

South London Gallery Open Plan Programme: Summative Evaluation

A report by
Shared Intelligence

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The purpose of this report is to evaluate the overall outcomes and impacts of the South London Gallery's Open Plan programme. The programme consists of a free-to-attend creativity-focused after school and Saturday club for children, known as Art Block, and artist commissions and events carried out within Art Block and in nearby public spaces on Pelican, Elmington and Southampton Way Estates. The report draws on evidence from three annual evaluations carried out by Shared Intelligence from 2020 to 2023, plus new interviews with Open Plan staff. It assesses how effective South London Gallery (SLG) has been in delivering four key objectives:

Objective 1

Children who have taken part in Art Block will be happier, more confident and more able to express their creativity.

Objective 2

Children and families will feel their neighbourhood is safer.

Objective 3

Increasing local young people's aspirations for the future through traineeships opportunities and working at Art Block.

Objective 4

Creating a sense of pride in the neighbourhood and creating greater familiarity with artists and arts practice.

Key findings

Art Block meets its primary goal of enabling children to be more confident in expressing their creativity. It is clear from our findings that children who attend Art Block have increased social and creative confidence. Art Block has helped build children's confidence and their ability to socialise with other children and make friends, and also improved children's communication skills with adults. Children attending Art Block are happy and become more creative. These effects are due to a combination of the staff, the Art Block space, and good quality materials and supplies.

South London Gallery's presence through Art Block and the Open Plan programme of artist commissions has contributed to sense of belonging and trust among local residents.

The Open Plan programme has provided jobs and employment opportunities for young creatives from the local area. The traineeship programme and Art & Play roles at Art Block have increased future aspirations for those involved, both during their time on those roles, and by providing a foundation from which to develop careers elsewhere. The Open Plan programme has also given a platform and confidence for more young people to find a career in the creative industries.

Open Plan has encouraged 'togetherness' and pride in the neighbourhood of Sceaux Gardens and Pelican Estates. Open Plan has also helped to create familiarity with artists and arts practice, through commissioning annual public events.

The Open Plan programme has had further positive impact on the local communities it works with beyond the four key objectives. In particular, the Open Plan programme has benefitted parents and families who send their children to Art Block in terms of parental wellbeing, and in practical ways, and this should not be underestimated. In the current climate of rising childcare costs, and declining availability, the free childcare that Art Block offers to some of the most disadvantaged families in Southwark is invaluable.

Furthermore, Art Block offers more than just free childcare – it provides a creative space for children to express themselves, with trusted staff equipped to deal with a wide range of behaviours. This safe and trusted environment has allowed parents to value the time they get back for chores, work, or respite time to relax and recharge. These are important ways in which SLG and the Open Plan programme are contributing to the wellbeing of its local community.

The unique character of the Open Plan programme and Art Block stems from being led by a public art gallery that champions creativity's role in learning and wellbeing. It builds on longstanding connections with local residents, creating opportunities for artists to engage with communities. For trainees, SLG's strong local and national reputation has provided a crucial entry point into the creative sector.



Learning and recommendations for other organisations

In approaching evaluation:

- **Developing an inquiry mindset in staff.** Co-producing the research approach and data collection tools with the Art & Play team has helped SLG staff think more critically about the evidence they can gather to understand the programme. This has helped develop an inquiry mindset.
- **Long funding periods.** The eight-year funding from Freelands Foundation has allowed SLG staff to develop a process of learning, reflection, and adaptation, with enough time to have an impact.

Service delivery:

- **Trained staff effective at dealing with a range of children with different needs.** By taking on some of the burden of managing children's behaviour, programmes like Art Block help parents feel less stressed.
- **The multiple wellbeing, financial, and practical benefits of providing free childcare in low income communities.** Beyond the other outcomes, the provision of high-quality, free childcare, by staff whom parents trust, is valuable for wellbeing, household finances, and offers practical help.
- **Staff creativity and availability of artistic materials.** The creative skills of the Art & Play team have meant that they often serve as role models, inspiring children to be more creative and artistic.
- **The use of indoor and outdoor space.** Art Block has been able to utilise indoor and outdoor spaces, meaning they can accommodate children's needs for high energy activities outdoors, and calmer indoor activities.
- **Giving decision making power to children.** Activities which explore "radical trust", where children have almost complete choice over activities and how to spend money, have been highly memorable and were still talked about by children a year later. Children taking leadership on projects and activities at Art Block is also a factor in building personal confidence. This was exemplified in the Something & Son artist commission *Exercises in Freedom*.

