

**INSPIRE
YOUTH
ARTS**



Able Orchestra 2024-2026 Evaluation Summary

Image: Fletcher's Theatre, Nottingham. 7 musicians are centre stage, with violins, keyboard and CMPSRs. The Able Orchestra logo with a purple background is projected on a large screen behind the stage. Audience members are sitting in seats in front of the stage area.



"When I came across Able Orchestra, that was really exciting for me, because it was the first time I had been able to feel properly involved."

I was surrounded by music, but often felt, honestly, quite sad that I couldn't properly participate, so Able Orchestra has given me an amazing way to do that. The inclusion and the community, where I don't feel like I need to fight to be included – it's hard to do justice to how much it has meant to me. I think it's changed my life, really giving me a completely unique opportunity."

(Athena Troke – AO Pioneer)

"Able Orchestra places disabled and neurodivergent young people at the very heart of high-quality, creative music-making. I have seen firsthand how AO removes barriers through technology and collaboration, giving young people genuine ownership of their music and a platform to express themselves with confidence. For me, the greatest value lies in those moments where participants realise they are not only included but celebrated as artists in their own right."

AO also has a wider impact: it raises aspirations across schools and communities, shows what is possible when inclusion is central to artistic practice, and provides a model that can influence how music education develops in Nottinghamshire. In short, it transforms lives while also shaping the sector."

(Steering group partner)

Image: Athena - A young female (wheelchair user) with long hair and purple jacket playing CMPSR and smiling.

Introducing Able Orchestra



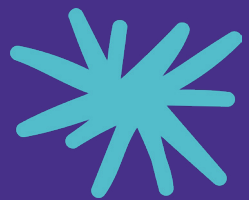
Able Orchestra (AO) is a programme of inclusive music and digital art opportunities for disabled and neurodivergent young people aged 11 to 25 from Nottinghamshire. AO is produced by Inspire Youth Arts (IYA) which is part of Inspire: Culture, Learning and Libraries. First established in 2015 as an education project in a SEND school, AO has developed into an inclusive programme that leads innovative musical collaborations, gives high-profile performances, and supports disabled young musicians into leadership roles.

AO has recently concluded an eighteen-month period of development from August 2024 to March 2026, supported by an Arts Council England (ACE) National Lottery Project Grant of National Significance which involved establishing an AO North ensemble that meets in Mansfield (serving young people in the north of the county), launching a new AO South ensemble to extend provision to young people in the south of the county, transitioning an established group for visually impaired young musicians at The Old Library (TOL) recording studio into an AO group, and co-ordinating AO Pioneers – a youth leadership programme for disabled musicians aged 18 to 25.

Taster sessions and workshops in education and community settings aimed to engage people new to AO. Additionally, AO expanded beyond music making and incorporated digital visual arts into the groups' regular creative activities. Whilst the ensembles, groups and the Pioneer programme are all new activity, they build on the established AO work developed through previous AO intensive time-limited projects in schools and colleges, and relationships with partner organisations.

The ensembles meet regularly to create music and digital art together, supported by professional musicians and artists. There is a focus on creating original music collaboratively, using accessible music technology to enable everyone to make music in ways that suit their preferences and access requirements. The AO Pioneers programme also involves individual mentoring and meetings to enable the musicians to influence the programme.

Image: 2 young people playing CMPSR and singing with a microphone. They are wearing yellow Able Orchestra t-shirts.



AO in numbers

372 young people took part in AO activities in some way over eighteen months up to March 2026.



11 regular AO North members

Image: A group of young people wearing yellow Able Orchestra t-shirts on stage performing.



6 regular AO South members

Image: A group of people on stage performing on guitar, and singing. They are wearing black, and yellow Able Orchestra t-shirts.



7 AO Pioneers

Image: A group photo of the AO Pioneers, their artists/mentors and IYA staff smiling. 1 person is holding a guitar.



241 workshops and rehearsal sessions

Image: 2 young people in a classroom. One is calling something out with their hand next to their mouth. The other is playing CMPSR.



Image: a young Able Orchestra participant smiling and gesturing excitedly while seated in his wheelchair.

30 taster workshops involving **292** young people



Image: 7 musicians are centre stage playing. The Able Orchestra logo is projected behind them. Audiences are seated watching.

14 performances to audiences of **1,432** people

Why and how we evaluate

Evaluation helps us to understand what people think of AO – the young people who take part and their families, the music artists and digital artists who support them, and people who work in music education in Nottinghamshire. IYA asked an evaluation specialist to help us gather information for evaluation. This short report is a summary of a longer evaluation report that will help us to improve how IYA supports young disabled musicians and develops inclusive music practice.

