

DSLR 16-25: Develop Skills, Learn and Reflect



An arts engagement programme with young people aged 16-25 in Southampton and the surrounding area, run by In Focus Education & Development, with support from Arts Council England.



The following report was compiled from a year's worth of evaluation that aimed to record and measure the impact of In Focus' DSLR 16-25 (Develop Skills, Learn and Reflect) programme. In examining approaches, progression, challenges and feedback from those directly taking part, we have been able to gain a bigger-picture view of how this type of inclusive educational approach can positively affect the lives of the young people it reaches.

DSLR engaged young people aged between 16 and 25 from September 2023 to August 2024, with the aim of supporting participants who had not been able to engage as comprehensively in formal education settings as they had hoped, for a variety of reasons. This demographic included participants involved with the Youth Justice system and those whose compulsory education had been disrupted during the Covid-19 pandemic. It also engaged with young people struggling or at-risk in various ways due to their identity and place in society—be it through a lack of self-confidence, living with invisible disabilities, or in terms of their gender identity or sexuality.

Using creative educational activities, the In Focus team provided young people with a chance to learn new skills while earning recognised qualifications and awards. Using photography and other creative methods including creative writing and collage, participants engaged with a range of subject matter that allowed them to better understand themselves and the world around them, and held space for them to feel able to safely express themselves.

This report showcases the importance of outreach with young people aged 16-25 within these or similar demographic markers. We believe it is evidence of the importance of a creative education that allows young people to work in line with their own autonomy, to increase their learning potential and create brighter futures for themselves.

If you would like to learn more about the work of In Focus, we would love to hear from you. Please send us an email at info@infocusedu.co.uk and we will be in touch.

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Background & Context

Since 2015, Southampton-based In Focus Education & Development have been providing much needed arts-based learning for young people considered at-risk or vulnerable, and those not in education, employment or training. In Focus also work within local communities to support a wider offer 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

Aims and Ambitions

The programme's ongoing aim is to support young people between the ages of 16 and 25 who have not been able to fully engage with formal education. This includes but is not limited to those involved with the Youth Justice system or considered on the periphery as potential perpetrators or victims of crime (or both). With many young people affected by the pandemic in terms of being unable to maintain or re-engage with formal education settings, the numbers of those who have missed out on a complete, formal education has risen. Alongside this, it is our goal to engage with young people struggling with their own lives and identities due to various factors, from invisible disabilities (including learning differences and mental health conditions), gender identity and sexuality, as well as other pressures to conform to societal expectations. We

anticipate that many of the young people involved in this programme will identify with one or more of these characteristics.

This programme marks the first time that we have also offered self-referral from participants. We wanted to do this to ensure there was a way for those not on the radar of Skills2Achieve or Breakout Youth (the two organisations we are partnering with for the first two cohorts of DSLR) to have an opportunity to participate. Our outreach methodology for this has included social media, local employment services, secondary schools and post-16 colleges, as well as the Hampshire-wide Youth Justice services and other local youth organisations including No Limits and Youth Options (two organisations we previously engaged with on another project in collaboration with the University of Southampton).

Forms of Engagement

The DSLR programme will take the form of creative educational activities with the opportunity to earn qualifications and gain awards. Using ongoing feedback from this age group and demographic over the preceding 24 months through other projects, we have shaped our approach for maximum accessibility and inclusivity. By embracing a more flexible approach to delivery that will see us utilise both group and 1:1 situations, we believe this will open up access for a greater range of young people. With this in mind, we also will make available any resources both as physical copies and as accessible online documents.

Using photography as a baseline for our delivery, combined with other art forms and mediums including collage and creative writing, we offer a menu of options that work to encourage ownership of learning and increased rates of maintained engagement with those involved. 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.

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

(In Focus Education & Development)



The Story So Far



August 2024 marked the end of the first two cohorts of young people aged 16-25 engaged through our Develop Skills, Learn and Reflect (DSLRL) programme. Beginning in September 2023, weekly sessions for Cohort 1 ran until the end of January, with Cohort 2 running from March-July 2024.

“Using a camera helps me focus on things. I see stuff I wouldn’t normally notice.”

(DSLRL participant)

Those taking part in the programme had left compulsory education, but not necessarily with the same levels of education or learning experiences as hoped. The DSLRL programme offers participants the chance to benefit from additional learning time as they continue to develop a sense of identity, progress into adulthood and seek to make their way in the wider working world. It provided a chance for them to develop new skills or

enhance existing ones, predominantly via the medium of photography as a learning tool, but also working with other mixed visual arts, poetry and creative writing as a means of self-expression, of individuality and of collaborative cohesion. It also makes space for those involved to reflect on and share their progress with each other, as well as friends and family members in their wider social circles beyond the group sessions themselves.

