wanted to explore how to better incorporate youth voices at the very start of our projects, and to ensure their needs are met through our engagement with them. To put it simply: what better way to engage and help young people than by listening to what they need most from us?

Something already implemented as a result of this group is building in more opportunities for young people to not only learn and create, but to include them in the curation and organisation of events and exhibitions, teaching them further transferrable skills in the process.

“The feedback we had from young people in the DSLR sessions is what led us to create these Youth Pathways and Progression Leadership opportunities. They were asking us—what’s next? How do I keep going? How can I progress and take this further?”

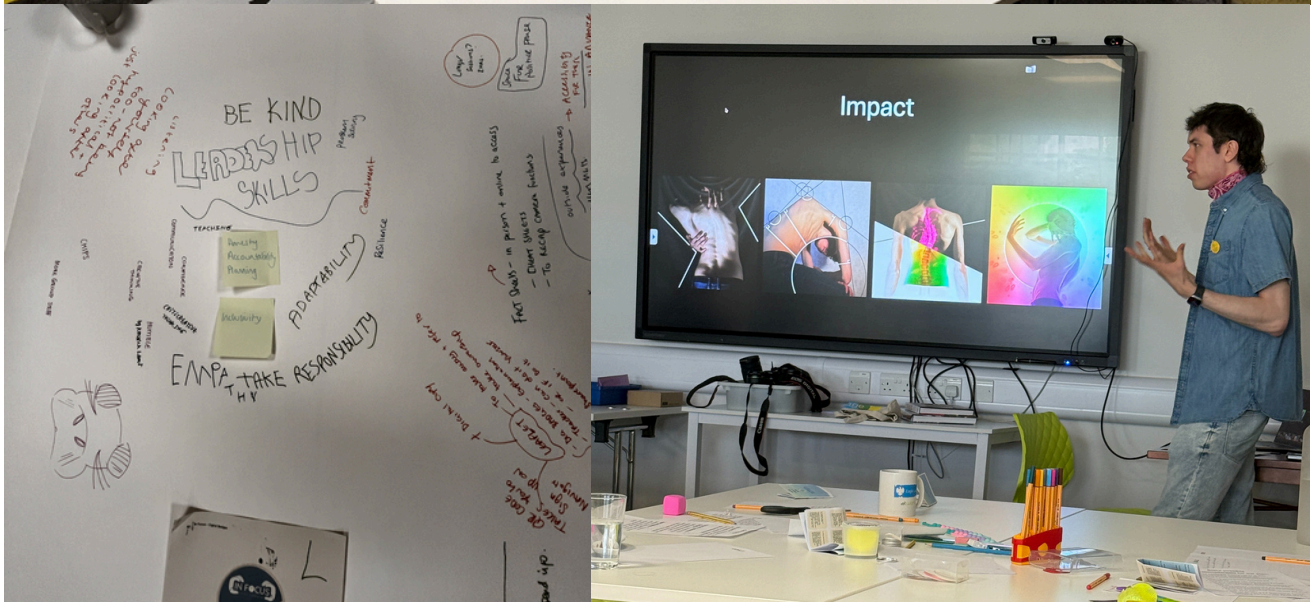
(Faye Phillips, Operations Manager & Artist Educator, In Focus)

This is not only about how In Focus can develop as an organisation, but also about giving back by supporting the growth of young people through the Youth Leadership Pathway, enabling them to experience and grow through developing their own leadership skills.

This enthusiasm is a testament to these young people, to how much they are invested, and how much they care about their own futures and those of their peers.

Kristianne explained that some young people in the group also “started asking, actually, can we run some sessions too?” The team are working hard to enable young people to become tomorrow’s leaders and facilitators. “They’re paid for their time and are becoming artist practitioners themselves. We’ve only been able to do this because of our long-term working relationships with these young people and our local partners. We would love to pursue this further in the future.”

Wherever possible, In Focus invites young people to attend events and meetings with other organisations, to help them gain further experience and awareness of the arts and cultural sector.



Further Afield: Youth Empowerment with the Blagrave Trust

(DSLRL participant)

“It was an amazing opportunity. I got to meet so many people with different experiences from my own, but there was a sense we were all united in our drive for change. I hope I get to attend something like this again in the future.”

