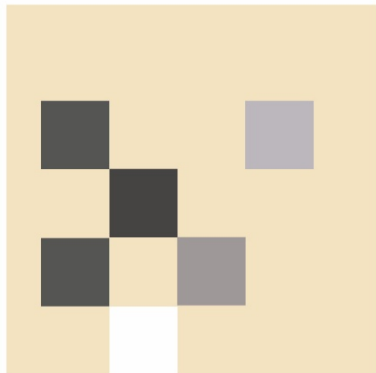


COLLECTIVE REPORTS

RACHEL VERNELLE
(INDEPENDENT EVALUATOR &
LEARNING PARTNER)

‘HOME FROM HOME’

SPRING 2023 - SPRING 2026



home from home



FOREWORD

When we drew up the budget of £ 375,000 for National Lottery Community Foundation (NLCF) to support a three year programme of work, I thought it would be interesting if we had somebody, independent of Skippko, who would, as it were, look, study and critique, everything we did over the three years. Go everywhere, see everything, attend workshops, meetings and events.

We advertised through a variety of outlets (paid and unpaid) and were astonished at the numbers and quality of ‘evaluators’ who applied for the post from around the country.

The brief was, quite simply, what could be done with £20,000 across three years that would bring evidence, understanding and learning in the moment and, an organisational awareness and shift in language for the future.

Nothing Rachel Vernelle produced was edited or changed. We fact checked and that was it.

This booklet contains reports from the three intense studies:

- The view of Skippko and their experience from our participants
- The view of Skippko and their experience from our artists
- A longitudinal study of single project from inception to delivery; Camera Connections.

This booklet also contains the Interim Reports Rachel produced that sat along our reporting back to our NLCF.

Two things became clear.

One, ditch the phrase ‘evaluation’. In our experience it is open to multi-interpretation.

Secondly, bring somebody in, funds permitting, independent of one’s organisation and reacquaint oneself with the concept of ‘learning’.

Arthur Stafford

Director

Skippko Arts Team

Artist Focus Group Report

Prepared by: **Rachel Vernelle, Independent Evaluator**

Date of event: **Jun 3, 2024**

<p>Introduction</p>	<p>A focus group was held with the artists who facilitate Skippko groups. All but one currently-engaged artists attended.</p> <p>Rachel held the focus group following stage one of her evaluation, which consisted of in-depth familiarisation with Skippko. During this phase she attended sessions of all groups within the Room in Leeds programme and a number of planning sessions with artists. It became evident to her that the artists were integral both to the development and current approach of Skippko and to its future success.</p> <p>This led her to seek to seek further, structured engagement with the artists, to ensure their views on Skippko’s delivery and development were captured and considered.</p> <p>To support Rachel to deliver the session in a way that artists were most likely to respond to, two of the artists acted as ‘cultural translators’, working alongside her in the design of the session format.</p> <p>Under the banner of ‘The Skippko Big Top’, during a 2.5 hour session, artists took part in a series of exercises, or games, that drew out responses to different aspects of their engagement with Skippko.</p>
<p>General comments</p>	<p>Artists appreciated the opportunity to discuss the areas for exploration in some depth. They acknowledged and valued the opportunities they have to discuss them within various meetings, but bringing the issues together and dedicating time to explore them, was appreciated.</p> <p>Further into the evaluation, artists would be willing to come together again to contribute to the development of Skippko’s work, if it is deemed appropriate.</p>
<p>What was explored</p>	<p>The focus group aimed to explore:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● The artists IN Skippko ● Skippko - the organisation from the artists’ perspective ● Skippko’s participants - access routes and challenges faced ● The future of the organisation - artist views on the direction the organisation is taking and on artist engagement with strategic planning.

<p>The artists IN Skippko</p> <p>Game 1 - Who we are: a washing line of questions</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Artists have always been recruited to Skippko in a variety of ways (both paid and as volunteers) and this flexible and organic approach to recruitment has brought in a rich variety of practice and experience, and has been much appreciated by artists. • Many of the artists have been with Skippko for a number of years and their involvement has developed organically, as programmes and individual projects have been funded and delivered. <p><i>“(I was) business building - it was my first gig and Skippko gave me my first way in.”</i></p> <p><i>“I came from a teaching background and Skippko allowed for a much more flexible way to support people creatively, which I loved!”</i></p> <p><i>“I now call myself a Creative Practitioner, not just a Drama Worker - Skippko’s influence!”</i></p>
<p>The artists IN Skippko</p> <p>Game 2 - Skippko in the artists’ practice and how they work together: making and spinning plates</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • All the artists are passionate about participative work - they bare a huge responsibility for the success of the programmes and by extension, of the organisation; without them, Skippko would not be the organisation that it is. • It cannot be overstated how much artists appreciate how they are valued within the organisation. They are freelancers, supporting their own artistic practice and in some cases working with other clients; the income and regular work Skippko provides is very important to them and is repaid by pride in, and loyalty to, the organisation. • Artists described feeling listened to and genuinely able to make a difference to the way Skippko delivers its activities. An example was the SWOT analysis delivered after completion of every group - they felt these are read and artist feedback is heard and acted upon, including when things go wrong. • For one artist, being supported through a complex health condition, to an extent they doubted would have been offered by an employer, cemented their loyalty and commitment to the organisation. <p><i>“(Skippko) is an organisation I work with rather than for. Collaborative; open-minded; long term.”</i></p> <p><i>“Skippko’s ethos is directly aligned with mine which is why I love working with them. The way my practice has evolved since joining means I feel like I challenge myself artistically</i></p>

	<p><i>with each project I do.”</i></p> <p><i>“Although I’m self-employed, I think this is the closest I’ve ever come to feeling as though I have a job....regular opportunities and the level of contentment and satisfaction and security I feel when I work with them.”</i></p> <p><i>“If someone calls me a ‘Skipkko artist’ I am very happy with that.....I’m happy to carry (their) branding!”</i></p> <p><i>“When I work for other organisations I compare them to Skipkko as a benchmark for good practice.”</i></p>
<p>The artists IN Skipkko</p> <p>Game 3 - The relationship between artists: <i>Juggling together</i></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● In describing how they have joined the organisation and work together within it, almost by a process of osmosis, artists have developed their facilitation skills to mirror each other so that they deliver a consistency to sessions that forms a recognisable ‘Skipkko approach’. ● The opportunity to work collaboratively with other artists was hugely valued and the balance of skills they bring contributes to the value participants place on the work they do in groups. It helps create a safe space for participants and enriches the offer to them, as facilitators trust and challenge each other to explore the uncertain. <p><i>“As we become more of a family and we grow in comfort as a team, there is more safety for our participants.”</i></p> <p><i>“(We) challenge each other to be the best facilitator you can be.”</i></p> <p><i>“We lose track of whose idea is whose....the whole is greater than the sum of its parts.”</i></p> <p><i>“The more we collaborate, even for a short time, the more instinctively we work and we don’t take this for granted.”</i></p>
<p>Skipkko - the organisation from the artists’ perspective</p> <p>Game 4 - What is Skipkko? What makes it work? How has it changed over time?: <i>Creating circus rings</i></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Gaining Unit 50 and having a base was seen as wholly positive for giving Skipkko a visible presence and reaching the communities Skipkko works with. ● The support provided for artists by Skipkko during Covid, culminating in the exhibition at Sunny Bank Mills, served to cement the relationship and feeling of mutual support between artists and the organisation. ● Practice during and post-Covid brought challenges that the organisation and artists rose to and built upon. ● ‘At home’ packs in particular were praised for their accessibility and there was a feeling they should continue to be offered to those isolated at home and as an ‘entry point’ for new people.