The evaluation used several methods to find out what people think: interviews with young people, an online questionnaire for family members, meetings with creative practitioners (music artists and digital artists), and a questionnaire for people who work in music education in Nottinghamshire.

Our evaluator analysed all the information, and summarised what AO achieves and what we have learnt about supporting disabled young people to create music.

Image: 3 people in yellow Able Orchestra t-shirts on stage performing. The person in the front of the image is sitting down and singing into a microphone. The person to the right is playing a blue and white bass guitar.



Our learning

The evaluation aimed to find out if AO met its intended outcomes (the changes it was hoped would occur), what else was important or valuable to people about AO, what learning took place that IYA acted on to refine the programme, and what learning arose relevant to AO's longer-term development and future. There is a lot of information in the full evaluation report – the main points which we think are the most important aspects to share are included here. The quotations give examples of what people told us but are only a selection from the wealth of evidence we gathered.

AO offers greater opportunities for participation

It was an intended outcome that AO provides greater opportunities for participation in music for disabled young people. The feedback from AO members, their parents/carers and the creative practitioners showed that this was successfully achieved.

For one parent, AO was the first out-of-school activity she had found that could accommodate her son's access needs,

"It's the first time I've seen a club that allows inclusion of all descriptions". Whilst her son had always enjoyed listening to music, AO provided the chance to create music for himself. For an AO Pioneer who was already an experienced musician, AO opened up new ways to make music collaboratively which he had not experienced before."

"Sometimes you never know what you're going to get – that's in a good way. And this is why I love it. I enjoy the variety, because you never know what sort of opportunities you're going to get from any given day. I enjoy the collaboration because you get to collaborate with not only other young artists who have additional needs, but the mentoring team."

(Marshall Fairbrother – AO Pioneer)



Image: A performer standing on stage, wearing headphones, holding a guitar and microphone, audience members are sitting in seats, front of the stage area.

Access is well considered - both for creativity and for practicalities of participation

The accessibility and inclusivity of AO is a significant factor in successfully providing greater opportunities. All those who contributed to the evaluation felt that, overall, the IYA team were very good at meeting access needs. There were occasional instances of accessibility not being adequate, but feedback was that the IYA team were open to challenge and receptive to critique about issues of accessibility, and there had been much learning about meeting the access requirements of people with complex disabilities.

There were different aspects to accessibility within AO. Making the creative activities of music and digital art accessible for everyone was achieved in two ways – firstly, by the use of adaptive technology and accessible instruments. The creative practitioners were skilled at finding the right technology for everyone's access needs and preferences, drawing from a range of options such as iPads, laptops, different apps and software, and digital controllers including the CMPSR and Eyegaze technology. One AO Pioneer spoke about how digital technology enabled her to make music:

"I was like, well, I can't play music because I can't pick up a guitar, and I never thought I'd be able to play music on an iPad. So having that given to me, that was like, oh man, I would have never thought you could do that. So, the digital aspect, I think, really kind of set the light bulb moment off in my head."

(Jess Fisher – AO Pioneer)



Image: A female performer (wheelchair user) on stage playing CMPSR. The CMPSR is projected on the screen behind.

The second aspect of accessibility was overcoming practical barriers to participation such as providing transport, creating documents that could be read by a screen reader, and providing a support worker to help with navigating an unfamiliar building. It was evident from the evaluation data there was an ethos amongst the creative practitioners and IYA team of enabling each young person's creativity, by striving to reduce and overcome access barriers. Sometimes finding the right technology for a young person's needs took perseverance and was not straightforward:

"I think everyone's unique and different, and I think it's our role as practitioners to cater for all of that. And sometimes we're successful, and sometimes we're going against the wind."

(AO South Lead Music Artist)

AO members and their parents/carers recognised the endeavour to find what suited each young person best:

"The leaders are really good, bringing different iPad programmes for me to try. Tom [a music leader] has helped me with the music, doing different stuff on the computer. It has really helped me."

(AO North member)



Image: 2 people standing in front of a screen with arrow notation projected behind. The person on the left is playing guitar, the person on the right is smiling and holding a rainmaker instrument.



Image: 2 people, one wheelchair user and one sitting, playing CMPSR and holding a microphone. They are both smiling.