As part of seeking progression and youth leadership opportunities, one DSLRL participant (attending since October 2023) took up the offer of attending the Blagrave Trust’s Youth-Led Change Day: A Celebration of Youth Leadership and Social Change. This Birmingham-held event brought together 90 young change makers, activists and leaders aged 18-30 for a day of learning, collaboration and action for social change.

Trips to London—the Hayward Gallery and Parliament



In April 2025, we took DSLRL participants to London on an arts exploration day, to the Hayward Gallery to visit Linder Sterling’s ‘Danger Came Smiling’ retrospective and Mickalene Thomas’ ‘All About Love’ exhibition. Young people were able to meet Linder Sterling and talk to her about inspiration and thoughts on creativity. Through anonymous feedback forms, 100% of attendees said they would like to go on future day trips with In Focus, with all saying they felt supported during the day and in the lead-up to it. Further feedback from young people included: “I LOVED the trip!”, “I had a great time, it was lovely - thank you” and “I had such an awesome time!!! It was really fantastic.”

In June 2025, we made a return trip to London—this time, headed to Westminster. With inclusivity at the heart of all we do, it is a privilege to be valued as a safe space by young people. We supported trans and non-binary DSLR participants to meet with Satvir Kaur and Darren Paffey (Members of Parliament for Southampton) for a discussion.



“It’s a joy for us to support self-expression and empowerment through creativity and community. We make sure In Focus is a safe space for everyone who comes through our doors. Because why wouldn’t we? It’s that simple.”

(Kristianne Drake, CEO, In Focus)

A postcard and poem created by a DSLR participant was presented to the MPs, and a letter written by another was read out to the room. “Although the day is a bit of a blur, I do remember having a really positive, emotional and exciting day. I’m grateful to have been able to share my experience of being transgender with the MPs,” wrote one young person afterwards. “I was very nervous going into the meeting but came out feeling heard and with a bit of hope for the future of trans+ youth,” said another. “I was able to share through the medium of art. I’m so grateful I had the opportunity to use my voice in such a personal matter.” “To know the voices of these exceptional young people who are our future were heard in a place of power gives us some hope,” said Kristianne, who also attended the meeting.

Upon hearing the ruling my heart sank
A day where the country took a step back
It’s not just Rowling we have to ‘thank’
For our freedom being under attack
After years of anti trans legislation
Me, my friends and community
Have become the scapegoat for this nation
What happened to the unity?

I don’t feel safe walking down the street
Wearing anything that identifies me as trans
How on earth can my life be complete
When everyday people die by these plans
Why do I have to hide my they/them pin
Having lived most of my life hating who I am
Having lived most of my life feeling like a sin
Why should others label me as woman

I feel like my fate has been decided by those
In power who don’t even know my name
So please don’t continue to impose
These laws that don’t treat us the same
We are just people trying to survive
So show solidarity and stand with us
Give us the chance to thrive
Give us a reason to trust

Further Afield: Starting a New Group on the Isle of Wight

In the second year of DSLR, we made new connections on the Isle of Wight, and were able to start running a new group in a community space there. Interest was strong from the start, with 17 people attending the first session. These sessions were facilitated by volunteers from Breakout Youth and run by our Artist Educator, Holli Kalina. Running these as evening sessions meant young people were able to attend outside of school or college hours. Holli joined In Focus initially as a student volunteer through Southampton Solent University. We were then able to hire her in a freelance capacity as one of our Artist Educators in January 2025. From July 2025, she became part of our permanent team, as Project Coordinator for our Isle of Wight groups.

Holli said that some young people from this new group “demonstrated a growing interest in photography,” with others more engaged in different creative activities offered, such as collage. “Breakout Youth staff said that some of their young people rarely get involved with other activities offered to them,” said Holli. “And those young people actively reported that they’d enjoyed the In Focus sessions.”

“Delivering sessions is both fun and rewarding. I feel I gain as much from the delivery as the young people do from taking part. Some groups are more challenging than others, but I feel that with a framework that isn’t particularly rigid, I can choose to adapt as the sessions unfolds, based on what the participants respond best to.”

(Holli Kalina, Artist Educator, In Focus)



Sharing and Connecting

A key part of DSLR over the past two years has been focused on giving young people new and exciting opportunities to flourish creatively. We have partnered with some excellent organisations in Southampton and beyond, in order to showcase and celebrate the hard work of these young artists. A series of exhibitions have taken place in spaces including God's House Tower, at a pop-up gallery space at Eagle Labs, and in refurbished vintage phone boxes thanks to GO! Southampton. Here are some excerpts from write-ups of these exhibitions. You can find full versions on our website - links in appendices [Or, click here](#)

“The exhibitions have been huge in building confidence, in giving their creativity validation and an audience. That’s been massive for them, and opening nights have been huge in bringing them all together. They’ve really showcased the young people’s openness, enthusiasm and skill-sharing.”

