

CentreStage Community Arts – supporting positive change through local engagement and connection based activities.



How-to Guide

This guide offers more detailed information and advice for those who may be interested in adopting or adapting the initiative in their local area.

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CentreStage Community Arts – supporting positive change through local engagement and connection based activities.



Title	CentreStage Community Arts – supporting positive change through local engagement and connection based activities.
Lead Organisation	CentreStage.
All organisations	CentreStage's partners are: Ayrshire Gymnastics. Barclays. Beautiful Inside & Out. Community Housing Advocacy Project. CoreFit. East Ayrshire Federation of Tenants & Residents. Flexible Childcare Services Scotland. Joe Wood's Ceilings. Kinship Carers. Leanne Cairns Millinery. Little Arts School. Maureen McFarlane Therapy. National Autistic Society Scotland. NEST. OCCAM. Quarriers. Ross Cooney Music Tuition. Skills Development Scotland. Vibrant Communities – English for Speakers of Other Languages. Victim Support Scotland. We Make Kilmarnock. Who Cares? Scotland. WorkingRite. Weekly visitors include: AA Psychology Services.

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	Ayrshire College. Ayrshire Film Co. Breakthrough Fellowship. Buzzworks. Imagine Care. Federation Small Business. Kilmarnock Business Association. Kilmarnock History Group. Men's Dementia Group. Harbour Ayrshire / Thrive. EA Housing Advocacy Support. Music Tuition. NHS Ayrshire & Arran. Sight Veteran Scotland. Social Security Scotland. Tai Chi class providers.
Category	Promising.
Poverty Impact	Prevention Mitigation Raising awareness.

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Initial Idea

Who had the initial idea?	Ex-secondary school music teachers; Fiona McKenzie and Paul Mathieson from Grange Academy.	
How did the idea for the project come about?		
Fiona McKenzie and Paul Mathieson left their teaching jobs to create an organisation that used the arts to provide life-changing social benefits for everyone, regardless of their background. The founders started without funding, converting a commercial warehouse in Kilmarnock into CentreStage.		
Were plans informed by any published reports / papers / research evidence or practice from elsewhere?	No	
The project was informed by working knowledge of Fiona and Paul. Working in a secondary school they identified a gap in the normative style of current educational service provision related to non-diversity of educational provision. Feeling frustrated by the rigidity of the curriculum offered they applied their working knowledge to the creation of a project which catered to the individual needs of its clients, rather than the normative collective educational needs model employed in school settings.		
Was anyone else involved in developing the initial idea of the project?	No	
Were those with lived experience of poverty involved in developing the initial idea of the project?	No	
Was funding required to support the development of the initial idea of the project?	No	

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Were specific resources – other than funding - needed when developing the initial idea of the project?		Yes
Staff/Volunteer Time	No staff were employed, only friends, family and volunteers from the community were involved.	
Facilities / Workspace	An old tyre warehouse was refurbished.	
Equipment	Musical instruments and computers.	
Local Knowledge	When CentreStage started, there was a lack of community groups offering cultural activities in East Ayrshire. The founders identified this as a gap in current service provision and built CentreStage around that gap in service provision, and their working knowledge and experiences in teaching the arts.	
Food and Drink	N/A	
Did any barriers have to be overcome when developing the initial idea of the project?		Yes
Finding the right place and securing financial resources to make the project happen in addition to sustaining it afterwards, was difficult.		
Did anything in particular enable development of the initial idea of the project?		Yes
The determination, vision, and strength of the founders, Fiona and Paul.		
How long did it take between having the initial idea and starting the project?	Not specified at this point in time.	
Who made the decision to introduce the project?	Mutual agreement between Fiona and Paul.	

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Early Development

Was there a pilot project or feasibility study or test of change?	No
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Accessing the Service and Engaging with Service Users

Are potential users referred to your Service.?	Yes
Referrals from local organisations and partners inclusive of the NHS, GP clinics, community link workers, Christians Against Poverty, and local schools.	
Are there ways, other than referral, that are used to make potential users aware of your Service.?	Yes
Word of mouth.	
What is the most common way through which users typically access your Service.?	
Word of mouth.	
Do you take steps to keep in touch / reach out to users?	No
Services users often move on to the next stage of their lives without keeping in touch.	