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Extension to art forms practiced - embracing textiles, mosaics and most recently performance - was identified as a notable change since Arthur joined Skippko and seen as a positive development that has brought complimentary skills and the range of experiences offered to participants. <p><i>“(Skippko is made by) the people, the practitioners, the directors, the trustees, the groups we collaborate with, the funders we chose to apply to.”</i></p> <p><i>“(Skippko is made to work by) the underlying care; it is run and staffed by people who love and care about what they are doing.”</i></p> <p><i>“The practitioner pool has grown with new/expanded skills.”</i></p>
<p>Skippko’s participants - access routes and challenges faced</p> <p>Game 5 - How do Skippko’s participants find the organisation?: <i>Passing through hoops</i></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Artists quickly identified groups of people who face barriers to finding their way to Skippko - Men; younger people; those not connected into support/community partners and those in ‘wrong’ postcodes. ● Word of mouth and referral were identified both as strengths in recruitment, but also limiting factors. ● While online communication methods (such as the newsletter) can aid accessibility, there was concern at the prevalence of data poverty in communities Skippko should be targeting.
<p>Skippko’s participants - access routes and challenges faced</p> <p>Game 6 - Participants within Skippko - what challenges do they face?: <i>Navigating the blindfold maze</i></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Artists identified feelings of empathy with participants in the challenges they face in engaging with art and with Skippko - artists face challenges, too! ● Artists identified many challenges to engagement for the participants: health; transport; accessibility/mobility issues; justifying, finding and allowing time for themselves; family pressures/childcare; logistics. ● Artists identified a shared responsibility to help participants overcome feelings of anxiety that they may bring to groups. These may be induced by feeling they will ‘do it wrong’; a belief that they are not creative; negative experiences with art in the past (especially at school) and awkwardness in a group. ● Challenges artists face over engagement included dealing with dynamics within groups and the experience of merging two groups into one. Bringing people out of their comfort zones was seen as both challenging and valuable, when accompanied by the option always to opt out. <p><i>“The very things that bring them to Skippko can also get in the way of coming regularly and engaging fully.”</i></p>

“Skippko freelancers can feel isolated in their ‘other work’ - participants sometimes lead very isolated lives.”

“We as artists have life outside work - but the work itself is nurturing (in a) supportive environment.”

The future of the organisation - artist views on the direction the organisation is taking and on artist engagement with strategic planning

Game 7 - What does the notion of being ‘participant-led mean to you? What challenges does it present to artists and to Skippko?: *Flying the trapeze*

- Artists’ responses to defining what ‘participant-led’ means in the Skippko context was nuanced. They thought of it both in terms of participants within current groups and in the future, and what might need to be put in place to support its further development.
- There was general agreement that participant leadership already happens when groups co-create, developing ideas together and with facilitators. A core belief in this way of working characterises artists approach to their practice, which feeds into how they support participants to achieve their goals.
- Beyond meeting basic needs, such as providing food and transport, artists mentioned a range of support that participants may need to take the lead. These centred around creating the right conditions for it to happen, such as giving space to discover individual strengths, giving room to fail and the right to say ‘no’.
- It is important to recognise that participants need skills and the inclination to lead. They also need to continue to generate creative opportunities for themselves if they are to be sustained, which isn’t a given. They have to want to do things together on a regular basis and to overcome barriers to participation; this can’t be forced to happen.
- Artists felt there were challenges to Skippko in desiring to major on this approach. These included needing to recognise that mentoring may be necessary and have to be structured into support to groups and individuals. Artists themselves need time and support to figure out how to do sustained participant-led practice. Finally, Skippko projects have defined end points and/or expected outcomes, which can make it difficult to be truly participant-led.
- Discussion around the idea of a ‘Skippko family’ that artists are part of extended to a consideration of the role and relationship with the Skippko Board.
- Artists felt informed by Arthur of the general direction of the organisation. However, the ‘family member’ they felt a disconnect from was the Board. While recognising the Board has a specific role, artists were unaware of who the members are and whether they fully appreciate what Skippko is most valued for outside the organisation.

- Given the Board makes vital decisions about the direction of the organisation, artists would appreciate informal opportunities for them to get to know each other. They suggested the ‘Room in Leeds’ performance or other celebration events might present opportunities for this to happen.

“Participant-led work is not a challenge. It is the instinctive core basis for my creative practice and always has been.”

“Creative and leadership skills have to be fostered equally.”

“Participant-led means a flattened hierarchy of practice and facilitation recognising the range of existing knowledge, skills and understanding in the room.”

“(To build a) sustainable community of participants (we need to) find the strengths of participants and nurture those skills; need to be weaned off Skippko.”

“The Board is part of the Skippko family - I feel disconnected from them when everything else is so integrated and woven together.”

Analysis and further thinking

A number of points arose from the discussion that Rachel would like to highlight for further consideration by the organisation:

1. The immense goodwill of artists towards the organisation has developed over many years; yet such loyalty is surprisingly easy to undermine.

As Skippko considers ways to bring new artists into the organisation, it will be important to continue to demonstrate loyalty to existing ones and retain the many and varied ways artists can become members of the ‘Skippko family’.

2. Related to this is the immense importance of enabling artists to continue to collaborate and learn from each other, both in terms of their own practice and in how that practice delivers consistently high quality sessions for groups.

This co-working, especially when new artists are brought into the pool, needs to be maintained and potentially overtly identified as *mentoring*, with the resourcing and methodology considerations this implies.

3. There are members of Leeds communities that are under-represented in the profile of Skippko participants. These include men, younger people and those not connected with, or accessing, support from partner organisations. Skippko should refine and interrogate its own quantitative

data further to drill into this information for specifics and use it to plan the targeting of under-represented groups.

4. Being 'participant-led' is something Skippko does naturally. But the nuance of the artists' discussion on this has shown that the meaning of the phrase can be interpreted differently.

The organisation needs to be clear about what it believes 'participant-led' to mean and to consider what should be put in place for artists to support the delivery of sustainable participant leadership.

5. Artists were unsure about who the Skippko Board members are. This stems from a separation from, and lack of contact with, the members and led them to question whether they fully appreciate what makes Skippko the organisation that it is.

Can Arthur be confident that the Board does fully recognise this and that it will be preserved and built into any change in strategic direction?

And if the answer to this is 'yes', how can this be communicated to artists to reassure them?

6. In addition, are there any opportunities for Board members and artists to come together in an informal way to increase common understanding?

Doing and discussing.....





Participant Focus Group Report

Prepared by: **Rachel Vernelle, Independent Evaluator/Learning Partner**

Date of event: **Oct 21, 2024**

Introduction

A focus group was held with seven regular participants of Skippko groups. These participants were deliberately chosen because they had been engaging with Skippko for some years and across a range of activities.

Rachel held the focus group as part of the second stage of her evaluation work with Skippko. The aim and objectives of the *Home from Home* project entirely centre around its participants, putting their experiences at the heart of organisation's work. It is therefore vital to engage participants in a number of ways during the course of the evaluation, to seek to gauge how successful Skippko has been in meeting its objectives.

During a 2.5 hour session, participants engaged in a small number of creative exercises, with most of the time being spent on group discussion. Transport was provided for all participants at no cost to them and, as a 'thank you' for attending the focus group, afternoon tea was served at the end of the session.

All participants in the focus group were women, estimated at aged over 55. One was from a minority ethnic group.

Purpose of the focus group

Skippko regularly collects the feedback of participants as it delivers and reviews its activities and plans for the future. It does this in a variety of ways that provide consistently positive responses as to the effect of engagement on peoples' lives.

In this regard, this focus group has reinforced much of what participants often tell the organisation about their engagement with it. This was not unexpected, but the focus group specifically sought to explore the stated aims of the *Home from Home* programme in a level of depth and discursive detail that other methods of data collection do not provide.