(Faye, In Focus)



Year One: Seeing Things Differently at God's House Tower

Seeing Things Differently ran from 30th May to 16th June 2024. Spanning the whole of the main gallery upstairs and with a complementary short film in the screening room one level down, the exhibition was the culmination of seven months of creative learning and engagement. For those attending evening groups at In Focus in Southampton—many of whom had been recommended to us by local LGBTQIA+ organisation, Breakout Youth, the sessions presented not only the opportunity to learn new skills, but they acted as a form of respite, a change of scene and an outlet for self-expression and exploration. For some participants, the space offered them more time and freedom to be themselves than anything else they'd been able to access before.

This context made for a powerful exhibition—the identity-affirming nature of the pieces created by the young people was evident—both in the photographic and collage work displayed in the main gallery space, and in the short film that featured the voices of the young people themselves. Here they described their experiences. Soundbites used in the film captured these responses:

“Nothing is too weird or wild. We can be ourselves here.”

(DSLR Participant)



“You don’t really get to have a lot of play as an adult. The world outside is hostile in so many ways and people think that being an adult means being really serious.”

(DSLR Participant)

The exhibition’s title relates directly to a collaborative poem, written by participants during group sessions. A vivid jumble of ideas, the piece considered both the stereotypical ideas of what being different might mean to people, and provided an insight into the minds of those involved. The collaborative effort here reinforced the impact of the work, and showed how the young people had been able to find commonality and understanding in each other’s differences. A trusting and safe environment had led to great artistic connection and collaboration.

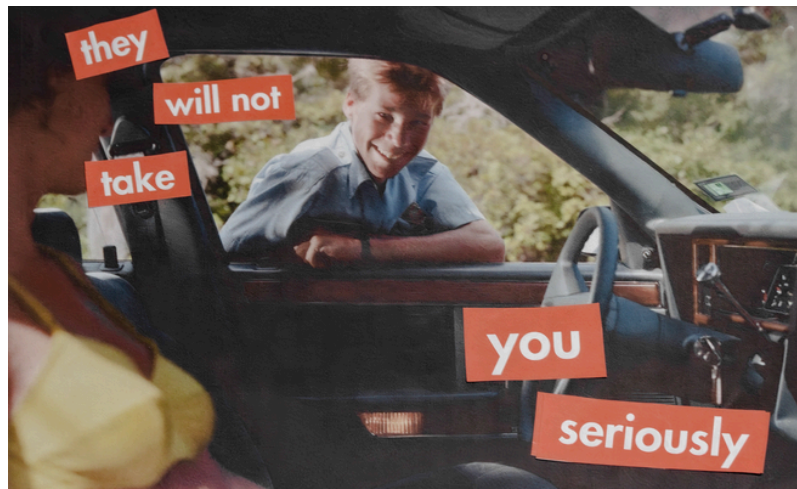
Seeing Things Differently was a lively and impassioned exploration of what it means to be a young person. For these young artists, being able to present and exhibit their work for the first time was a powerful way of affirming months of hard work, showing them that people do care about what they have to say.



They Will Not Take You Seriously at God's House Tower

Launching on 23rd August 2024, They Will Not Take You Seriously was the second DSLR exhibition. The exhibition's title came from a discussion during one of the group sessions, and provided visitors an opportunity to see the world through their eyes.

(Kristianne, In Focus)



“Shakespeare said, ‘All that glitters is not gold’, and he was right. The young people and their work in this space sparkle brighter than any precious metal or diamond. They burn bright, and in doing so, cast a light on the world that we can all benefit from. But some of this light comes from the darker places they have inhabited. Spaces both physically and metaphysically uninhabitable at times, but they are still here, brighter and stronger than before.”

As well as showcasing young people's work, They Will Not Take You Seriously centred around the idea of labels and breaking free from their constraints—from the outright negative to those that might appear potentially positive or helpful. At the heart of this exhibition was a powerful statement: that you do not have confined under labels to understand or define yourself as a person.