Reach

Art Block and the wider Open Plan programme are almost exclusively serving children and families from the immediate vicinity of the Sceaux Garden and Pelican Estates.

Postcode data obtained for 108 families who have regularly sent their children to Art Block over the last two years show that 102 (or 95%) live either near or in the Sceaux Garden area.

Regular participants of Art Block

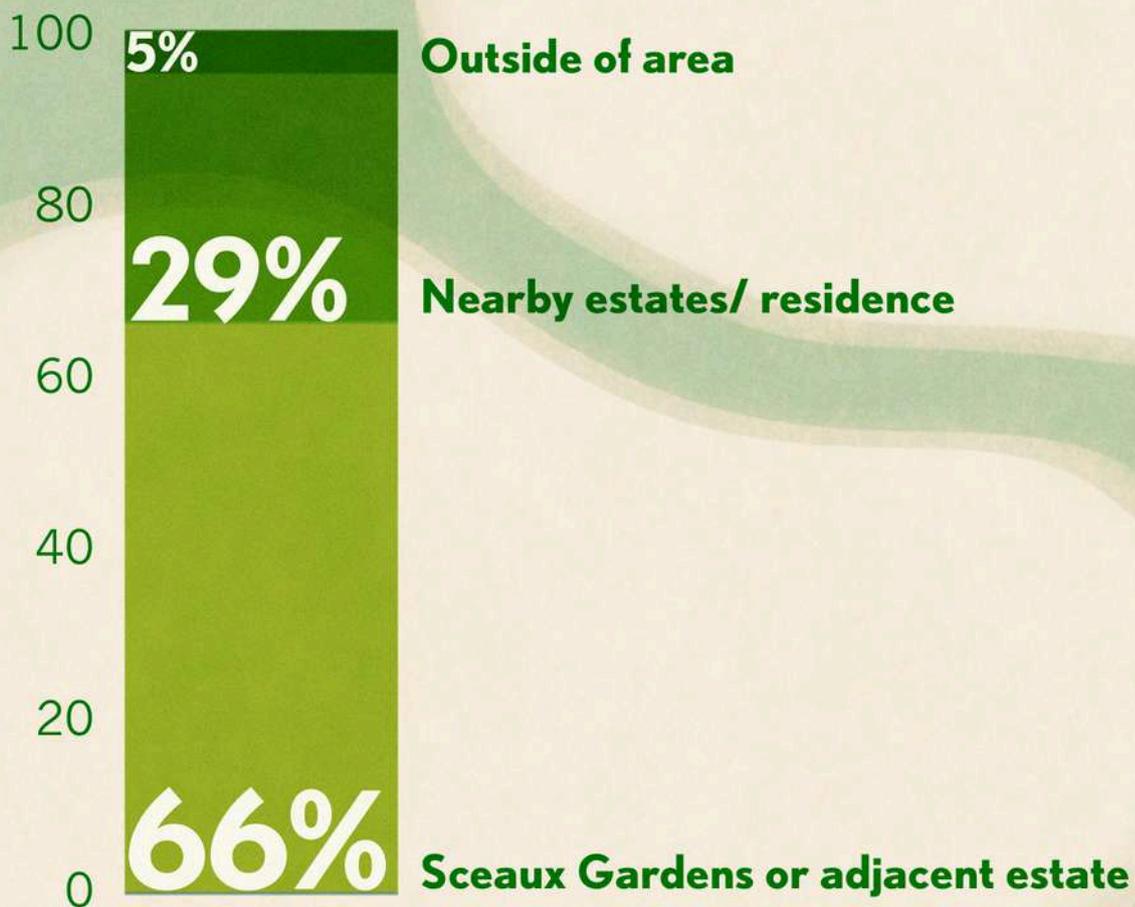


Figure 1: Where are Art Block users from?

Free school meal eligibility

Using Free School Meals (FSM) as a proxy for levels of socioeconomic disadvantage, data collected over the last 2 years suggests that Art Block is disproportionately reaching the most disadvantaged families in Southwark.

The proportion at Art Block is more than double the level of FSM eligibility for primary school children across the borough of Southwark.