We ran sessions for groups of young people across two main locations — some at our In Focus Creative Space (situated within Eagle Labs in Southampton). These participants were referred by Southampton-based LGBTQIA+ organisation, Breakout Youth, or had self-referred after seeing one of our callouts (via physical posters and on our social media channels), or after we had visited Breakout Youth in person to talk about what was on offer. Other groups we engaged with in collaboration with our delivery partner, Enham Trust, and their Skills2Achieve scheme. These sessions took place at a central location in Eastleigh, as well as a couple of visits to Enham Trust's main location in Andover.

“Working with DSLR cameras, the young people have been able to explore a new experience and gain a skill most of them have never had. For many, having access to and being trusted with professional-level equipment is a first. Having the chance to prove to themselves and others that they can learn for themselves, and then go on to share that learning, is an important first step—which is why it is where we begin.”

(Kristianne Drake, Chief Executive Officer, In Focus)

The scheme of work was shaped to teach young participants transferrable and life-enhancing skills, alongside the basics required to

engage in lens-based media practices. 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 share their work with others, another crucial part of their learning, engagement and collaboration.

Through the collection of data via self-evaluation questionnaires and anecdotal evidence gathered in conversations with young people, we have been able to see firsthand the positive impact taking part in this programme has had. In line with our aims as an organisation, it is vital that we pay close attention to the experiences of the participants themselves, so we can continue to work to tailor and improve future outreach and maintain strong levels of engagement with our targeted demographic (as outlined in our aims and ambitions above).

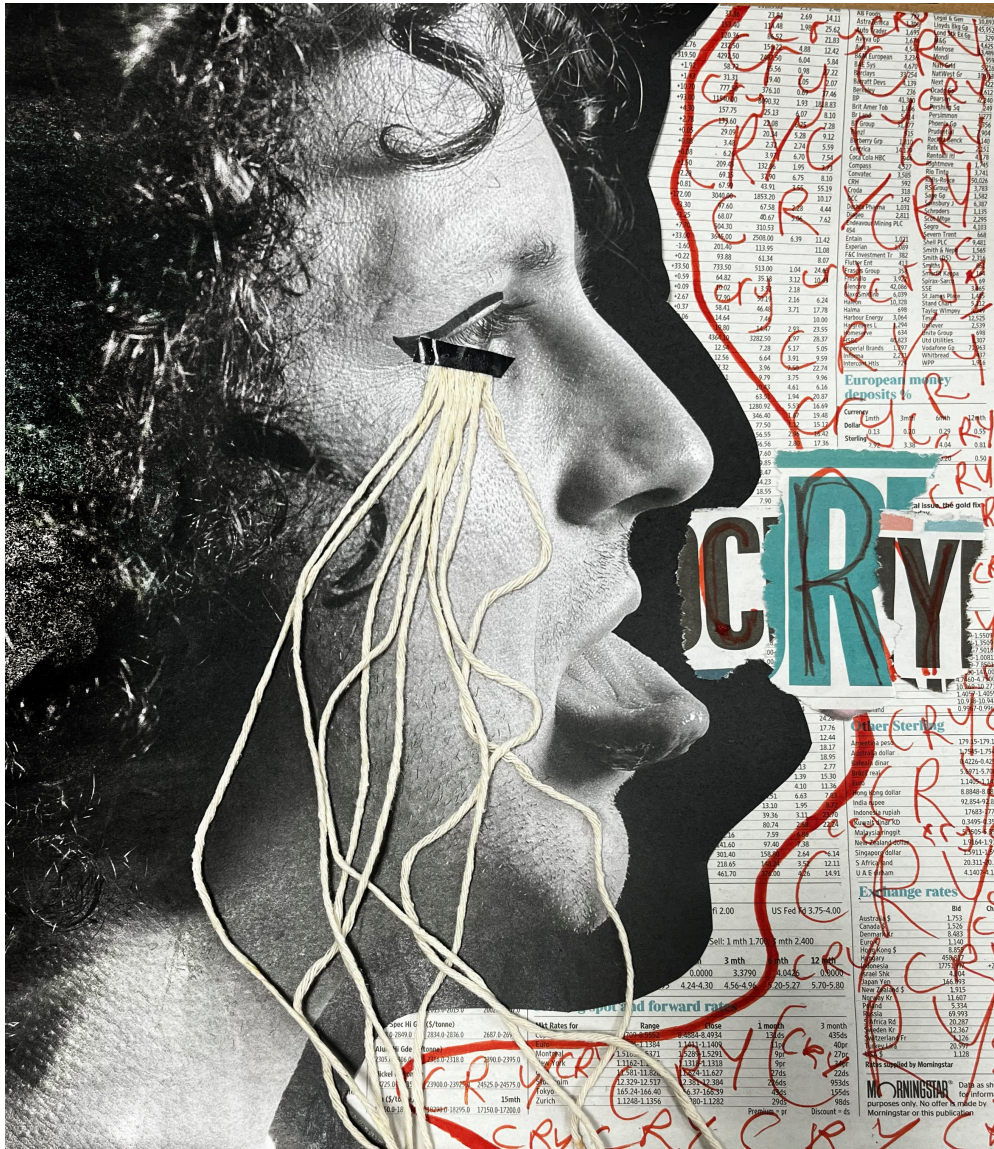
“It’s improved my mood, and I think my confidence has definitely grown. It’s helped that it’s been a small group, because I find bigger groups much harder. It feels safe; there’s no judgement.”