Kristianne encouraged the audience to embrace the young artists “generosity, acknowledge their vulnerability and become part of their journey with them”, before inviting attendees to participate in the work as well—by writing down any labels they too would like to shed, or rather, shred...as they were placed into a shredder to applause and cheers from onlookers.

The exhibition, programmed to run alongside Ian Giles' interactive video installation, Everyone Involved, and Southampton's Queer Stories (GHT's archival exploration of the city's lesser-known history of queer pride reaching back to the 1970s), worked perfectly to complement the history of our city, in showing the present and potential future of Southampton's queer voices and community, DSLR's participants: the queer artists of tomorrow.

Year Two:

They Will Not Take You Seriously (reimagined) at Eagle Labs, God's House Tower and Winkle Street Phone Boxes

“Different is...the only thing I know,” reads one of the lines in the collaborative poem written by DSLR participants. This poem, pulled together from a session in which they wrote responses to the prompt, ‘What does different mean to you?’, has been a part of two exhibitions, screened as part of a visual installation, and performed live during exhibitions in different locations in the city. Yet hearing it repeated does not diminish its impact—if anything, it only serves to reinforce it. Different lines from the poem seem to resonate with the listener each time. In many respects, this is symbolic of the DSLR programme as a whole. Over the past two years, this scheme of work and the young people it has connected with have really found their feet.

On 26th February 2025, the reimagined exhibition of They Will Not Take You Seriously made its way home for a pop-up show in the corridors of In Focus’ creative space at Eagle Labs, Southampton.

In a double exhibition launch, the work from TWNTYS was re-curated by young person and In Focus volunteer, Gazelle, who worked to select images from the initial exhibition and present them in a new way. With the parcel tags strung along a blank wall this time, it gave viewers the opportunity to pause and really take in each of the statements written by young people—labels others have given them that they would love to destroy.



As well as the exhibition, visitors were able to explore In Focus' creative space, where much of the learning and creation takes place. DSLR participants then led attendees towards the docks, where a second exhibition was waiting for them. There was something in the act of moving together through the city that felt like a shared declaration, visitors and young creators united in an exploration of art and identity.

In a formerly disused red phone box, which (with the support of GO! Southampton) has been lovingly restored and repainted, sits further artwork created by the young people involved in the DSLR programme. As Gemma Pratt (GO! Southampton's Director of Place Making and Deputy Executive Director) explained, these boxes sit in a prime location, where many arrive and depart from cruise ships and ferries every day.



“Together as partners, we were able to take this public realm improvement project and excel it into something which contributes to the community, supports the career progression of young people, and increases their pride in Southampton. It became something much more impactful and beneficial for the city because of In Focus.”

(Gemma Pratt, GO! Southampton)

When asked why GO! had been drawn to work with In Focus in the first place, Gemma said it wasn't something they needed to think twice about. “Once you're introduced to In Focus, to their ethics and the way the team are motivated to support young people, it's more a question of ‘How can we help their cause?’ They have mastered this way of creating an environment that gives young people the freedom to be themselves, but also challenges them to grow.”

Thanks to this partnership, these tiny, unusual exhibition spaces are now home to the photographic work of young artists from Southampton and the wider area. Photographed by tourists and day-trippers alike, their work is now being seen by countless numbers of people passing by each day and shared online across the world.

“When the community look into the story behind the art, they learn the journey of these young people. This is placemaking at its core—making places work for people.” - Gemma Pratt

Following the exhibition unveiling, attendees were led across to God's House Tower for a panel discussion, hosted by Dan Crow (Director, Aspace/God's House Tower). One young person spoke of how this project had far exceeded their expectations.



“As a young artist, it’s near impossible to get any exhibition space...any anything basically...so to have this opportunity to be in God’s House Tower, and then the pop up space, then the phone box and then...well, who knows what else, that’s the thing! It’s gone further than I could ever imagine.”

(DSLR Participant)

For these young people, the power of collaboration with their peers has bonded them in ways they perhaps did not anticipate. When asked which work was theirs, a young person found themselves struck with a realisation—all of it was theirs, because all of it had been created by them as a group. Like a lot of artistic processes, the lines between ownership have become blurred, but in a very positive way: “You asked which work was mine, and I said, I actually don’t know most of the time.”

“It’s just that...so much of our work is interchangeable, and I think we need to recognise that it’s not only the person who takes the picture or the person who does the final bit of art that is the one who takes credit for being the artist. Because a lot of the time, it’s the set up, it’s the lighting, it’s the idea...it’s mainly a huge group project to create any piece of art that we do.”