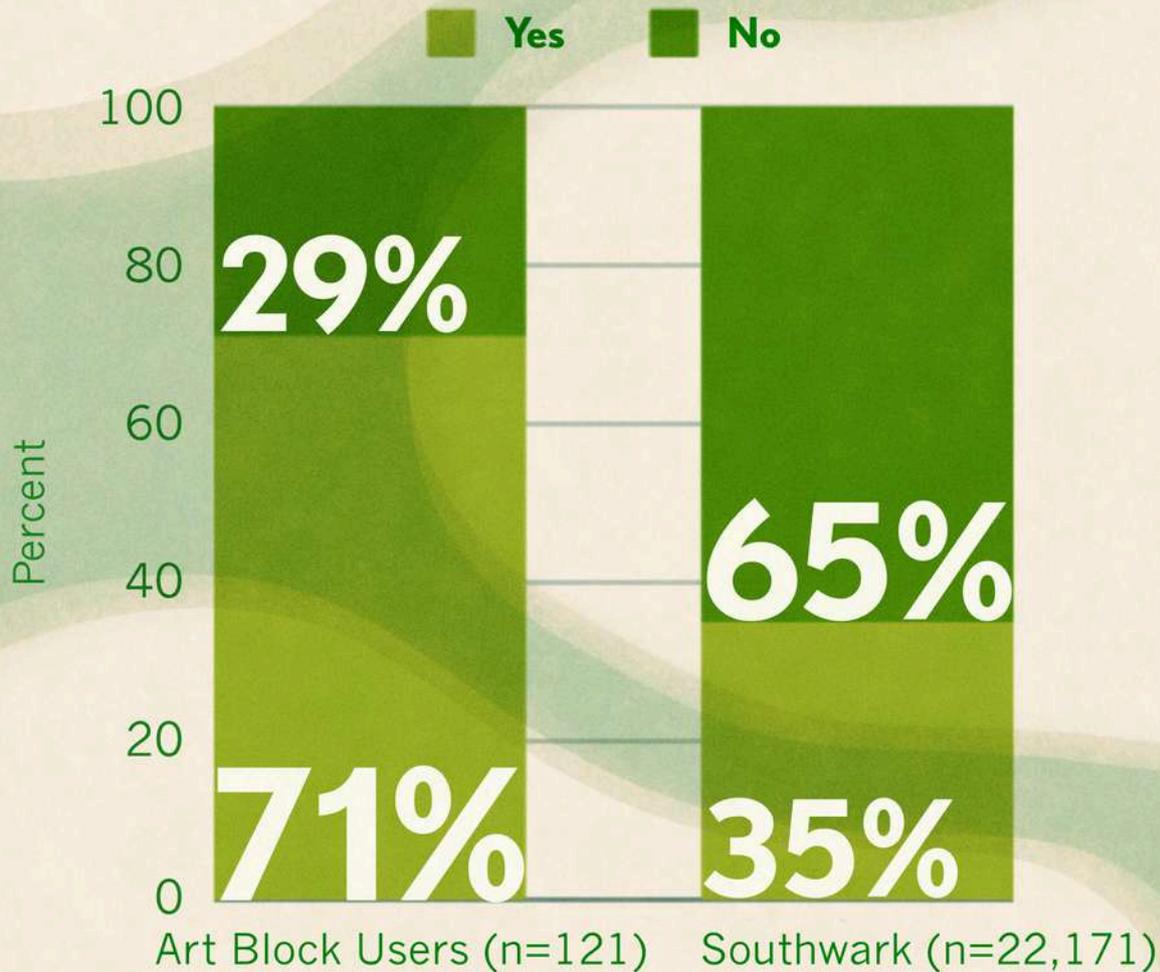


Figure 2: Free school meal eligibility at Art Block compared to borough level

Childcare costs

Art Block provides around 560 hours of free childcare a year. During term time it runs three days a week, and a session on Saturdays. During holidays, Art Block runs one Saturday session a week.

Southwark has some of the highest costs of childcare in the UK, with the average cost of childminding, babysitting and nannying around £11 an hour.¹

In inner London the average afterschool club costs around £65 a week, this equates to £2,535 a year (term time only)²

THE NEED FOR OPEN PLAN

Similarly to our previous annual reviews, this summative report deals predominantly with the largest element (by budget) of the Open Plan programme - the Art Block programme. The Art Block programme run by the SLG provides local children and families from Sceaux Gardens Estate with a free-to-use after school and weekend club. It operates from an art and play space staffed by the Art & Play team workers who have access to a wide range of high-quality arts and craft materials. After school and weekend sessions are designed to enable children to play, socialise, create, and learn. The programme also provides the opportunity for children to collaborate with artists through periodic artist commissions.