Given that the stated aims of the *Home from Home* programme centre around Skippko's contribution to participant's health and wellbeing, the focus group presented the opportunity to consider issues that surround measuring these factors.

In practice, it proved difficult to attribute participant responses to particular outcomes. This challenge lays the foundation for Rachel and Skippko to think further about how the project's

	<p>health and wellbeing aims may be measured during the remainder of the programme</p>
<p>How the focus group was structured</p>	<p>The session sought to offer participants an opportunity to share reflections on their extensive experience of engaging with Skippko activities, and to do this in a relaxed and informal environment.</p> <p>The focus group took the form of extensive discussion around:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • An introductory ‘washing line’ exercise, involving participants listing the activities they have undertaken with Skippko, how they came to the organisation and words that crystallise how they feel about their engagement. • A visual exercise that posed a series of questions focused on how engagement with Skippko effects participants’ lives beyond their time with Skippko groups. • Examination of the overarching project aim as stated in the <i>Home from Home</i> Lottery application.
<p>Report format</p>	<p>The report isolates the stated outcomes of <i>Home from Home</i> and displays, in their own words, how participants see the influence of Skippko in these areas of their lives.</p>
<p>1.Improving or sustaining mental health and wellbeing</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The opportunity to play and experience the benefits of reaching a childlike state of mind was a theme that repeatedly surfaced during the discussion. • The group discussed the motivation they find to attend Skippko activities even on days when they may not be feeling their best, either physically or mentally. Travelling to sessions with friends from the group can provide the nudge that is needed. • Trusting the staff, looking forward to seeing them and knowing the space they are working in helps to motivate people to come. Being able NOT to join in could be very important to enable someone to attend on a particular day. <p><i>“Reconnecting with my inner child - my childhood had started late (as a result of being a young carer).”</i></p> <p><i>“I can do things that are daft; no one looks sideways at you. It makes me happy and I go home with a smile on my face.”</i></p> <p><i>“At Under the Canopy we laugh so much - we did maypole dancing and I got it wrong but it didn’t matter!”</i></p> <p><i>“Sometimes my Caring Together activities clash but this is ALWAYS our day to come to Skippko; I wouldn’t cancel</i></p>

Thursdays for anything.”

“Socialising with others benefits me emotionally, mentally and physically and inspires me creatively.”

2.Reducing stress and anxiety

- Making time for themselves - ‘me time’ - was regarded as hugely important by participants. Analogies such as ‘topping up the tank/jug’ and ‘recharging batteries’ were regularly referred to.
- Many participants were in caring situations and identifying ‘me-time’ was particularly significant for these people.
- Those who had experienced activities based outdoors - particularly the Under the Canopy group - mentioned the huge benefits of being in nature, citing many examples of activities that they found beneficial to their wellbeing.
- Creativity’s role in helping people access their emotions was mentioned as challenging, but valuable and only possible with high levels of safety and trust.
- Provision of transport enables people to attend when they may not be feeling up to it, by reducing the stress (and costs) of making their own arrangements.

“I can put myself first and discover who I am; that’s hard when you’re a carer.”

“(Has been) 65 years a carer from being little – this is my time to do what I want to do.”

“I wear lots of different hats. I can take them all off and immerse myself in something else; can’t put a price on that.”

“I can escape the daily grind for a couple of hours, improving my ability to survive another day!”

“...someone is caring for you as well as you being there for others. I’m always giving and at Skippko my jug gets re-filled so I can go back and give again.”

“Its a wonderful experience that brings a joy you can take back with you when you’ve had time to recharge.”

“(It can be an) emotional roller coaster. Emotions are good to feel; it helps to release them and someone will have had a similar experience.”

“I said to Cath I couldn’t come ‘cos I had mobility problems; then suddenly got a message to say ‘taxi coming’ – I wouldn’t

have come if it hadn't. We go and pick up others (so get to know them)."

3.Improving confidence, self-esteem, motivation, sense of belonging and feeling valued and supported, often linked to the acquisition of new skills

- Doing new activities and learning new skills without judgement was cited as a confidence-builder
- Confidence came from finding out skill levels didn't matter and the reward of discovering what they CAN do
- Building of confidence was repeatedly cited as a benefit of Skippko activities. Undertaking never-before-tried activities, and allowing themselves to be open and childlike (see above), along with the supportive environment created by the artists, all contributed to increased self-confidence.
- The provision of food, refreshments and transport (specifically taxis) all contribute to a feeling of belonging and being valued and are hugely welcomed by participants. In some cases, not having to worry about the cost of taxis enables them to attend, the anxiety of the expense having been removed.
- Participants referenced many examples of how they had shared new-found skills and activities with family members and other craft groups, which helped enhance confidence and feeling valued.

"It might be something I never dreamed of doing and I learn I can do it – I did that! Never thought I'd write a poem! Confidence to do what children would do. Adults doing children's things – that takes confidence, not worrying about anything, just relax and go with it."

"Coming here helps me understand myself more. Opens up creativity I didn't know I had."

"(They are) always checking our comfort, and being given soup; to let someone give to me when I'm always giving - I so appreciate it."

"Knowing someone else is paying takes the stress out of it. I don't have to look at the (taxi) meter going round 'cos I'm not paying for it."

"Don't always need a taxi but the group starts from when it leaves the door. Felt guilty at first taking taxi money but that's what its for – it's a real luxury!"

"Makes me happier; gives me something positive to talk to others about; I can do similar creative things with my

grandchildren.”

4. Building social connections and support networks and reducing loneliness and social isolation

- Creating collaboratively was appreciated for building relationships and mutual support.
- Participants referenced life-changing events that Skippko activities had helped them overcome.
- ‘At home’ activities were cited as a way of staying creative and in touch, so reducing isolation, especially during winter.
- Travelling in a taxi with others contributes to feelings of wellbeing and being part of a group, as well as to feelings of belonging (see above).

“Given me a new identity ‘cos I got made redundant – this is the new artistic me!”

“I retired due to ill-health, my life was so full, I went from that to nothing; this has given me another string to my bow and a new identity.”

“What gets me through dark winter months is the ‘at home’ activities online. Something positive to do, with a deadline. Then the meeting up to share what we’ve done.”

“Sharing a taxi, so I know there’ll be someone in the taxi and we can offload to each other.”

The overarching aim of the project is to help to build a community (of beneficiaries) which supports each other, where people can express themselves through creative activities, share their stories and learn more about themselves and each other through a programme of work that is delivered in safe and adaptive spaces.

Participants looked at the stated overarching aim of the project and gave their reactions to it.

Community of beneficiaries:

Most participants felt Skippko, and the groups they attend, are communities. They cited a willingness to help each other and to share across different backgrounds as evidence of this:

“I like sharing days for groups I’m not in. Means we mingle so is like a community.”

“How you build a community starts as you arrive – when you get your toast or soup and start talking and communicating and relaxing.”

Two participants didn’t feel the phrase “build a community of beneficiaries” was an accurate description:

“If we had something online where we can share things with each other, like a WhatsApp group. But Skippko controls what goes back to people and sharing of ideas isn’t controlled by the ‘community’ of the group.”

Programme of work:

“I like having a theme for all the groups and how this stretches

across everything we do; we don't know what we're going to get – themes are amazing.”

Sharing of stories:

This created some debate - some felt they were sharing experiences rather than *stories*; that they learn about themselves but are not sharing that with others. Others felt they do talk about themselves where trust has grown - sharing taxis encourages this before and after sessions.

Safe and adaptive spaces:

This was enthusiastically supported in relation to Unit 50 and how the artists and participants together make it feel safe.

The overwhelming responses of participants to the stated aim of the programme was positive; this final statement attracted endorsement from everyone:

“We get out of it more than they were trying to show us – WE have delivered more! Tell that to the Lottery – it's an overwhelming success!”