(DSLR Participant)



“Co-creation can be sort of a buzzy word but I think you’re genuinely co-creating these pieces of artwork. It’s beautiful you didn’t know whose piece was whose,” added Dan Crow.

“As the next generation of new artists and creators, I think if that ethos comes through, that genuine sense of sharing a joy and co-creating images and work together, I think you’re on to something really quite special.”

(Dan Crow, Director, God’s House Tower)

GO! Southampton have secured the funding for In Focus to host a further three shows in the telephone boxes over the coming year. Plans are already underway and In Focus have ideas for building on their current model of delivery. For this initial exhibition, team members (Faye Phillips, Operations Manager/Artist Educator and Dev Place, Communications and Marketing Manager/Artist Educator) were responsible for curating a selection of artwork from across the range of groups In Focus works with.

However, as Kristianne Drake (CEO, In Focus) explained, the next three shows are set to give young people more direct involvement in the curation process: “For around six months, we’ve been running sessions that focus on leadership, pathways and progression for these young people, and a big thing that’s come from this is that they’ve said they want to have more opportunities like this. So, moving forward, the young people are going to be curating these shows, because they need these opportunities to grow and develop. We’re excited to support them in these new roles, where as well as creating the work, they will decide on the subject matter and curate the exhibitions themselves.”

“I love that sense of community I’ve found with In Focus; it’s really cool that I get to do this alongside some really cool people.”

(DSLR Participant)



And Everything In-Between...at God's House Tower

“The young participants’ work in this exhibition is an exploration of what it means to be their own true selves—the good, the bad, the ugly...and everything in between.”

On 13th June 2025, the young people from DSLR unveiled their latest group exhibition, And Everything in Between...

“Your life is a series of labels and stereotypes—roles you are given at birth, inherited social identities and the lottery of where you grow up,” so began the opening statements, read by the young artists themselves as part of a short film. “The one thing we do have some control over is autonomous choice. To be who we want to be, to change our future selves, to become all of this, and none of this...and everything in between.”

'a space' arts & In Focus present

And Everything In-Between

God's House Tower
Town Quay Road
Southampton
SO14 2NY

Friday 13th June -
Sunday 22nd June

Free entry

God's House Tower
is open Thursday -
Sunday only

QR code

IN FOCUS
education & development
inspired young people

HERITAGE
FUND

ARTS COUNCIL
ENGLAND

SOUTHAMPTON
CITY COUNCIL

Blagrove
production

Quilter

“We know that this city can foster creative talent, and credit to you all for producing such amazing work. No show is at all possible without the artists; we’re all just here to facilitate you lot, you’re the talent.”

(Dan Crow, Director, God’s House Tower)

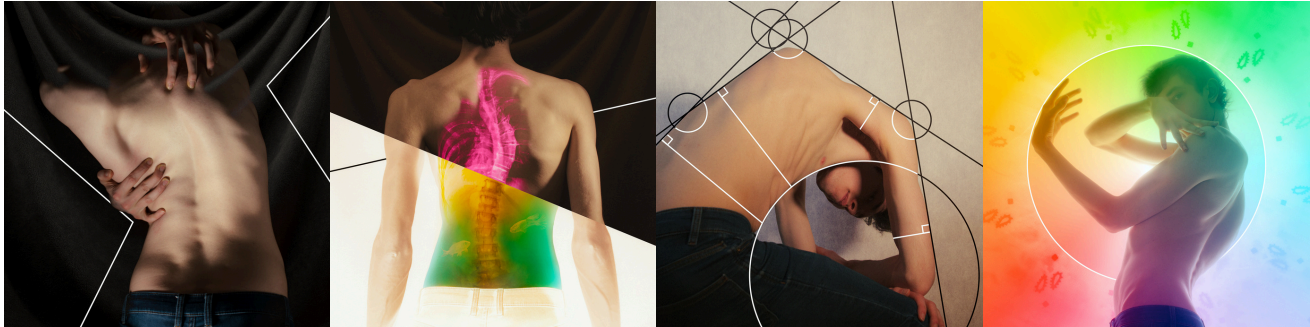
In the main gallery, wooden partition boards housed photographic work by the young artists, utilising techniques they’d learnt during sessions with In Focus, including triptychs (a trio of connected images), to explore narratives of their choosing.