The value that Art Block offers through free childcare is very important for local families. The UK has the second highest childcare costs in the world, and in inner London, some parents have to pay over 70% of their weekly take home pay on childcare. Despite this, childcare providers are struggling. In England, all 3-4-year-olds are entitled to 15 hours a week of free childcare. However, the National Day Nurseries Association has found that for each child that is promised the 15 hours of free childcare a week, the average nursery is underfunded by £2.31 per hour. This funding gap is either carried by the provider, which means they provide the most basic service they can, or is passed onto the family, so the childcare is no longer free. Unaffordable childcare has further negative social and economic consequences. Often, women will leave the workforce to care for their child, leading to issues of equality, and decreases in national productivity.

Art Block does not just provide childcare which is both high quality and completely free. It also provides opportunities for creative and outdoor play, with clear positive effects on children's confidence and creativity. In our most recent annual evaluation, we also explored the parental effects of Art Block. Parents send their children to Art Block with confidence, due to the trust they have in the staff. As more parents come to use and trust Art Block they also come to value the time they get back for chores, work, or time to relax and recharge. This virtuous circle seems a very important way in which Art Block and SLG are contributing to wellbeing of the local community.

Art Block has also helped parents with the behavioural management of their children. It is clear that the staff have the experience and staffing levels to deal with a wide range of behaviours and are able to adapt their sessions to the needs of the children. As a result, parents have said children tend to be calmer on days they attend Art Block, further benefitting parents and their wellbeing.

In terms of SLG's role and contribution to the wider local community, the family-level wellbeing benefits which result from the presence of Art Block should be recognised. This is especially important in a community where incomes are below average, households are often time-poor, and where the ability to access Art Block means parents have one less thing to worry about.



SLG Residents' Summer Party, 2022. Photo: Lucien Ebongue

SUMMATIVE FINDINGS 2020-2023

Objective 1

Children who have taken part in Art Block will be happier, more confident and more able to express their creativity.

Finding 1

Children are undoubtedly more confident through taking part in Art Block. In particular, we have found that Art Block has built children's confidence in their ability to interact with other children and make friends, as well as improved their communication skills with adults. To many parents, the increases in confidence gained from attending Art Block is a deciding factor in sending their children to Art Block.

Over the past three years, we have had several interviews with parents who send their children to Art Block. The majority of these interviews have highlighted the increases in confidence for children who have regularly attended Art Block. Being around other children, in a familiar group, fosters friendships between children and builds their confidence in interacting with others.

"My son is more quiet, less confident and needs encouragement to make new friends. And since coming here he has got better at making friends, and more comfortable making friends. He doesn't just play with his sister when he is at Art Block"

Group family interview 2021

The family interviews also suggest that Art Block has been able to build confidence in a different way to school, in that it creates an environment where children can freely interact with children of other ages (outside their school year group) and allows them to learn from one another.

“Being around other children, it means they can learn how other kids act and can take this on board...at home there are no siblings so this allows him to learn by example from others.” *Family interviews 2022*

“Yes, the mix of ages at Art Block is good, and they allow free play between the years unlike in school.” *Family interviews 2022*

Parents also described Art Block as a “safe zone” for their children to express their feelings and helped them become more confident when communicating their emotions, particularly to adults.

“Art Block is a safe zone for feelings, kids feel very comfortable talking to the staff about anything. This has helped his confidence in talking to adults.”
Parent interview 2023



SLG Residents' Summer Party, 2023. Photo: Lucien Ebongue

Finding 2

Our findings from each of the three previous annual reports illustrate that Art Block has helped children become more creative. This has been achieved through three primary mechanisms: The Art & Play team; the creative space that Art Block offers; and the artistic materials provided by Art Block.

In addition to sessions with guest creatives, the Art & Play team regularly provide creative instructions on how to use materials, and also carefully plan creative activities based on the children's interests. The creative skills of the staff (many of whom have art and design qualifications) also help inspire children, who observe and replicate creative outputs made by staff. For example, creating stop-frame animation was mentioned in several family interviews as an activity taught by the staff, which children would not have been able to do at home. Another example is inspiring and teaching children how to bake and cook.