AO supports individual progression - from first encounters to creative careers

Another outcome was to create stronger progression pathways in inclusive music, so that young people can develop their interests and skills in creating music and digital art more easily. There was evidence of AO supporting progression for young people at different stages of their journey.

The new AO South ensemble had members who were relatively new to inclusive music ensembles following a first engagement through the taster sessions. One member had progressed swiftly over a few months from participating in a taster session, to becoming an ensemble member using assistive technology and accessible instruments, to having piano lessons outside of AO and being gifted a keyboard prompted by his AO experiences.

Some AO Pioneers have been part of AO for many years from its initial phase of time-limited intensive projects in schools, and they are now receiving mentoring to support their exploration of creative careers. Through their involvement in planning events and their input into the steering group, Pioneers get to experience 'behind the scenes' of inclusive music ensembles, which is beneficial to their progression. One Pioneer said that *"being a Pioneer looks a bit different for everyone in the group"*, as each person explores their own interests, and opportunities are offered tailored to different people.

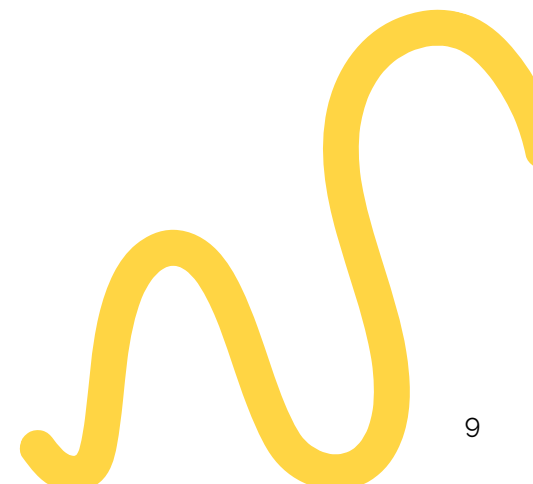
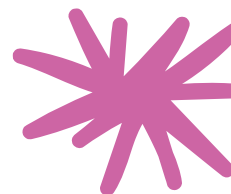
Pioneers were working on a range of career options – from releasing their own music on streaming services, to leading inclusive music workshops, and combining their skills as a computer programmer with creating music.

The creative practitioners stated that the AO Pioneers strand of the programme was important to progression within the overall AO model. Events such as AO 360 that involved performances by all the AO groups, enable younger musicians to experience performances by the Pioneers which gives them something to aspire to:

"I think meeting those young people, showcases to us how we could develop our ensemble into more high quality."

(AO North Lead Music Artist)

Opportunities to collaborate with professional musicians such as Dyskinetic and Orchestra of the Swan were also a valuable aspect of the model that places AO Pioneers on a par with professional musicians, creating work of high artistic quality.



AO fosters a sense of ownership for young people

Many AO members experience a sense of ownership over the music they create and of AO as a group:

"It was the first time I'd ever felt like I had ownership of what I was doing. The quality of music – it wasn't as if we were told we were good and we actually were terrible. The quality that was expected for us to make was amazing. I think that instilled confidence in us".

(Jess Fisher – AO Pioneer)

There was a strong sense of pride for some – in the quality of the music they create and in the leadership role they have taken.

Image: A big group performing on stage, playing Djembe drums. There is a big projection on the screen behind that says 'Happiness' and has large and small circles in different colours.



Strengths of the AO model

There were intended outcomes for IYA to achieve as an organisation. To strengthen the model of AO for its future was an organisational outcome that was successfully accomplished. The evaluation identified several strengths of the model. The variety of ways to engage with AO were considered a strength: taster sessions and school workshops, regular ensembles, leadership opportunities, and regular performance opportunities.

"It's not just like they do one thing, one way of doing Able Orchestra. It's like reaching out in different ways."

(AO Music Artist)

The freelance creative practitioners felt that they were well-supported in their roles by the IYA team, and they appreciated the structure IYA created, which gave them freedom to run sessions which played to their individual styles.

The regular meetings for reflective practice and sharing of skills were appreciated. Feedback from the young people and their families about the high level of skills amongst the creative practitioners to respond and support their needs, shows that the skills of the team are valued and are important to the strength of the model.

The digital innovation that takes place within AO was viewed by the creative practitioners as also important for the success of the model, and opportunities to keep up to date with assistive technology innovation were vital. It was noted by Dyskinetic (Lead Artists and Mentors for AO Pioneers) that the model is bespoke to AO, and has grown from the young people AO are working with and the specialist practitioners working in the local area.