Work spilled out beyond this into the connecting space between the two floors. Here, one artist’s work explored their lived experience of physical difference: “I wanted to capture my complicated relationship with my back and torso. I explored how I could see my scoliosis as a fashionable piece of clothing that I want to wear, rather than something that is purely subtractive from my appearance,” they eloquently explained.



“Could I dare to find beauty, not by looking past my deformity, but by looking directly at it? I loved how adding colour to an X-ray could transform it from something medical to something magical.”

(DSLR participant on their ‘scoliosis series’)



Attendees mentioned repeatedly how striking they had found the exhibition, with comments ranging from “very moving and thought-provoking; well done to the young people” to “this brought me joy today”. One visitor even sketched a version of a photograph from the show, sending “love to everyone in-between”.

“Being an artist, I find the idea of ‘and everything in between’ to be kind of a challenge, because the way I experience emotions as an autistic person, it’s like my highs are really high, my lows are bad and scary. What’s in between? I just have to find out, you know? I have to look inward and find a space for myself to just be myself. And that’s both a challenging thing art-wise and for recovery. I find that I can recover in this group. I find that it’s healing.”

(DSLR Participant)



“I associate joy with community and people. Coming here, I have a lot of joy meeting and seeing people like me. And just being creative around other people—that is my joy.”

(DSLRL Participant)



“DSLRL has grown into much more than we expected, offering young people real opportunities—from paid roles with partners like Southampton Forward and God’s House Tower, to gallery trips and youth leadership meetings.”

(Dev - Marketing and Communications Manager and Artist Educator)

Looking Ahead - DSLRL’s Legacy

Over the past two years, our reach has been wider than anticipated. Sept 23 - Aug 25:

DSLRL LGBTQIA+
SESSIONS

472

ATTENDEES

DSLRL OPEN
SESSIONS

170

ATTENDEES

ISLE OF WIGHT
SESSIONS

112

ATTENDEES

SKILLS2ACHIEVE
SESSIONS

827

ATTENDEES

TOTAL

1581

Sessions were attended by 1,581 participants

1,004

PEOPLE SAW
SEEING THINGS
DIFFERENTLY
EXHIBITION

528

PEOPLE SAW
AND EVERYTHING
IN- BETWEEN
EXHIBITION

2,914

PEOPLE SAW
WORK CREATED BY OUR
PARTICIPANTS IN
EXHIBITIONS.

52

PEOPLE SAW
OPENING OF PHONE
BOXES & CORRIDOR
GALLERY

1,330

PEOPLE SAW
THEY WILL NOT TAKE
YOU SERIOUSLY
EXHIBITION

THE TRUE NUMBER OF THE
WINKLE STREET PHONE BOXES
VIEWERSHIP IS LIKELY MUCH
LARGER, CONSIDERING THE
FOOTFALL IN THE BUSY CRUISE-
PORT AREA. (ABP REPORTED A
RECORD 3 MILLION PASSENGERS
IN 2024!)

Lasting Impact

“It’s not just about the skills learnt, what we did or said—it’s about how the young people we’re connecting with feel. Our mission at In Focus is to support and enable personal change. Specifically, to support the changes that young people want in themselves.”

(Kristianne, CEO, In Focus)



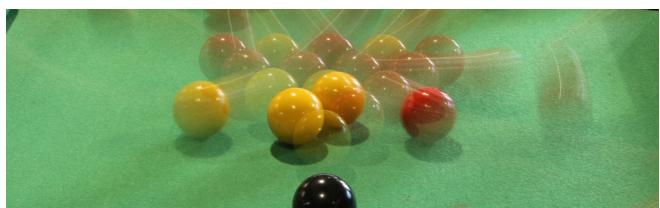
As well as ongoing feedback and input from the young people who have been involved in with the DSLR programme, we asked for their thoughts now, months (and for some, years) on from when they first stepped through the In Focus doors:

“For the last year and a half, I have been a participant of the Tuesday DSLR group for young LGBT+ people. To say that In Focus has enabled me to be creative would be an understatement. I view In Focus as a chosen family that supports me in chasing my dreams. Since I joined the group, my artwork has been a part of eight exhibitions across a number of disciplines. I have never felt more connected to my artist peers and empowered to just be myself.”

“Being a participant with In Focus has honestly been life changing and life saving too. I joined feeling like there was little hope for my future but with the opportunities offered by In Focus I have slowly grown into myself. Some of the opportunities include leading workshops, going to national conferences, youth leadership input and even a trip to Parliament. It’s not always about the big opportunities though as I love going to weekly sessions. When I started the weekly sessions, I enjoyed learning new skills—now I enjoy being able to share those skills with others.”