Analysis and further thinking

A number of points arose from the discussion that Rachel would like to highlight for further consideration by the organisation:

1. Participants had ‘found’ Skippko through a variety of routes, the main ones being referrals from other networks, groups or organisations (Carers Leeds; OPAL) and word-of-mouth.

The latter is significant, illustrating as it does (and as was mentioned by participants during the discussion) a willingness on the part of participants to ‘evangelise’ on behalf of Skippko to bring new people in. People felt the desire to share the benefits of Skippko with friends and those they identified as needing the experiences Skippko offers.

2. Between them, the seven participants in the focus group cited more than 60 individual examples of engagement with Skippko, illustrating the breadth and diversity of the creative opportunities Skippko offers.
3. Some participants would like to be able to share ideas and thoughts outside the group, without Skippko acting as the conduit or intermediary for this.

It may be of benefit for facilitating artists to ask groups whether there is an appetite to, for example, create a WhatsApp group that they can administer themselves.

4. The aspirations of the *Home from Home* project are deceptively simple but hard to measure. It is equally hard to attribute comments made by participants between the four outcomes because they overlap. An example of this is the effects of Skippko providing taxis to get participants to sessions; this simple act can be demonstrated as contributing to ALL four of the outcomes, as evidenced above.

This has implications for measuring the stated outcomes; it is becoming clear that it may be impossible, and even undesirable, to attribute evidence to one of these outcomes alone.

While recognising this, it will be important to demonstrate to the Lottery that the outcomes have been met, thus creating a dilemma for evaluation and for the organisation.

5. As Rachel seeks to develop the engagement of participants in measuring the success of Skippko's stated outcomes, the learning from this focus group will be deployed alongside some of the emergent thinking on methods for measuring health and wellbeing.

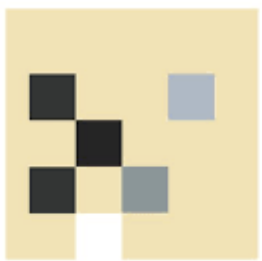
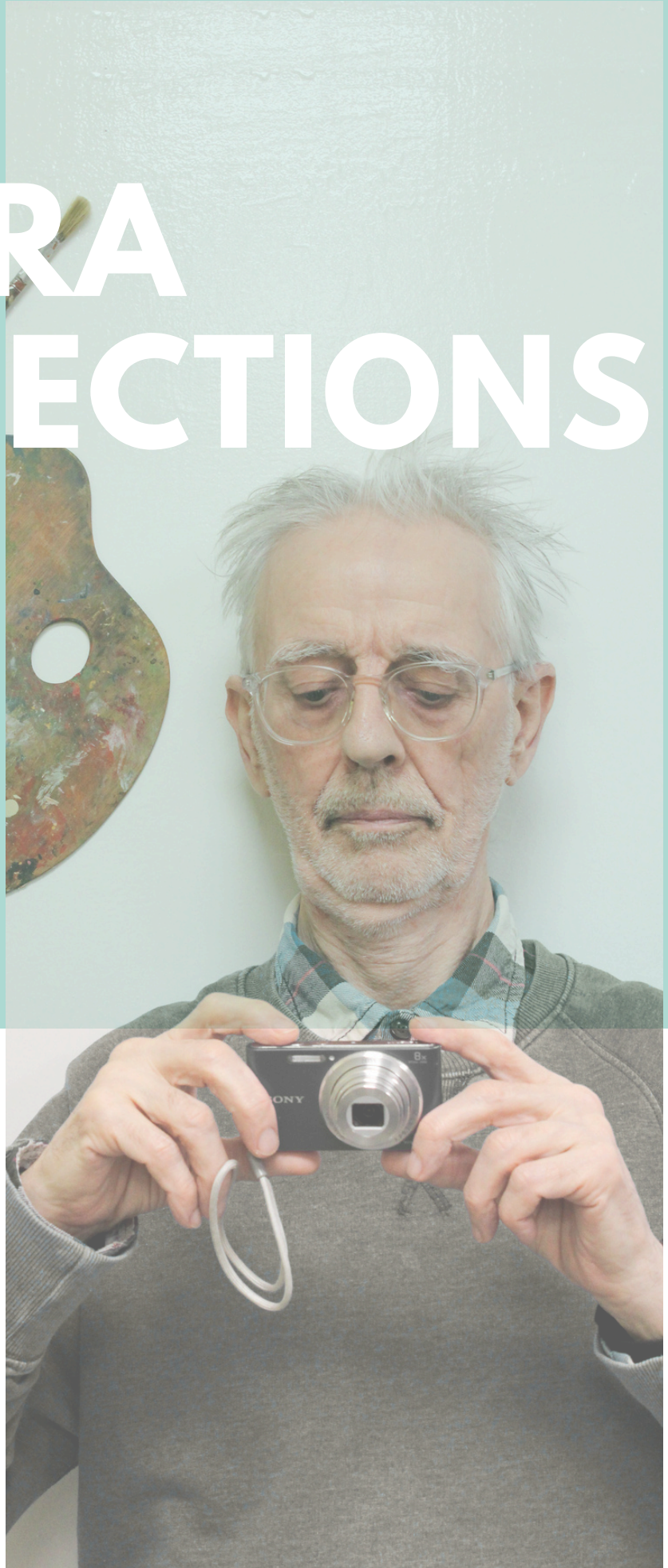
6. In developing a second Lottery Community Fund application, it is vital that Skippko considers the fund's emerging strategy.

The strategy will be finalised in Spring 2025 and the Lottery is rolling out its emerging thinking via its website. Stand out intentions include putting communities at the heart of the Lottery's work and taking an "equity-based approach". I.E. tackling inequality.

Skippko will need to demonstrate how what is proposed in the new application speaks to this strategy, so that it can deliver on the Lottery's priorities.

7. It was striking that this group of participants, not all known to each other, worked really well together; there was much laughter in the room, mutual respect and active listening. This suggests that, should there be an invitation for them to come together again, they may be willing to do so. This could be considered both for further engagement in the evaluation and/or as Skippko's participant engagement develops.

CAMERA CONNECTIONS



home from home

**An
evaluation**

INTRODUCTION

The Camera Connections project was delivered by artist facilitators Nicki Taylor and Sally Storr, between January and May 2025. It was a pilot project, delivered to more than 60 older residents of Leeds, through six of the city's Neighbourhood Networks.

The role of the Learning Partner:

Rachel Vernelle's role is to 'travel alongside' Skippko as it delivers its Home from Home Lottery-funded project.

She is supporting the organisation to maximise learning opportunities 'in real time', as it delivers its work.

Why evaluate this project?:

- As it was a pilot, learning would support Skippko's decision-making as to whether to offer future iterations of the project
- Learning from the evaluation could be implemented if and when the project was rolled out
- It offered the opportunity to gather the views of six partner organisations on working with Skippko in a relatively concentrated period of time
- As Skippko looks towards the end of the Home from Home programme, the views of partners are vital in planning the projects it will look to offer in future.

What Rachel did:

- Interviewed all the Neighbourhood Networks in person, online or by telephone
- Reviewed documentation, including the partnership agreement and comments of artist facilitators, Skippko staff and participants
- Attended a session of the Camera Connections exhibition in Unit 50 and spoke to a number of participants
- Facilitated a learning session with artists Sally and Nicki, who delivered the project, and Cath from Skippko.

Rachel Vernelle

SKIPPKO LEARNING PARTNER

PROJECT AIMS

- Explore portraiture through photography
- Improving or sustaining mental health and wellbeing
- Improving confidence, self-esteem, motivation, sense of belonging and feeling valued
- Building social connections and support networks and reducing loneliness and isolation
- To work in ways which promote participants taking the lead.