"Sometimes [the artistic skills of the staff] make me interested and I want to try it [new artistic methods] out and see if I can do what they're doing."

Carousel activity 2023

"I see the different styles of artwork here [Art Block] and I get inspired. At home I will try to make the same things but in my own style." *Family Interview 2022*

Another important mechanism is access to the creative space that Art Block offers. This allows children to do things at Art Block they cannot do at home or at school – for example a whole wall which the children are allowed to draw on it.

"She has always been arty, always had a piece of paper. When she is set a project at school, she will always come here to do the project. She is naturally creative, but Art Block provides space and opportunity to be creative." *Parent interviews 2023*

"They have become more creative since [attending Art Block], and the art is important – they can make a mess there and then be tidy at home. They can do things there that they can't do at home..., they even draw on the walls!"

Parent interviews 2023

"Art Block opens doors in terms of creativity." *Parent interviews 2023*

Art Block provides the physical space to store and use good quality art materials which many children don't have at home. A survey of local residents, conducted in 2021, found that parents find it difficult to do creative and craft activities in small flats where many Art Block attendees live. This sentiment was shared in many interviews we conducted with parents in 2022 and 2023.

"[her child was] able to utilise things he wouldn't otherwise be able to."

Family interviews 2022

"It's called Art Block because there's the most art here."

Carousel activity 2023

Combining the three mechanisms mentioned above together with a staff ethos (passed on from previous iterations of SLG's art and play programmes) of minimal rules, has created an environment very different to school or home; a space that allows children to explore their freedom. For many children who attend, Art Block is the buffer time and space between school and returning home to do homework, where they have freedom and fun. Children and parents in the family interviews described Art Block as a space in which they can express themselves in ways not possible in other spaces. Being able to write on the walls was seen as emblematic of the Art Block ethos.

"The rules are not as strict as a school club. Art Block has a wide range of resources to use. The room is bigger than arts rooms at school, which allows different areas to do different things whereas at school you are focused on just one thing."

Group family interview 2021

A new theme which emerged in our most recent evaluation was that many parents stated that they find it hard to limit the amount of time their children spend on devices with screens (ie "screen-time"). However, Art Block has created a space, both indoors and outdoors, for children to get away from all electronics and screen-time, and express themselves in more physical, creative ways.

"Art Block is a space where children can get away from technology and has really helped with screen-time management." Parent interview 2023

Finding 3

Whilst the happiness of children is difficult to measure, it is clear from all our interviews with parents, discussions with children, and our own observations, that those who attend are happy whilst at Art Block.

Whilst the decision to send children to Art Block is ultimately down to the parents, a key reason why so many parents are eager to send their child there is simply due to how much children enjoy being there.

"I like to be creative and do new projects and meet other kids"

Family interviews 2022

"Art Block is always fun!" *Family interviews 2022*

The Art & Play team also collected testimonials from the children on an open text box on the register, probing their motivations for attending. Typical responses from the past three years to this were: "Playing games", "Playing outside", "Meeting up with friends", "Making things", "To do fun and creative things".



Art Block Session, 2024

Objective 2

Children and families will feel their neighbourhood is safer

Finding 1

The Open Plan programme has helped to build a feeling of belonging and trust within the community – despite ongoing unrelated and external factors which challenge local residents' general feelings of safety in their neighbourhood. This was a sentiment expressed both by Art Block users, as well as those attending the Open Plan public events. This also means that despite parents' concerns about the safety of the area generally, they have somewhere they do consider safe, where they can confidently send their children.

Art Block is somewhere that parents believe is safe. This is facilitated by the trust and confidence that parents have in staff, particularly when supervising outdoor activities. To the majority of parents we have spoken to, Sceaux Gardens' outdoor space is not deemed safe, particularly for younger children to use unsupervised. As the majority of families who attend Art Block do not have access to private gardens, Art Block is one of the few times when many children can safely play outside without their parents.

"We don't have access to a garden [at home], and this allows him to be free and creative, and to run outside." *Family interviews 2022*

"He loves the outdoor space, but without Art Block, he wouldn't use it.... I wouldn't let him as I wouldn't feel safe without Art Block there supervising."

Parent interview 2023

The location of Art Block is also a contributing factor to explain why parents trust Art Block. For many parents living in the vicinity of Sceaux Gardens, they feel reassured by their children being so close to their home.