The inclusion of digital visual art to AO was viewed as a valued addition, broadening opportunities for creativity and engagement. The views of stakeholders who work in music education in Nottinghamshire were that AO greatly adds to inclusive music provision in the county and contributes to the strategic functions of the Music Hub, for whom inclusion is a priority.



The importance and value of AO

In addition to the intended outcomes that IYA set out to achieve, there were several themes in the evaluation data that showed other aspects of AO that were important to the young people. Many young people valued the social aspect of AO and the friendships they had made in the groups. AO also supported social interaction within families where parents/carers also took part to support their young people. Parents/carers enjoy the music making and seeing their child enjoying music and achieving.

There was a solidarity and sense of community for AO members through working together with other disabled young people. For some of the Pioneers, it was clear they wished to make societal change for disabled people through their pioneering role in inclusive music practice and digital innovation.

Image: 2 people sitting at a piano. The person on the right is watching the person on the left, who is a wheelchair user, playing with one hand.



Image: A person wearing a cap and a yellow Able Orchestra t-shirt, holding a microphone on stage.



Image: 2 people (wheelchair users)
looking at each other, smiling and
holding hands.



Learning for the longer-term future of AO

The full evaluation report concludes with a few points that IYA could develop in the longer term. The social and community-building benefits of AO for disabled young people and their families are evident. It is suggested that IYA could consider foregrounding the social and community-building aspect of AO in funding applications which may broaden opportunities for support. Careful consideration will be needed to do this in a way that does not diminish the artistic achievements of AO and the ethos of young people being artists first.

The views of young people, their families, creative practitioners and steering group partners about the high quality of AO, gives IYA a confidence in our position as leaders in inclusive music practice. Being at the forefront of digital innovation is a key aspect of AO, therefore there needs to be attention to maintaining this, through professional development and skill sharing for the creative practitioners and exploring new opportunities to collaborate with digital tech companies.

Image: A group of people wearing yellow Able Orchestra t-shirts performing on stage, playing a mixture of guitars, CMPSR and singing into microphones.



What's next for Able Orchestra?

Alongside the evaluation, IYA have sought support from a business development consultant to consider the best organisational structure for sustaining AO in the longer term. The consultant's report was completed in February 2026 and assesses the strengths and implications of different options. IYA are currently reviewing recommendations from the report whilst seeking funding for a short-term bridging year to sustain the AO model until July 2027.

During this period IYA plan to develop a sustainable plan in response to the report's findings. Sustaining AO is a priority for IYA and the steering group, to continue offering high quality inclusive music opportunities for disabled young people across Nottinghamshire.

IYA contact details

inspireculture.org.uk/arts-culture/inspire-youth-arts
inspireculture.org.uk/arts-culture/able-orchestra-ao

Email:

lya@inspireculture.org.uk

Ao@inspireculture.org.uk

Rebecca Streets – Inspire Youth Arts Manager

Megan Dawes – Creative Producer

Call: 01623 644 377

Instagram: @aonotts

Facebook and YouTube: Inspire Youth Arts



Image: An Able Orchestra participant and musician smiling as they make music together on stage.



Image: 2 people sitting at a table playing CMPSR and keyboard. The artist is on the right showing notes on a whiteboard.

Acknowledgements

Thank you to all those who contributed information for the evaluation: AO members and Pioneers, their families, creative practitioners involved and steering group partners.

IYA would like to thank Arts Council England who were the primary funder of AO from 2024 - 2026.

IYA would like to thank all partners involved in AO for their valued contributions and support. This includes; Beatfeet, Digit Music, Dyskinetic Ltd, Fletcher's Theatre, Mansfield Museum, MEHEM (Music Education Hub East Midlands), Music in the Round, Music Mark, Nottingham and Nottinghamshire Music Hub, Orchestra of the Swan, Orchestras Live, Youth Music and all education and community setting partners.

IYA would like to thank all staff, freelancers and support workers within Inspire and across all partnerships for their hard work and commitment throughout the delivery of AO.

And finally, IYA would like to say a huge thank you to all the young people, Pioneers, creative practitioners and families that took part, for all their creative ideas, hard work and support; and would like to congratulate everyone on the brilliant achievements made.

Evaluation commissioned by Inspire Youth Arts.
Evaluation co-ordinated by Dr Nell Farrally (Evaluation Consultant).
Evaluation report completed March 2026.

Image: A person wearing a checked shirt, in a wheelchair, playing CMPSR on stage.



Image: A person wearing an orange jacket, standing, singing into a microphone.