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Working with People with Lived Experience of Poverty

Are those with lived experience of poverty involved in <u>delivering</u> the project?	No
CentreStage concentrates on continuous improvement, constantly collecting feedback from the community and adapting its services to service user needs.	
Are people with lived experience of poverty involved in <u>managing</u> the project or in project <u>governance</u> ?	No
Are people with lived experience of poverty involved <u>in any other aspect</u> of the project?	Unknown
Data on poverty experience of staff or service users is not collected so, this cannot be answered.	

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Leadership, Governance and Partnership Working

Who is responsible for managing the project?	
Board of Trustees with Fiona McKenzie as the Chief Executive Officer, and a senior leadership team.	
Is this the only responsibility of the person managing the project?	Yes
What proportion of the manager's overall workload is given over to this project?	
Is there a Project Steering or Advisory Group?	
Who is involved?	There are two subcommittees: Audit, and Risk.
How does it work?	The subcommittees are chaired by the Board members. Papers are prepared by the staff members.
Are any other governance arrangements in place to review strategy and performance?	Yes
CentreStage has governance arrangements in place to oversee strategy and organisational performance: Board subcommittees provide oversight of organisational policies, which are reviewed and updated annually. This involves a Board of Trustees which comprises individuals from a range of sectors who bring their individual, varied expertise and knowledge the charity. Additionally, as CentreStage does not have union representation, it has established the "CentreStage Voice" staff forum, comprising representatives from all departments (quarterly meetings). This provides a mechanism for staff consultation on issues affecting the workforce, such as changes to National Insurance contributions, with key feedback and recommendations communicated to the Board of Trustees.	

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Links to Wider Policies, Strategies and Statutory Requirements

To the best of your knowledge, is the project aligned with national and/or local anti-poverty strategies and priorities (e.g., local authority or health board priorities)?	Yes
CentreStage's work is closely aligned with both local and national anti-poverty strategies and priorities. At a local level, CentreStage's contribution is recognised within East Ayrshire Council's Anti-Poverty and Inequality Strategy with the organisation actively participating in local Challenge Poverty Week activities. At a national level, CentreStage has developed a strong relationship with the Scottish Government. The First Minister, John Swinney, visited CentreStage in 2024 with several Scottish Government Directorate Leads also visiting. Scotland's First Minister visited in March 2026 to launch the Government's Tackling Child Poverty Action Plan. CentreStage is also recognised as a national voice, helping to influence the development of a whole family support approach as set out within the Tackling Child Poverty Action Plan.	
In your opinion, has the project benefitted from being part of this anti-poverty strategy?	Yes
CentreStage benefited from being a partner with the Hunter Foundation and Scottish Government and is now recognised as a key community partner in national efforts to tackle inequality and child poverty.	
Is the project part of any other strategy?	Yes
CentreStage's approach is recognised beyond East Ayrshire as an example of good practice in tackling poverty through a whole-family support approach. Its impact is evident across Scotland, particularly in Clackmannanshire, where learning from the Social Innovation Partnership has helped to shape local delivery in areas facing similar social challenges. Representatives from Clackmannanshire visited CentreStage and used the knowledge obtained from the visit to adapt its family-centred tackling poverty model. The collaborative learning generated through the Social Innovation Partnership has also informed the Scottish Government's Whole Family Wellbeing approach, supporting the development of early intervention and preventative service related to child poverty.	

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In your opinion, has the project benefitted from being part of this anti-poverty strategy?

Yes

CentreStage's involvement with National Funding Initiatives – Social Innovation Partnership, has allowed it to align better with poverty related government priorities. This has resulted in the charity being better able to demonstrate a measurable community impact, allowing it to secure both political backing and financial investment.

Is the project delivering a service that is a statutory commitment?