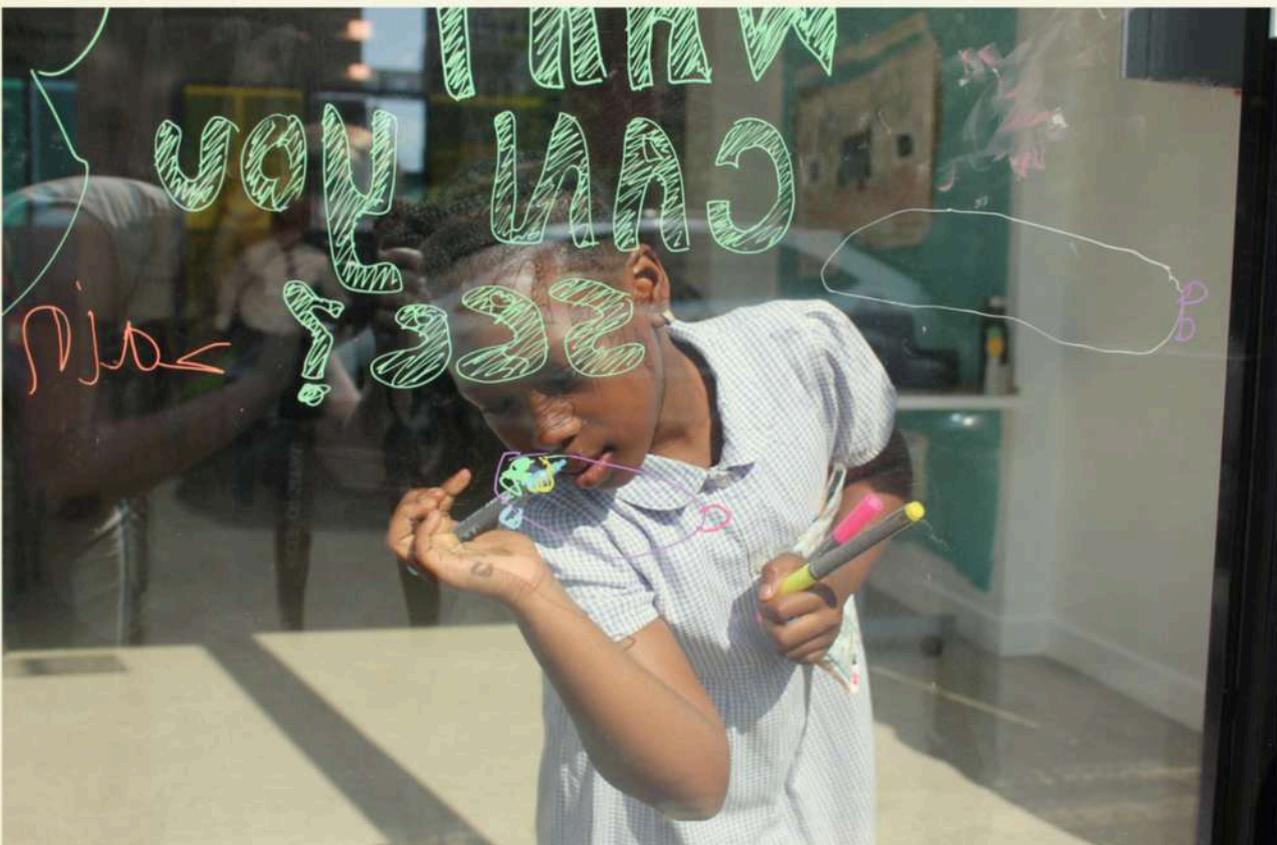
"The location means I can see Art Block from my window – I can see the staff interacting with the children. If they are outside, I can see there is always someone there. It does make the place safer. Because the kids are in AB not out and about."

Family interviews 2022

Attendees at events related to Open Plan public art commissions shared similar sentiments to Art Block users. Residents believe these events have created a space for the community to come together – and therefore some residents do feel a “sense of community building” through these events – despite more general concerns about the physical security of the neighbourhood.



Pelican Summer Party, 2021. Photo: Sam Nightingale



KNEED, Art Block Ecologies, 2024

Objective 3

Increasing local young people's aspirations for the future through traineeships opportunities and working at Art Block.

Our three previous evaluations have focused mainly on the effects of Open Plan on Art Block users and community event participants. However, for this summative report we also wanted to explore the effects on the individuals who work on Open Plan either as part of the SLG traineeship programme or as Art & Play team members.