(DSLR participant)

Speaking to participants in a 1:1 setting proved helpful for achieving more detailed insight into personal experiences. Many seemed happier to divulge further information or be able to make more considered responses without the pressure they might feel in being perceived by their peers, even within a supportive environment such as this. We believe this approach led to a more accurate expression of participants personal experiences. Speaking to our evaluator about attending Tuesday evening sessions at the In Focus space in Southampton, 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 with my own photography and creativity.”

(DSLR participant)

As well as learning new skills and putting them into practice, the young people were also able to work towards completing all four elements

required to achieve a Bronze Arts Award—participating in the arts, experiencing the arts as an audience member, researching an artist and their work, and skill-sharing with others. Each young person on the DSLR programme worked to build up an online portfolio for submission to Arts Award. They added the work they created each week as evidence of their progress, development and learning.

When asked about their thoughts on the process, several of the young people explained that before attending the In Focus sessions, they hadn't heard of Arts Award at all. For one attendee coming to the end of their Bronze Award journey in Cohort 1, they expressed interest in continuing their learning, with a view to working towards achieving a Gold Arts Award:

“It's great because I'm down an A-level and know I'll have a harder time getting into uni because of this. So finding out I can work towards a Gold [Arts Award] and get UCAS points for it is amazing. It's given me hope for my future, that I can achieve things I didn't think were possible because of my studying and grades and my experience of school.”

(DSLR participant)

Another participant talked about being able to learn different aspects of what a creative career might entail. One of their favourite things during the sessions was working with scenes: “I love building sets with things and setting everything up before we take the photographs.” They spoke about how they enjoyed the practical elements of learning new camera techniques, but also the mechanics of setting up equipment such as light boxes and scene-setting.

Crucially, what these sessions have represented for the young people is a space free of judgment, where they are able to experiment and explore things differently. “There's no pressure here and I feel happy and safe,”



one participant said. “It feels like the only place I can really just be myself,” said another.

We asked participants a series of questions that aligned with our self-feedback questionnaires, in order to gain further anecdotal evidence. When asked what their favourite thing had been during the 16-week programme, one young person’s response was:

“I like how varied it is. Every week feels different and in school I just got bored really easily ‘coz it was the same stuff every week. This isn’t like that. I get to do new things and I never feel bored.”

(DSLR participant)

“I like coming here and find it more interesting than school or college. It’s more creative and I think I learn better as I stay interested and don’t get bored,” said another.

The biggest challenge for many seemed to be surrounding group work and having to participate by sharing their work with others. However, several group members reported that although they had found it hard, it had become easier the more they attended and connected with others. “I have felt more confident in sharing my work the last few weeks,” said one participant.

“At the start, I thought it sounded good and wanted to take part, but I feel I’ve gained so much from it — more than I ever imagined I would.”

(DSLR participant)

One young person we engaged with had spent the previous four Christmases in hospital. This past Christmas period was the first time where they had been able to spend it at home, and in their words, “It was because I wanted to be able to come back to this group in the new year.” This is hugely powerful in terms of seeing the direct positive impact that engaging with the programme has had on this young person. Another young person’s family directly thanked us for the work we’ve done over the past year to help them, explaining how much confidence the young person had gained. They reported that their communication skills had improved, and that they now actually have the desire to get up and go out into the world and engage with things.