Two Skippko artists delivered the project at the premises of six Neighbourhood Networks in Leeds (VCSE organisations working with older people – see below).

The project consisted of three sessions, delivered two weeks' apart, exploring identity through portraiture. It was delivered to over 60 people between January and May 2025.

An exhibition of the work produced during the project took place at Unit 50, Barkston House in April 2025. It was attended by 38 participants, plus guests, volunteers and staff.

THE PARTNERS

LEEDS NEIGHBOURHOOD NETWORKS

Leeds Neighbourhood Networks are community based, locally led organisations that support older people to live independently and participate within their own communities.

Neighbourhood Networks are commissioned by Leeds City Council to:

- reduce social isolation and loneliness
- increase the contribution and involvement of older people
- increase choice and control
- enhance health and wellbeing.

NETWORK PARTNERS INVOLVED IN THE PROJECT

Age UK, Leeds	City centre based
AVSED	Yeadon, Rawdon and Guiseley
Bermantofts Community Friends	Harehills, Little London, Lincoln Green and Burmantofts
Health for All	South Leeds
Otley Action for Older People	Otley, Pool and Arthington
Seacroft Friends and Neighbours	Seacroft and East Leeds

PARTNER FEEDBACK - WORKING WITH SKIPPKO

History:

Some of the partners had worked with Skippko in the past, or had users involved in other Skippko projects. Cath's extensive experience and connections in the city brought on board two partners that had never worked with Skippko before.

Reasons for involvement in the project:

- Built on existing knowledge of Skippko and the kind of work it does and wanted to share the chance to work with the organisation with their users
- Aimed to offer new opportunities that are inspiring, different and innovative
- Identified individual users who they felt might be interested in the specific nature of this project.

“Really like how Cath and the team work. Like us, they are all about creating opportunities and experiences.”

Flexibility:

All partners appreciated that they were able to offer the project to their users in the way that they felt would be most beneficial to them as organisations and to the participants themselves.

In the event, half the partners offered the opportunity to existing craft or social groups and the other half opened it to any user who expressed interest in joining the project.

Engagement, administration and communication:

A number of partners mentioned how useful it was that Cath came and visited them before delivery of the sessions began, explaining what would happen in the sessions and learning about any individual needs.

PARTNER FEEDBACK - WHY ENGAGE?

Delivery 'in-house':

All partners appreciated Skippko coming to them. The main reason cited was the challenge presented by users who may lack confidence and are reluctant to go somewhere they don't know. Other reasons included costs (to the organisation or to individuals), distances involved, the location of Skippko's base and logistics of travel.

Delivery at no-cost:

The fact that Camera Connections was delivered free of charge was vital to all the partners. Most said they would not have been able to bring the project in if they, or their users, had had to pay for it. They cited reasons such as the current funding landscape for voluntary sector organisations and financial pressures faced by their less well-off users. It was also suggested that people might be more prepared to try something with which they were unfamiliar if they weren't risking losing anything by taking part.

Two participants charged Skippko for using their premises to deliver to their users, this being part of their business model and in at least one case a volunteer was deployed so that paid staff did not have to attend.

“We would have had to charge members as probably couldn't have found the funding. Arts and creativity does need investment but so much else needs the money.”

“Could organise the Access Bus to get people to the centre, but couldn't have got them to an external venue as no funding.”

“All equipment, including different cameras, were provided – they learnt a lot and could start again without me worrying about how much paper they were using!”

“Other companies and service providers constantly approach us but require payment, but its important that a rich experience is available to everybody.”

PARTNER FEEDBACK - THE PROJECT

The artists:

The partners were unanimous in praising Nicki and Sally for the way they worked with participants; frequently stated was the way they built trust, supported and valued people. Putting people at their immediate ease and, in only three sessions, encouraging them to work together and express themselves was admired by partners. The artists were seen as open to all and able to work with people of all experience levels.

It was regularly commented that the artists made participants feel safe. Staff attending initial sessions frequently felt confident enough to leave:

“I could leave the room and hear them laughing and joking; they didn’t need me for reassurance – they felt safe where they were.”

“We had put plans in place for people who might get upset but they weren’t needed because of the environment created.”

“The sessions are run in such a way, and are so well planned, it flowed sweetly.”

One of the partners, and both the artists in their reflection on the pilot, suggested that their age was important; as mature women there was an affinity from a peer perspective. For the artists this provided an emotional connection, for the partner they were seen as inspirational, showing older women that they can lead and be creative.

The content:

Responses to the project from partners and participants were overwhelmingly positive.

Health for All told Rachel that the main group who attended were older Indian ladies and that there is a prevalence of mild depression in this group. This is often hidden; culturally, it isn’t talked about but it can come about as people age and are dealing with life events, such as the death of a partner. It was observed that Camera Connections brought people out of themselves and helped them talk about how they felt, through artistic practice.

“Didn’t know what to expect but they would ask “what’s going on this week?”; I’d say “its Camera Connections” and they’d say “brilliant” – we always had the best turnout with Skippko!”

“People encouraged their friends to come along; we saw people we hadn’t seen for a while.”

“(It was) really positive....Its always good to try something new, especially as we get older. Some thought they couldn’t manage the camera due to arthritis but they did – it was a confidence-booster. They were really happy with what they produced – I was really quite proud of them. (They had) discussions they don’t usually get a chance to talk about – it was lovely.”

Partners were willing to signpost and encourage people to engage with Skippko independently, recognising the value and quality of the opportunity.

All the partners would have liked there to be more sessions, reflecting what participants had told them.

“It was only 3 weeks and left people wanting more.”

All the partners wanted to work with Skippko again, as did many participants.

HOME FROM HOME OUTCOMES

Home from Home, Skippko's National Lottery Communities Fund programme, has the following outcomes:

- Improving or sustaining mental health and wellbeing
- Reducing stress and anxiety
- Improving confidence, self-esteem, motivation, sense of belonging and feeling valued and supported, often linked to the acquisition of new skills
- Building social connections and support networks and reducing loneliness and social isolation.



ALIGNMENT OF VALUES AND OUTCOMES

The Camera Connections pilot project has clearly supported Skippko in its delivery of the Home from Home outcomes. Importantly, it has done this with over 60 participants who would not otherwise have engaged with Skippko (except in a handful of cases).

Offering Skippko projects at venues other than Barkston House has been a feature of Skippko's work in the past and is clearly a way to extend the benefits of its work to those who may not have the confidence or capacity to attend sessions outside venues they know and feel comfortable in. It also takes Skippko to the most deprived areas of the city.

By delivering this project with voluntary sector partners, the benefits go beyond the fulfillment of Skippko objectives. The way Skippko works and the outcomes it delivers, also reflected the values and aims of the partners it worked with. These centre around supporting and social connections, health and wellbeing and building confidence.

Social connections:

A partner cited two participants, recently bereaved, who appreciated the social contact and being creative. Another said that their model was to put likeminded people together and encourage them to meet, building peer support, which the project enabled.

“Supports people getting to know each other in a different way. They found out about people through sharing bits of their life stories they wouldn't otherwise have known.”

Health and wellbeing:

“Content was brilliant; the conversation that it caused was fantastic....they wouldn't leave that table!...Backgrounds of depression and loneliness (but were) offered the opportunity to safely reflect on their lives; this could have been a trigger point but this project gently led them to volunteer (thoughts) in a safe environment.”

Building confidence:

“They said “I can't do this.” “I was rubbish at school”. They can be negative, but it's down to lack of opportunities and/or lack of affordability, which limit their lives.”

“(They tell me) “I can't take photographs, I'm rubbish”; I offered for them to observe for a while, but they got involved straight away because the facilitators were very engaging and supportive...”.