We conducted two group interviews, with three current Art & Play team members, four former trainees, and one current trainee.

Finding 1

The Open Plan Programme has given employment opportunities to those local to the gallery. All eight individuals we interviewed were based in south London at the time of applying to the gallery. Six out of eight individuals also grew up in south London, with most having some familiarity with SLG prior to working there. Being local to the gallery was a key motivator for applying for a role there.

To many, working locally was a fundamental reason for applying as it gave an opportunity to give back to the community they grew up in. Those we spoke to gave details of how the Open Plan programme seemed to them to have been created to serve the community. This is something which was believed to be unique to the SLG, with a consensus among participants that other jobs are often unable to serve the local community as successfully as the roles with SLG. These sentiments are also reflected in the data, where it is clear that Art Block is almost exclusively serving the Sceaux Garden and nearby estates.

"I felt like I should apply for a role in a community that I've lived and worked and walked in for a substantial period of my life". *Former trainee*

"I wanted to work in a community I have lived in and I know".
Art & Play team member

Finding 2

Working as a trainee and as an Art & Play assistant has increased future aspirations for young people involved. This has either been through continuing their development at the gallery, or through support in careers elsewhere. The traineeship programme and working in the Art & Play team has also provided a platform and confidence for more young people to find a career in the creative industry.

Two out of four of the former trainees we spoke to have continued to work at the gallery and have both progressed to more senior roles - programme managers/coordinators. These individuals spoke about the increased confidence they gained through working on the traineeship programme – with the broad nature of the role allowing them to explore the array of services the gallery offers.

“It has definitely helped my confidence. I used to be extremely shy and hated speaking in public...but now I have to speak in large groups of people and deliver information. And that’s something that I never thought I would be comfortable doing but it’s become a lot easier now. I have had really supportive managers here and people who encouraged me...and my confidence has definitely grown”.

Former trainee

The two trainees who no longer work at the gallery spoke about the opportunities that working at SLG has created for them. Both individuals now work as freelance artists and administrators and stated that their time at SLG has and continues to help their current work. This sentiment was also shared by current Art & Play team members, who also work in roles outside of the gallery. Working at the gallery has opened doors in terms of exposure to world class artists and their practices, and also allowed for networking opportunities through building relationships with the gallery and their affiliations to artists and curators.

“It [working as a trainee] presented an opportunity to expand my network of artists and researchers and helps get your foot in the door [of the creative industry]. There is also an opportunity to learn from people who are scholars and professionals”.

Former trainee

Careers in the creative industries are highly competitive but working at SLG as a trainee or an Art & Play team member has allowed local young people the opportunity to work in a creative environment. This has helped give confidence that this is indeed the right career path for them and has given clarity that a career in the creative sector is what they want.

“I’ve never been able to work in an art space before because it’s so hard to get into. Fortunately, I was able to do that here, and I’m so happy for it”.

Art & Play team member

The traineeship programme and working as an Art & Play team member has taught vital skills (e.g. administrative tasks, workshop facilitation) and a better understanding of the workings of a gallery. During interviews with all previous trainees, they spoke about the unique nature of a role at SLG – with it offering a balance between arts administration and an opportunity to use their creative skills.

“When I read the job application, it felt like a really nice balance of perhaps slightly more office work that teach skills you need to develop in any role and getting those afternoons working directly with children.” *Former trainee*

“You learn the analytical data side... which you don’t learn about until you are working in a gallery and doing it yourself.” *Former trainee*



Rumpus Room, Playing for the Future, 2021. Photo: Andy Stagg

Objective 4

Creating a sense of pride in the neighbourhood and creating greater familiarity with artists and arts practice.

Finding 1

Open Plan has helped to increase familiarity with artists and arts practice, through commissioning annual public events.

SLG have delivered one commission a year on the Pelican estate. These commissions are often with artists who specialise in engaging and working collaboratively with the community.

During the 2023 commission by Seyi Adelekun *The Diaspora Garden: Watering Connections* workshops, residents were invited to explore herbalism, craft and storytelling. To many residents, this was the first time they had access to a garden and learnt more about gardening as well as Seyi's artistic practice. Some residents became inspired by Seyi's practice centred around nature, and were keen for the space to remain there, even after the commission was complete.



Finding 2

Open Plan has made a contribution to a sense of pride within the community, primarily through creating a space for residents to come together.