In supporting the development of young people’s own pro-social identities (rather than those inherited from other influences), we believe they can learn to experience life and the world around them differently. Through this, some of the barriers they face are lessened or removed completely. Through sustained engagement and the subsequent increase in self-confidence, we have been able to help two of the young people from our Tuesday evening group to apply for (and successfully be awarded) Artswork’s Rise 24 bursaries, to further develop their personal artistic practice. Alongside this, we are supporting them to work towards Gold Arts Award as they continue in their creative exploration.

Challenges and Successes

Working with unexpected change

During Cohort 1, we successfully worked with Enham Trust alongside their Skills2Achieve scheme (which taught key skills to young people outside of mainstream education settings). We engaged with two groups of young people, with many achieving Bronze Arts Awards and having the opportunity to exhibit work as part of a joint exhibition with our LGBTQIA+ group (see below and the appendices for further details).

Unfortunately and very unexpectedly, we were told at the end of May that Enham Trust were no longer able to continue their Hampshire-wide Skills2Achieve programme. This was a shock, not only to us but to their staff and the young people they had been engaging with, as it meant those groups of young people would no longer be able to meet and learn together through Enham's scheme.

We made it clear to all the young people we had engaged with through Skills2Achieve that we would hold space for them to attend our other groups based centrally in Southampton. Sadly we did not see much of a retention of engagement with these young people—we believe the change in location presented too great a barrier for many of them, and potentially the fact that their cohort was soon due to come to an end in July.

Engaging with new groups of young people

This change also meant that where we had planned to engage with another cohort of young people through our partnership with Enham Trust, we needed to be flexible and rethink our outreach approach. We contacted the Unaccompanied Asylum-Seeking Children's services (UASC) in Southampton, in the hopes of engaging with a new, diverse group of young people. We were successful in this connection, and we

also received a small amount of funding from them to start work with these young people over the summer months, so we could ascertain any potential barriers to learning (in terms of language or culture, etc) ahead of them starting as a regular Wednesday group with us from September 2024. We are excited to continue this new partnership and hope to welcome and engage many young people this way.

We will also be running another group on Wednesdays—an open group taking place after school and work hours, which is something we haven't offered before; we are hopeful that this will become a good way to engage with new groups of young people, particularly those who would benefit from connecting with us but whose other commitments have meant they haven't been able to through past offerings.

Despite these challenges, ultimately our reach has also been wider than anticipated. We have been able to attend other groups where we have been given space to recruit for future cohorts, and are building on an existing relationship with No Limits' Drug and Alcohol Substance Hub. We have also been invited to be a part of Southampton's PULSE group, which looks to be a positive way to utilise arts funding in the city more effectively through collaboration. We have also successfully been awarded charity status as an organisation this year, something we believe would not have been possible without this support from Arts Council England. In becoming a charity, we have been able to apply for and receive core funding from the Blagrove Trust for the next three years, and are now officially a Living Wage Employer, something we feel puts us in good stead for future funding applications.

“Being supported in this way 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, and are being invited into more spaces where we have the opportunity to engage with young people in the city.”

(Kristianne Drake, CEO)

Offering further opportunities for young people

After the Enham programme came to an end, the parents of one young person from the group approached us and asked if we might be able to support their child with some work experience, as real-world experience in employment was something they were struggling to gain. We have been able to engage with two young people on this basis, as well as being able to employ another young person through a six-month paid position (thanks to Artswork’s Breakthrough scheme).

Due to the funding and support from Arts Council England we continue to receive, we have been able to gain visibility as an organisation and this has led to opportunities like this becoming available to the young people we work to engage.

We have also been able to utilise the support from the Arts Council to employ a freelancer to run our social media and raise our profile across online platforms. During this time, we have invested in their development, up-skilling them to be able to deliver workshops to young people, something they had never done before but are now thriving in. From September, they will join our team on a permanent contract.

Sharing and Connecting



Seeing Things Differently exhibition

To celebrate and showcase the work produced by Cohort 1, we partnered with local arts and heritage organisation, God's House Tower, to give the young people an opportunity to curate their own exhibition and exhibit their work.

Seeing Things Differently ran from 30th May to 16th June 2024. Spanning the whole of the main gallery space 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.