“Skippko is the same as us but in a different format. Everyone is going through their own issues so it's a different way to support people through that. Amazing way to explore and talk through things.”

THE EXHIBITION

The exhibition formally ran for four days in April at Barkston House, where it has remained on display since, available for viewing by groups using the space. Four of the six partners organised for their participants to attend together, along with staff and/or volunteers.

38 participants attended, some coming with family members.

The exhibition gave partners and participants the opportunity to:

- See their work displayed
- View each other's work
- In most cases, travel and attend with fellow group members and staff
- Visit Barkston House and see Skippko's base

Some partners appreciated the exhibition as an endorsement of participants' work and reported a 'buzz' about attending together as a group.

"The exhibition brings it to life and is exciting. Will be able to say "Look at what you did!" And good to see what other groups did so we think outside our boxes – frees up the imagination."

Skippko providing transport was important for some partners. For one, it was the chance to travel together by mini-bus and then go for lunch:

"(They) want to go together so they can chat on the bus. Unlikely to have gone under their own steam; needed to be an organised activity."



PARTICIPANT STORIES

Burmantofts Community Friends:

One man who was an existing user, quiet and reserved, but joined in. He had studied at Leeds Art College in the 1970s and brought existing experience and skills. He opened up about being a gay man who faced discrimination when younger, but was accepted into the group. His partner had died last year and it was the first time he had really got involved. He worked with a woman in her 90s and they really bonded. He appreciated being useful and wanted. While still reserved, he has returned to do more activities.

Another woman brought a picture of grandchildren with whom she no longer has a relationship. The facilitators very sensitively put her in the centre of the picture and it made a lovely piece.

Age UK:

One 56 year-old woman is now pursuing a university degree course, having left school with one 'O' level and feeling that she had never reached her potential. While Camera Connections was one of a 'few strands of influence', the worker said "this showed how such projects are of more significance than us just running a workshop – other messages are being given all the time."



WHAT PARTICIPANTS SAID....

“My hands shake so I can’t take photos, but my hands are in the picture so I could get involved.”

“When you’re older, you don’t like your picture being taken, but I took my friend and she took me.”

“We chat about using our cameras more (not just on our phones) and I’ve been encouraging my granddaughter.”

“It was the first time I had met Sid who took my photo and I felt very comfortable with him as I do not like having my photo taken.”

“It was very beneficial to be able to tell my story, It brought back some happy memories.”

“..., I enjoyed the idea of sharpening observation skills. I’ve never lost my childhood curiosity about everything in life. Everyone in the class got on really well...”



Three participants have joined Skippko’s Monthly Art Club, a couple are also interested in the Research Team and the upcoming Spanish project starting in September.

A number of participants signed up for the newsletter and at home packs.

LASTING LEGACY

For a pilot project lasting only three sessions, partners were easily able to identify a number of lasting effects for many of those attending. Partners were interviewed at different times after delivery; most had been completed some months before, a couple more recently.

One partner spoke of the project being something to talk about when participants bump into each other, and they were anticipating the exhibition. They now recognise each other in other situations; the worker sees them sitting and talking together because they met on the project.

For those who already knew each other from existing groups, it deepened relationships. “It was lovely to hear the stories of participants and how they learnt more about each other, even though they knew each other from Art Group.”

Partners spoke of people with whom their own relationships developed:

“When we were working in groups of three a very shy lady took the best photo (Rubix Cube) - she really enjoyed that and has since grown in confidence - she is now an acquaintance who phones me up; we recognise each other now and we didn't know each other before.”

Improved confidence was cited by all partners as an outcome of the project, with lots of individual instances quoted. This was seen as something that would be taken into other aspects of participants' lives and on into the future.

“One lady had had a stroke and didn't think she would be able to draw anything - that really improved her confidence.”

“(There is a) legacy of confidence and inspiration to do other things.”

The pilot was clearly a success and further sessions - six for each partner involved - are already planned.

Three of the original partners will be involved in the next iteration of the project; new partners are being approached and offered the opportunity to take part. A wider partnership is developing with Age UK, Leeds with discussions underway about delivery of an @home project for housebound users, involving training of volunteers.

LEARNING

Facilitation and preparation:

The artists completed an extremely thorough SWOT analysis that supported organisational learning around how the project could be enhanced. In it, they mentioned how useful it had been for Skippko to facilitate them undertaking research in advance of the project and responding positively to the request to increase the originally-planned two sessions to three. Both of these were possible because of the secure funding from the Lottery Community Fund.

“As artists we were totally enthused and engaged with the project visiting portrait exhibitions beforehand for research, recording and discussing what stood out during our prep for Pop Ups so we both felt that we hit the ground running.”

“We felt listened to and fully trusted and supported by Skippko to go for the 3 sessions instead of 2 and again it is this tried and tested working relationship that helps make these workshops successful – a testament to the Skippko process!”

The flexibility and adaptability of the artists involved is evidently very important when a project goes ‘on the road’ and Nicki and Sally were experienced and willing enough to exercise both throughout this project (see below).

Future of Camera Connections:

Cath, Sally and Nicki identified some immediate learning around the content of sessions that will be implemented in the next iteration of the project.

Use of different types of cameras and shutter speeds and utilising mobile phones all came up during the pilot and will be addressed in future sessions.

The artists will have the challenge with three of the partners to integrate new starters alongside those who took part in the pilot.

Some participants expressed interest in taking the project outdoors, the logistics of which will need consideration.

Future partnerships:

Perhaps inevitably, when working with six partners, some were easier to work with than others. Skippko had to navigate:

- A couple of partners that seemed to see the project as them providing Skippko with an opportunity, rather than the other way around!
- A majority of participants uncertain of what the project entailed – not all had received the flyer or had the project explained to them
- Venues that were not always suitable, or ready for use when the artists arrived.

It is important that partners recognise that this isn't just Skippko achieving **its** outcomes; it is fundamentally supporting them to achieve **theirs** (see above). Skippko has the right to expect that this is valued and the relationship approached accordingly.

RECOMMENDATIONS

The recommendations below focus on the relationship between Skippko and partners and stem from an observation that the organisation, in establishing expectations around projects, could be more assertive, given it is an equal partnership, and despite being delivered on partner's 'home turf'.

Review the Partner Agreement to make clear expectations around:

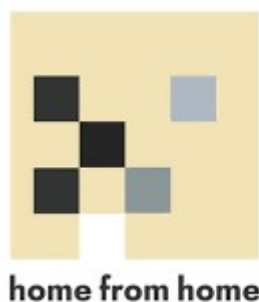
1. The space being suitable for the activity IE that it is big enough, private, sound-proof and warm
2. The space has been set up for each session, with tables/chairs (as specified in advance) and that facilitating artists are not responsible for organising the space themselves
3. Expecting staff/volunteers to be present
4. The worker and/or volunteers supporting and attending sessions is identified in advance
5. The sharing of information with participants happens in advance; if there is a flyer, participants are given this
6. Making clear it is not a course, thereby managing expectations. It may be hard to explain what will happen during sessions, and therefore what partners should tell potential participants; consider devising a 'script' that explains the project and that workers can use when recruiting participants.
7. Being clear about, and reiterating, limits on the number of participants per session
8. Not having new people join after session one.

Future projects

While partners hugely appreciated the Camera Connections project, a couple would be interested in building on the relationship by Skippko responding to direct expressions of interest. These may take the form of:

- Partners identifying projects that they feel will be attractive to their users (as HOPE has done recently) and working with Skippko to deliver them
- Partners responding to a menu of options presented by Skippko in response to requests
- Projects emerging organically, as the partnership develops (as is happening with Age UK).

9. Skippko considers whether this way of developing projects could be possible through future business development.



Home from Home Interim Community Fund report – May 2024

The purpose of this paper is to provide some initial thoughts as Evaluator for the Home from Home programme.

Role of Evaluator

It has been stated elsewhere (interim Community Fund briefing paper, Dec '23) that: “(Skippko) realised that the external evaluator had to not only arrive at conclusions and recommendations apropos the programme but also Skippko’s effectiveness in creating, implementing and delivering the programme.”

This intention led Skippko to identify a particular set of skills and experience that they wanted to identify in their successful candidate.

I was recruited in part because I offer both evaluation skills and experience and a background in community development. The ‘golden thread’ that runs through my work is the support of communities to take the lead in whatever field of activity I encounter them. My practice emphasises participant leadership and may include forming advisory groups and partnerships.

Therefore, I am able to ‘walk alongside’ Skippko, both to assess the success of the project and to contribute to the ambitions of the organisation to realise its aims around participant leadership and sustainability.

Timeline of engagement with the programme – Stages 1 & 2

Stage 1

Stage 1 from November 2023 to March 2024 was envisaged to give sufficient time for me to acquaint myself with Skippko; how it works, to meet with staff, artists and members of the Board, engage with some of the participants and subsequently develop the evaluation programme to be delivered in Stage 2.

Stage 1 evaluation input

Stage 2

The next stage of the Home from Home evaluation is being delivered from April 2024 and will continue to develop in the light of experience, learning and the demands of the project. Immediate plans include:

- A focus group of artists in June – areas to explore include their experience of working with Skippko in contrast with other clients they may have; what makes Skippko the organisation that it is; the community of participants engaged in activities and the potential future of the organisation.
- Developing a model for longer-term relationship-building with a number of participants to chart their journey with Skippko, taking into consideration issues such as safeguarding.
- Developing a ‘digest’ of the creative health space for future placement of the organisation.

Initial thoughts

I have addressed the two most relevant suggested areas in the Lottery's guide to what might be included in progress updates. These are my thoughts on these areas; Skippko will have different or additional observations of its own.

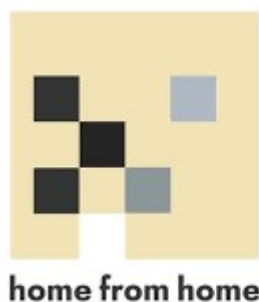
What you've learned

- The organisation has strong central leadership through its small complement of staff and its Board.
- Skippko has clear values that it easily articulates and that translate into its working practices.
- These values are shared, and demonstrated, by a group of highly accomplished and committed artist facilitators.
- Skippko and its artists create a unique safe space in the unit where activities are delivered, which is demonstrable, identified in feedback and highly valued by participants.
- The vast majority of participants hugely value their experiences with Skippko and, increasingly, the connections they make with others beyond those attending from existing groups who are known to them.
- Feedback from participants, both written and expressed directly to me, regularly demonstrates how Skippko utilises the power of creativity to support mental and physical health, recovery and the building of resilience.
- As the evaluator, I am beginning to identify a ‘Skippko way’ of working that demonstrates acceptance, tolerance, respect, nurturing and valuing everyone’s contribution, regardless of their role in the creative process, or their skills and talents.

- Skippko is clearly attracting to its groups people who may be facing challenges in their daily lives, such as poor physical and/or mental health, disability, significant caring responsibilities or economic and social disadvantage. Often, Skippko participants experience multiple such challenges.
- However, the organisation needs to closely examine who finds out about, and attends, Skippko activities and, just as importantly, who may *not* be finding the organisation through current communication channels.

How you're changing what you do

- Change is clearly intrinsic to the way activities are developed and devised within Skippko; there is an observed dynamic among the artists and staff to be open to change and to others' ideas which stems from the artistic process itself
- The organisation demonstrates a willingness to work in partnership with others, creating and adapting to situations from which communities both of interest and of place, can benefit
- Skippko is flexible in its delivery model – it will deliver both in its own building and out in community settings, where most benefit can be offered
- I have witnessed a willingness to adapt and change plans when a case is made for a different approach. Examples of this from my own experience include:
 - An April 2024 event that was originally billed as a consultation session with participants became a sharing event designed to nurture and demonstrate the value of coming together to build relationships through a shared artistic endeavor.
 - Inclusion in the major theme of the 2024/5 overarching project an element of 'research and development' will open Skippko to learning from other organisations about ABCD approaches in Leeds and beyond and could build further partnerships. The design for this theme and how it will be delivered is evolving significantly from the original idea.
- The learning that is coming from events such as those mentioned above is posing for Skippko some fundamental questions about what it means to be 'participant-led' in its own context. The organisation is totally open to this learning and to exploring the notion further as the remainder of the project is delivered.
- I believe that an element of the final evaluation submission will reflect upon, and make recommendations about, the role of an independent evaluation. I predict that this learning will be relevant for other recipients of Community Fund support. To engage an evaluator who is 'alongside' the organisation for the duration of the project is very unusual but is already enabling a richness both of reflection on the programme and its real time development.
- Engagement with Skippko, its participants, staff and artists is causing me to reflect upon and adapt my own practice as an evaluator. I am being challenged to be open to new ways of doing things and to my own creativity. I believe there will be potential learning here for others engaged in this discipline as the project develops and deepens.



Home from Home Year Two Community Fund report – May 2025

The purpose of this paper is to reflect on the second year of the Home from Home project from my perspective as Skippko's Learning Partner (formally Evaluator).

In it I will reflect on my role, focus on delivery of the specific outcomes of the Home from Home project and on Skippko's stated aims. I will highlight two areas of emerging thinking which illustrate Skippko's learning approach to delivery of the programme.

Evaluator or Learning Partner?

"Change is clearly intrinsic to the way activities are developed and devised within Skippko; there is an observed dynamic among the artists and staff to be open to change and to others' ideas which stems from the artistic process itself." Evaluation Year One report

During the second year of my involvement with Skippko, we have refined my role.

It is a mark of the uniqueness of the role that we have been able to think deeply about what an objective eye can bring to a programme that, by design, is flexible and fluid, delivered by an organisation that is open to learning and has the confidence to develop its work accordingly.

It is an indication of this that all involved in the organisation – Board members, staff and the artists who deliver the programme of work – have accepted my presence and are open to my observations. Participants have also welcomed me into their 'safe space' and generously shared their experiences and feelings about their engagement with Skippko.

While a traditional evaluation would enable retrospective reflection on the programme, by me 'walking alongside' Skippko we have increasingly been building in opportunities for reflective practice, alongside those already undertaken. This means that, when changes of strategy or practice are made, they happen in the context of shared and considered thinking by those delivering the work and developing the future of the organisation.

This partnership approach extends to revising activities within the agreed scope of my work – as the emphasis of the Home from Home programme has evolved, so has my role supporting the organisation to evidence its strategy and outcomes.

To recognise the nature of the relationship we have agreed that 'Learning Partner' is the appropriate description of my role. It most accurately describes my practice of providing guidance, facilitating reflective conversations and helping the organisation generate and share learning from its work.

Year Two Learning Partner activities

My activities have increasingly focused on evidencing Skippko's delivery of the four stated outcomes of the Home from Home project and emergent thinking around 'participant leadership'. My work during the second year of the Home from Home programme has included:

- **Sharing Days** – I have supported the design of three 'Sharing Days'. These have evolved from being consultation events into activities designed to emphasise sharing, valuing and relationship-building with participants.
The most recent event, on 29th April, focused on the benefits participants experience from their contact with Skippko. Entitled 'Ripples and Reflections' it resulted in often moving testimony from people who engaged in a range of ways with Skippko, extolling the benefits to their health and wellbeing.
These days are highly valued by participants, giving them an opportunity to experience the work of other groups, share creative activities, contribute their thoughts to the future of the organisation and benefit from a professionally cooked meal that is a highlight of the event.
Beyond the day itself, I have encouraged 'sweep up' sessions after the events to capture and share immediate learning.
- **Artist Focus Group** – I facilitated this in June. I was concerned that my facilitation style and session design might not elicit the most value from and for artists. In response, as well as financing attendance by artists, Skippko engaged two artist 'cultural translators'. They helped interpret what I was looking to elicit from the artists in creative ways to which they were more likely to respond.
The focus group aimed to explore artists' experience of working with Skippko; what makes Skippko the organisation that it is; the community of participants engaged in activities and the potential future of the organisation.
Some of the main findings from the event were:
 - All the artists are passionate about participative work - they bare a huge responsibility for the success of the programmes and by extension, of the organisation; without them, Skippko would not be the organisation that it is.
 - Artists identified many challenges to engagement for the participants: health; transport; accessibility/mobility issues; justifying, finding and allowing time for themselves; family pressures/childcare; logistics.
 - Thinking around participant leadership was nuanced in terms both of its meaning and its cultivation.

*"(Skippko) is an organisation I work **with** rather than **for**. Collaborative; open-minded; long term."*

"(Skippko is made by) the people, the practitioners, the directors, the trustees, the groups we collaborate with, the funders we chose to apply to."

- **Participant Focus Group** – Seven participants attended the session I facilitated in October. Because they are deceptively simple to articulate, but hard to measure, the session focused on evidencing the Home from Home stated outcomes. The willingness of participants to attend and share personal experiences and stories about their health and wellbeing is indicative of the close relationship, trust and loyalty they have with and towards Skippko.

Some of the main findings relating to the Home from Home outcomes were:

- The group discussed the motivation they find to attend Skippko activities even on days when they may not be feeling their best, either physically or mentally. Travelling to sessions with other participants, facilitated by Skippko, can provide the nudge that is needed.
- Creativity's role in helping people access their emotions was mentioned as challenging, but valuable and only possible with high levels of safety and trust.
- Provision of transport enables people to attend when they may not be feeling up to it, by reducing the stress (and costs) of making their own arrangements.
- Building of confidence was repeatedly cited as a benefit of Skippko activities. Undertaking never-before-tried activities and allowing themselves to be open and childlike, along with the supportive environment created by the artists, all contributed to increased self-confidence.
- The provision of food, refreshments and transport all contribute to a feeling of belonging and being valued and are hugely welcomed by participants. In some cases, not having to worry about the cost of taxis enables them to attend, the anxiety of the expense having been removed.

"I wear lots of different hats. I can take them all off and immerse myself in something else; can't put a price on that."

"I can escape the daily grind for a couple of hours, improving my ability to survive another day!"

"Makes me happier; gives me something positive to talk to others about; I can do similar creative things with my grandchildren."

"I retired due to ill-health, my life was so full, I went from that to nothing; this has given me another string to my bow and a new identity."

- **Camera Connections** – I am in the process of completing a 'mini evaluation' of this pilot project, delivered between January and April 2025. The project involved the delivery of three photography-based sessions to groups of older participants, delivered by two artists at the premises of six partner organisations across Leeds. It culminated in an exhibition of the groups' work in Unit 50, which was both open to the public and to which partner organisations brought groups who had engaged with the project. The response to the project has been overwhelmingly positive, both from participants and the partner organisations involved. Two of the main strengths all partners identified was that the artists delivered in spaces that participants were familiar with and felt safe in and, for the poorly-funded third sector organisations involved, there were no costs incurred by them in the delivery.

All participating organisations concurred that the project met the outcomes of Home

from Home, while also contributing to their own aims. There have been some incredible personal stories emerging that will be captured in my evaluation report.

The immediate nature of my relationship with Skippko enabled me to provide feedback to the staff member and artists who delivered the project as they prepare to offer further sessions, based on its evident success. This learning is informing the organisation's review of guidelines it will be sharing with partners to manage and refine their expectations and to deepen genuine partnership working in future.

Partner organisations:

"We would have had to charge members as probably couldn't have found the funding. Arts and creativity do need investment but so much else needs the money."

"Skippko is the same as us but in a different format. Everyone is going through their own issues so it's a different way to support people through that. Amazing way to explore and talk through things."

"I could leave the room and hear them laughing and joking; they didn't need me for reassurance – they felt safe where they were."

Participants:

"Yes absolutely! I have more confidence, more relaxed, confidence to speak up regarding photos"

"This has been a major thing for me. Before I didn't like pictures of myself. However love the one that was taken at the session."

Volunteer:

"This has been a real roller coaster ride. As a volunteer with AGE UK my task has been so much easier. I think everyone has enjoyed every session and risen to the challenge of perhaps being slightly outside their own comfort zone. I certainly want more!"

Emerging thinking on...

Participant leadership

One area the Skippko team continue to engage in deeply is what 'participant leadership' means for the organisation. This is ongoing and is moving on from the idea of an advisory group to something more nuanced and relevant to both participants and the organisation. The conversation amongst artists during their focus group perhaps epitomised this thinking - there was general agreement that participant leadership already happens when groups co-create, developing ideas together and with facilitators. A core belief in this way of working characterises artists' approach to their practice, which feeds into how they support participants to achieve their goals.

It is important to recognise that participants need skills and the inclination to lead. They also need to continue to generate creative opportunities for themselves if they are to be sustained, which isn't a given. They have to want to do things together on a regular basis and to overcome barriers to participation; this can't be forced to happen.

Being 'participant-led' is something Skippko does naturally. But the nuance of the artists' discussion on this showed that the meaning of the phrase can be interpreted differently. The organisation continues to explore what it believes 'participant-led' to mean and to consider what should be put in place for artists to support the delivery of sustainable

participant leadership. It is also increasingly responding to participant-motivated activities, such as a monthly art club and a performance group.

The group of participants who attended the focus group undoubtedly have the capacity and engagement with the organisation to take their deliberations further and may prove to be the makings of a reference group in the future. Added to this are the increasing number of participants who have volunteered for specific tasks that support Skippko's work, who also feel an affinity with the organisation.

This is an area I fully expect to develop further during year three of Home from Home.

Measuring vs evidencing outcomes

In developing an approach to the Sharing Days and to the collection of feedback from participants both at these events and during the delivery of Skippko's various activities, how to demonstrate successful delivery of the Home from Home outcomes has been constantly under review.

While there are recognised methods for measuring wellbeing (such as Outcome Stars and WEMWEBS), there is a recognition that these do not always provide evidence that is genuinely meaningful, either to participants or organisations themselves.

For Skippko, there is a determination not to be 'extractive' in its discourse with participants as it seeks to gain their feedback and ideas for future development. This has led the organisation away from scale-based assessment tools to a richer, more value-driven approach characterised by the content of Sharing Days, constant discussion with participants and aspects of my work, such as the participant focus group.

The practices deployed in evidence-gathering are constantly questioned, with the test of whether a particular exercise is happening in 'good faith' or 'bad faith' always at the forefront of consideration by those engaged in it. This approach is well illustrated by the latest Sharing Day - we have recognised that the richness of the evidence given to us by participants was only possible because of the learning that emerged from the first two Sharing Days. It has been an iterative process of providing artistic, mental and physical nourishment in return for participants often deeply personal reflections on the place of Skippko in their lives.

In conclusion

By the end of the Home from Home programme I am confident that Skippko will be able to provide rich evidence of its delivery both of the stated outcomes and its own development as an organisation. The programme is enabling it to deepen its offer to participants and partner organisations and to understand what people want from it going forward.

Alongside analysis of Skippko's delivery, the learning partnership approach will enable deep reflection on the very notion of evaluation and 'critical friend' methodologies, which may have the potential to provide learning for future applicants to National Lottery programmes.