“Every session at In Focus is different, pushing the participants to create beyond what they thought they could do, and providing the resources to do whichever insurmountable things we want—but the atmosphere constantly remains genuinely welcoming, kind, and extremely fun. In Focus is such a big part of my life, and I greatly admire everyone I have met through it.”

“In Focus sessions have helped me develop my photography, creative, and time management skills. The staff being accepting and encouraging let me feel able to be myself, be creative, and explore topics without judgement.”



“Throughout my time with In Focus, I have learned many practical things, like using cameras, planning and delivering sessions and being a part of several exhibitions. But I have also learnt that there is a space in the world for me—somewhere I can be myself without judgement, and that wasn’t something I’d really experienced before.”

“Through the kindness and dedication from the In Focus team I have found a way to express myself through art, and for that I will always be grateful. My experiences at In Focus have made me consider a creative career but the impact of this charity is so much more than anything that can be measured. I hope to continue to grow with the support of In Focus and am looking forward to seeing how this charity continues to support young people across Hampshire.”



“I was particularly impacted by being supported to do a series about my scoliosis. This was possible because of the balance of teaching, guidance and agency provided in the sessions, as well as inspiration I got from the visit to the Hayward Gallery. Exploring this and having it featured in the ‘...And Everything In Between’ exhibition positively affected my body/self image. I’ve also noticed my confidence increase and anxiety decrease because of these sessions and opportunities.”

“I’ve met so many amazing people who are all now a massive part of my life. People who have helped me to try new things and supported me through some of my toughest challenges yet.”



What's Next for In Focus and the DSLR programme?

Following a successful second bid to Arts Council England, we now have the fantastic opportunity to continue the work started here in the first two years of our Develop Skills, Learn and Reflect programme. DSLR Phase 2 delivery will begin in September 2025 and continue through to the end of March 2027, with weekly workshops to take place both in Southampton and on the Isle of Wight. There are also two exhibitions planned for during this time.

The work we began in Phase 1 in building our outreach on the Isle of Wight will be evolving further—there will be four groups in different locations across the island as part of DSLR Phase 2 delivery.

It is also our great honour to announce that we were shortlisted for the Community Organisation LGBT Award at the 2025 National Diversity Awards, run in association with HSBC UK. With over 85,000 nominations received for organisations across ten categories, to have made it into the top 125 finalists was a huge privilege for us. It highlights our ongoing commitment to promoting and enabling equality, diversity and inclusion in all we do at In Focus.

“Throughout the process of DSLR, we’ve seen true collaboration between these young artists. People have generously stepped aside from their own work to support each other,” said Kristianne, In Focus’ CEO. “It’s said that generosity should not be measured by how much you give, but by how much you keep for yourself. These young people have given everything. They are so much more more than we could ever hope for. They are the future.”

For further updates on the work of In Focus as we continue our mission to provide education, opportunities and experiences for young people in Southampton and the Isle of Wight, please sign up for our newsletter [here](#). You can also find more case studies and updates on our website [here](#), and links to our social media.

“To all of you young artists—you are the most incredible, resilient, beautiful people. You are creative change-makers, and your voices will resonate.”

(Kristianne, CEO, In Focus)

LINKS & REFERENCES

[In Focus Website](#)

[In Focus Social Media](#)

[Impact Website Page](#)

[BLOG POST/REPORT: Opening Night of 'And Everything In-Between'](#)

[shortlisted for the Community Organisation: LGBT Award at the 2025 National Diversity Awards](#)

[BLOG POST: Parliament Visit](#)

[Youth Empowerment with Blagrove - Written by Young Participant](#)

[BLOG POST: Youth Leadership Group](#)

[BLOG POST/REPORT: Seeing Things Differently Report](#)

[BLOG POST/REPORT: Seeing Things Differently Report](#)

[VIDEO: AND EVERYTHING IN-BETWEEN POEM](#)

[VIDEO: THEY WILL NOT TAKE YOU SERIOUSLY POEM](#)

[VIDEO: SEEING THINGS DIFFERENTLY POEM](#)

[VIDEO: PARENT OF DSLR PARTICIPANT](#)

[VIDEO: ISLE OF WIGHT BREAKOUT YOUTH WORK](#)