In the weeks leading up to the exhibition, we used our social media channels to share posts and stories to entice visitors to attend. During this

campaign, our online engagement was promising, with reach across TikTok, LinkedIn, Facebook and Instagram ranging from 1.3k (TikTok) to 2.7k (Instagram), and content interactions totalling 1044 overall.

This translated very well in terms of visitors to the physical space; across the exhibition run, a total of 1004 visitors came to see the work—an impressive statistic for an exhibition of ‘unknown’ young artists.

“An amazing look at young talent and their successes—a partnership which should be rolled out across different counties. Brilliantly inspiring!”

(Exhibition attendee)

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, as they described how they had experienced the programme. Soundbites used in the film captured these responses:

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

“I have space to be creative and share ideas with

other creative people.”

“My camera has been blurry for years. You twiddled a little button and it was all fixed!”

“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 participants)

To open the exhibition, one of the young people stood in front of a filled-out room and recited a poem, entitled Different Is...

Written collaboratively during group sessions, the piece was a vivid jumble of ideas, considering both the more obvious, stereotyped notions of what being different might mean to people, as well as providing insight into the minds of the young people involved. That the work had been created together reinforced its impact, showing how the young people had been able to find common ground and understanding in each other, and that a trusting environment had fostered great working collaboration.

“Different is feared and beautiful...

Different is loving and liking yourself, being kind to strangers, sitting on the floor, it’s being heard, it’s accents...

It’s having a body that betrays you and a brain that just won’t listen...”

(Excerpts from the poem, Different Is...)

The young people involved appeared visibly proud of their efforts—keen to pose next to their favourite pieces of work for photographs with their family and friends, some happy to talk to passersby about why they had focused on what they had for their photography, others taking a quieter approach, enjoying observing people’s reactions as they walked around the gallery space.

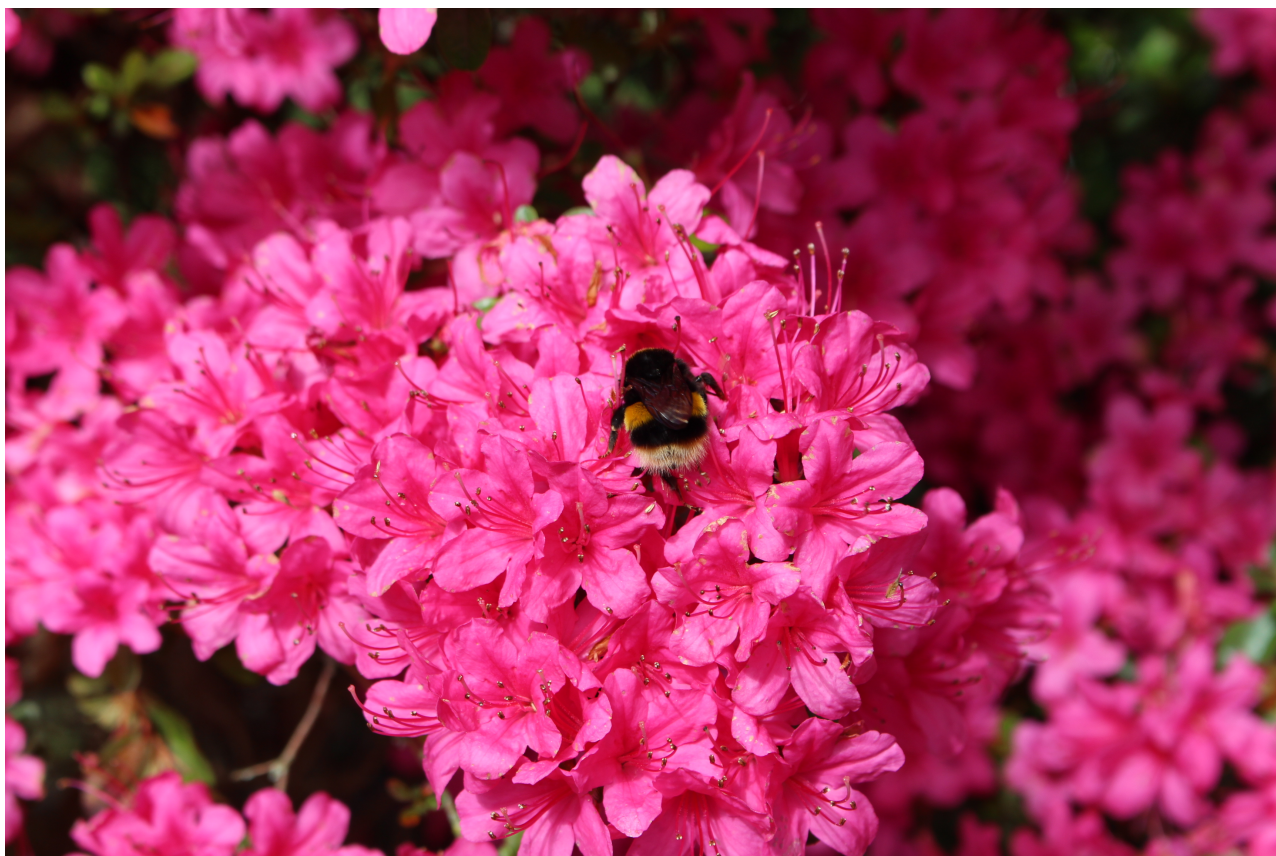
“I know one of the young people in this exhibition; they’re a family friend, and it’s incredible to see the transformation and boost in confidence that this opportunity has provided. Hearing them speak on film, you wouldn’t know it was the same person. You can hear in their words how much self-belief and the ability to express themselves they have gained through it.”