Data collected over the previous three years suggests that Open Plan events have helped to create a sense of community togetherness. These events offer a safe and welcoming place for the community to come together, and open to residents of all ages.

"[these events] give us a chance to get to know more people in the estate. It creates a place for the community to come together."

Diaspora Garden attendee 2023

Parents of Art Block attendees also told us how Art Block has acted as a catalyst for socialising between neighbours. During family interviews in 2022, parents explained that even though they had lived on the Sceaux Gardens estate for years, they still knew very few neighbours. However, since coming to Art Block, they became friends with other parents of other Art Block attendees. This has been a sentiment shared by many Art Block users.

"We built friendships through the kids, we got to meet different people in the area, people we didn't know before. We had lived here for a while but didn't know many people." *Family interview 2022*



Art Block Session, 2024

LEARNING AND RECOMMENDATIONS FOR OTHER ORGANISATIONS

Approach to evaluation

Developing an inquiry mindset in staff. During our three years of being the SLG's Open Plan evaluation partner, our aim was not only to carry out our annual evaluations, but also embed the Art & Play team within the evaluation approach. The data tools, seen in appendix B, were co-produced with staff, who were then responsible for carrying out some of the data collection. After each annual review, the tools were assessed by us and SLG staff, to ensure they were feasible and collecting useful information. Staff have found this model of co-produced evaluation has helped them think more critically about their theory of change, and more creatively about the kinds of evidence they can gather to understand and evolve the programme.

Funding periods

Long funding periods. The Freelands Foundation's funding of Open Plan has been over an eight-year period (2016-2024), the past three years of which we have been involved with. This has allowed SLG staff to constantly learn about Open Plan during the process and from previous years, and ultimately better deliver the desired outcomes. An example of learning during the process could be seen with the chosen commission artists. SLG initially opted for a mix between studio and socially engaged artists, but after feedback from artists and the community, learnt that socially engaged artists were better placed for meeting the objectives of Open Plan.

Therefore, in subsequent years, SLG opted for more socially engaged artists to lead commissions. In the final year staff have selected artists through an open call, with children attending Art Block involved in the decision making. This demonstrates how long-term funding has allowed SLG staff to develop a process of learning, reflection, and adaptation, with enough time to have impact.

Service delivery

Trained staff effective at dealing with a range of children with different needs.

Throughout our evaluations, parents often spoke about how Art Block has shared the burden with them of the management of their child's behaviour. This was especially the case with for parents of neurodivergent children, who told us that Art Block staff have the right skills and appropriate techniques to deal with them. These skills include listening and boundary-setting, which have been honed through training on disability and autism awareness and safeguarding. As a result, parents have said that their children tend to be calmer after Art Block, and have noticed behavioural changes in their children. As a result, parents are less stressed with greater wellbeing.

The multiple wellbeing, financial, and practical benefits of providing free childcare in low-income communities. The intentions of SLG in launching Open Plan were as much about access to arts and creativity, as about bringing broader benefits to the local neighbourhood. But in practical terms the benefits of an arts organisation providing high-quality, free childcare, in a setting and with staff who parents trust, provides incredibly valuable help in terms of wellbeing, household financial pressures, and practical help.

Staff creativity and availability of artistic materials. Children and parents have often told us about how the staff often serve as role models for the children who attend. In many circumstances, the creativity of staff has inspired children to be more artistic. For example, children have told us of creations they have made at Art Block, home and school after seeing staff make similar pieces. Staff have also been able to teach children new artistic methods, using materials they would not ordinarily have access to.

The use of indoor and outdoor space. Art Block has been able to utilise indoor and outdoor spaces, meaning they can accommodate children's different needs and types of play. The ability to have calmer indoor sessions, mixed with more active outdoor sessions often leads to happier children, who are able to use Art Block as a buffer time between school and returning home.

Giving decision making powers to children. Art Block staff are ultimately accountable for the quality and safety of the activities which take place, but children and parents have said that the staff will often listen to the children on the type of activity chosen. For the 2022 artist commission with Something & Son, the artists practiced "radical trust" which meant children were given almost total freedom over how the commission money was spent (in the end they chose to spend the money setting-up a temporary swimming pool inside Art Block for a one-day pool party). This showcased the strategic aims of Open Plan in a real-life participatory arts experience – leading to a highly memorable indoor swimming pool party for the children which was still being talked about by the children a year later.



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SLG