No

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Funding

Is funding used to support the work?		Yes
Has external funding been secured to support the work?		Yes
Which organisation provided funding?	• William Grant. • Scottish Government. • East Ayrshire Council. • Robertson Trust. • National Lottery. • Baillie Gifford. • RS McDonald. • Screen Scotland. • Film Hub Scotland. • Theatre Improvement Scheme / Wolfson Foundation. • SIP.	
What was the specific funding stream/source/scheme?	Various sources of funding including grants.	
How much funding was secured?	Various sources of funding including grants.	
For how long has funding been secured?	The funding target for 2025 was £800,000, it is not specified if this was met at this point in time.	
Is future funding from the same external source a possibility?		Yes

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Is future funding dependent on achieving pre-agreed outcomes or outputs?		Yes
What are these conditions?	Future funding from the same external sources is a possibility and, in many cases, is dependent on demonstrating pre-agreed outcomes and impact. CentreStage's strategic approach is to build long-term relationships with funders and secure multi-year funding wherever possible. Participation in the Social Innovation Partnership (SIP) has strengthened these relationships, helping CentreStage secure longer-term funding and infrastructure support, particularly through the Scottish Government. This has also created opportunities to access Public Sector Reform funding and reduce reliance on short-term third sector interface funding. In addition to external funding, CentreStage continues to strengthen its financial sustainability by building strategic reserves through its commercial income streams.	
Has a specific sum been secured from your organisation to support this work?		No
Is future funding from your organisation a possibility?		N/A
Is future funding dependent on achieving pre-agreed outcomes or outputs?		
What are these conditions?		
What are the future - longer-term - prospects for this work if existing funding sources were no longer available?		
Not specified.		

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Staffing and Resources

Do existing staff from your organisation contribute toward the work of this project?		Yes
Role: Not specified.		
Are existing staff from the host organisation paid extra (for example, taking on extra hours) to contribute toward the work of this project?		No
Extra hours worked: Not specified.		
Have additional paid staff been employed to contribute toward the work of this project?		No
Are volunteers involved in delivering the project??		Yes
Role: CentreStage was supported by over 100 volunteers in 2025 who were involved in a variety of activities, such as administration, café and kitchen, gardening, classes, and events.		
Are specific resources – other than staff/volunteer time and money - needed to support the delivery of the project?		Yes
Facilities / Workspace	The Community hub, the building of the former Kilmarnock Academy, 15 Elmbank Drive, Kilmarnock, KA1 3AE	
Equipment	Not specified.	
Local Knowledge	Knowledge of the needs of the local community is essential.	
Food and Drink	N/A	
Are any of the resources needed to deliver the project provided in-kind, rather than budgeted from project funds?		No
Who provides:		
Were new IT systems, additional software, or upgrades existing software (databases, Apps) required to deliver this project?		No

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Was additional training – for staff or volunteers - required to deliver this project?

Yes

Staff and volunteers engage in a wide range of activities, from arts education and youth outreach to food distribution and wellbeing support. Training ensures they are equipped to handle these varied tasks with professionalism and care.

CentreStage works with vulnerable groups including children, older adults and people with disabilities. Training in safeguarding, equality and trauma-informed practice is crucial to protect participants and uphold ethical standards.

Volunteers are welcomed into a structured programme which includes induction, mentoring and ongoing learning. This helps them to grow as individuals whilst contributing meaningfully to the community.

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Monitoring and Evaluation

Do you – or other organisations - collect data on the project for monitoring or evaluation purposes?		Yes
Is there baseline data to describe what things were like before the start of the project?		No
Is the difference that the project is making measured or monitored by the host organisation?		Yes
Who within the host organisation is responsible for monitoring the impact of the project	Cailean Tait.	
How often is the impact of the project monitored or measured by the host organisation	Annually.	
What methods, techniques or strategies are used by the host organisation to impact of the project	Regular participant surveys.	
What information is collected by the host organisation about the project?		
Number of users	Yes	
Profile of users	Yes	
Experience of users	Yes	
Outcomes for users	Yes. Questionnaires and user satisfaction surveys record this.	
Anything else	Yes	
Videos of clients experiences and stories are collected. The Warwick-Edinburgh Mental Wellbeing Scale (WEMWBS) is also utilised.		

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Has the data that has been collected by the host organisation been used to adapt the way the project works?		Yes
The data collected from the participants is analysed to ascertain what is working well and what is not, and then used to adapt practice.		
Has an external organisation been employed to formally evaluate the project?		No
Who conducted the evaluation	Some researchers have studied CentreStage's activities, but no organisations have been employed to formally evaluate its work. However, this is something we are keen to apply to the operation in the near future.	
Details of the evaluation	What Works Scotland https://whatworksscotland.ac.uk/wp-content/uploads/2017/01/FunFoodFolkCentreStageResearchSummary.pdf IRISS https://www.iriss.org.uk/resources/case-studies/centrestage	
What were the key findings from the evaluation	Not sepcified.	
Has the data that has been collected from this evaluation been used to adapt the way the project works?		No
Is there an intention to employ an external organisation to evaluate the impact of the project in the future?		Yes
Is there an intention to undertake your own formal evaluation in the future to estimate the impact of the project?		Yes

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Impact

To what extent have the aims of the project been achieved?		Making progress towards meeting aims.
What difference has the project made? CentreStage continues to show high indicators within its work, with 97% of users reporting increased confidence, 90% report making new connections, and 93% reporting improved mental health. The data collected shows that CentreStage helps people build resilience, feel hopeful (one of CentreStage's core values), be able to help themselves, and work with the services available to improve employability and reduce poverty. CentreStage's work has also supported participants to access better housing, enhance individual well-being, and strengthen their financial management skills.		
Have conditions or demand changed since the project was introduced?		Yes
The demand for CentreStage's services and support has increased. It has become a challenge to meet those demands.		
Has the project had the capacity to meet these changing conditions and demand?		Yes
The demand for CentreStage's services and support has increased. It has become a challenge to meet those demands.		
Has the project changed through time?		Yes
What changed	CentreStage constantly adapts and changes to meet the local demand, employing an innovative approach to tackling poverty. The number of partners has increased, and the variety of activities have change to meet regional demand.	
Why has it changed	To meet the needs of local population.	
Has the project had any unexpected or unintended outcomes?		No

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In your opinion, is the project having an impact on tackling poverty?

Yes

CentreStage is having a significant impact on tackling poverty by addressing not only financial hardship, but also the social isolation, low confidence and reduced opportunities that often accompany it.

It had done this through the adoption of a holistic approach, using art and community engagement to help clients:

- Build confidence and life goals.
- Develop a community identity.
- Access pathways into education, employment and wider support.

Through initiatives such as its youth theatre programmes, young people at risk of school exclusion are re-engaged in learning, contributing to a reduction in the poverty-related attainment gap.

The impact of this approach has been recognised nationally. During Challenge Poverty Week 2024, First Minister John Swinney visited CentreStage and praised its contribution to tackling child poverty and inequality. He returned in March 2026 to launch the Scottish Government's Tackling Child Poverty Action Plan, highlighting CentreStage's work as an example of the benefits of collaboration and cross-sector partnership.

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Learning from Experience

What is working well?	
The holistic nature and diversity of the project had enabled the project to meet not just community, but individual needs.	
What, if anything, is working less well?	
Not specified at this point in time.	
What are the key learning points that you'd like to share with other practitioners?	
• Do not underestimate the importance of community. Creating opportunities for people to come together in a safe, non-stigmatising environment builds resilience, strengthens social connections and can reduce reliance on public services. • Create safe, welcoming and genuinely inclusive spaces where everyone feels valued and able to access support with dignity. • Tackle poverty holistically by addressing social isolation, confidence and wellbeing alongside financial hardship. • Build strong cross-sector partnerships to provide joined-up support and improve outcomes for individuals and families.	
Are there plans to develop or expand the project in the future?	Yes
Not specified.	
How easily do you think this project could be replicated in another setting?	
Proven that it can be adapted as CentreStage has established a model that can be replicated, and has worked with partners previously to share the model through collaboration and adoption.	

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