(Exhibition attendee)

“Brilliant! Wonderful to see young people learning how to express themselves and find new ways of looking at the world, and make beautiful images and traces of its moments.”

(Exhibition attendee)

Seeing Things Differently was a lively and impassioned exploration of what it means to be a young person, exploring things for the first time, or returning to ideas and themes they felt a connection to. 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 exhibition

At the time of compiling this report, young people from Cohort 2 are finalising preparations for a second exhibition at God's House Tower— They Will Not Take You Seriously, an LGBTQIA+ exploration of identity and self-reflection. This will run alongside God's House Tower's upcoming exhibitions, Southampton's Queer Stories and Everyone Involved, an immersive sound and visual installation by artist Ian Giles, from 23rd August to 6th September.

We had initially intended to produce four printed books or zines over the two years of DSLR, and this year, we produced two printed mediums as planned — however, with feedback from the young people attending groups, these ended up being in a newspaper format. They were excited by the prospect of using this format as a medium for their creativity, as it presented a unique opportunity for them. This also meant that the work has been able to have a wider audience as we were able to produce

many more copies in this format compared to if we had printed books or zines. These newspapers were a part of both exhibitions at God's House Tower and are things that the young people themselves have been able to take away and show to others when talking about what they have been working on over the course of their engagement with In Focus.

Being able to exhibit in a dedicated art space has also had a positive impact, both on the young people themselves and for In Focus as an organisation. "Whilst we had the intention of trying to get the young people's work out into a public space, being able to exhibit in an actual art gallery setting, and alongside other higher-level artists and pieces was a much higher ambition than we had initially hoped for," explained Kristianne Drake. "It has been hugely validating and rewarding for the young people who have both created art for and directly curated these exhibitions, and has also raised our profile in the wider Southampton arts community too—we are hugely thankful to Dan Crow and the team at God's House Tower for helping us to achieve this."



16-25 DSLR group curating their work during the installation of 'They Will Not Take You Seriously'

Please see the appendices of this report for a write-up from the opening night of They Will Not Take You Seriously, as well as the full version of the Seeing Things Differently article.

Looking Ahead

Our Develop Skills, Learn and Reflect programme will continue until the end of August 2025. The next cohort is due to start in September 2024, with young people engaging via a range of referrals from our delivery partners or through self-referral following recommendation from organisations in Southampton and the wider Hampshire area.

“By supporting young people to make informed choices, we have seen them positively re-engage in their learning experience and grow in confidence. In turn, this has created a safe and inclusive learning space, enabling their voices to be heard. Having the autonomy to make decisions and better life choices for themselves has nurtured good mental health and wellbeing.”

(In Focus Education & Development)



Appendices

- **Seeing Things Differently Exhibition Report Article:** <https://www.infocusedu.co.uk/2024/08/15/seeing-things-differently-exhibition/>
- **Watch testimonials from 16-25 DSLR participants:**
- **Watch ‘Different Is...’ poem, written and performed by DSLR 16-25**



participants (starts at 8.15)



- **Review: Launch of They Will Not Take You Seriously – God’s House Tower, Southampton:** <https://www.in-common.co.uk/2024/08/26/review-they-will-not-take-you-seriously-gods-house-tower-southampton/>
- **Watch ‘They Will Not Take You Seriously’ poem** written and performed by DSLR 16-25 participants:

