

Evolve Music

SOUND LAB PLUS

EVALUATION REPORT

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**Report commissioned by
Ben Vleminckx for Evolve Music**



Roper Family Charitable Trust



ABOUT EVOLVE MUSIC AND WPA

Evolve Music is a community music charity based in Somerset which provides accessible music-making opportunities for communities across the South West of England. Evolve was founded by Ben and Beth Vleminckx, who work with experienced freelance music leaders to deliver a programme of regular workshops and creative music-making projects.

Wansdyke Play Association (WPA) is a small voluntary sector organisation which has delivered holiday play activities, community play-rangers, outreach community play sessions, youth clubs and projects since 1993. The charity provides high quality play opportunities to inspire, challenge and empower children, young people and communities to affect positive change.

ABOUT THE SOUND LAB PLUS PILOT PROJECT

Sound Lab Plus was a series of 6 creative music-making workshops for WPA's "Saturday Club", a weekly youth club for young people aged 11 to 18 with additional support needs. Saturday Club members have Special Educational Needs and Disabilities such as Autistic Spectrum Disorder (ASD) and Mental Health needs. Sound Lab Plus took place once a month, between April and October 2018, during the usual Saturday Club, but in an adjoining room to other club activities. Young people could choose to take part in all or part of the music-making, or to do other activities.

The music-making sessions were structured to introduce group improvisation and composition, with informal performance opportunities for the more musically experienced young people, yet were flexible to respond to young people's interests and support needs.

Sound Lab Plus was designed as a time-limited pilot project to introduce Evolve Music's approach to creative composition to the young people, to gain greater understanding of young people's musical interests and needs, and to further develop partnership working with WPA. The project was funded by the Medlock Charitable Trust, Quarter Community Foundation, Roper Family Charitable Trust and St John's Foundation.

PROJECT AIMS AND INTENDED OUTCOMES

Overall project aim: To provide new and additional music making experiences for disabled young people, and those

with additional needs, which supports their wellbeing and personal, social and musical development.

Musical outcomes

- YP have increased opportunities for musical expression and creativity.
- YP learn new musical skills through a wider range of music making than they have previously done.
- YP have a broader range of musical experiences due to opportunities to use assistive music technology and instruments which are new to them.

Social and community outcomes

- YP have enhanced friendships and social interaction due to enjoyable group activities.

Personal outcomes

- YP will have developed their social skills through group activities and musical communication.
- YP have increased confidence to take part in group activities, try new things and share their music with others.
- YP's wellbeing is supported through opportunities for musical expression and creativity, and a supportive environment.

EVALUATION APPROACH AND DESIGN

Evolve Music contracted a freelance Evaluation Consultant, Nell Farrally, to support the project evaluation and monitoring. The Evaluation Consultant's role was to design an evaluation plan and framework, create data collection tools, collect data and evidence, collate and analyse data, and to write this summative evaluation report. The purpose of the report is to assess to what extent the project aims and intended outcomes were met; identify key successes, challenges and learning; and to make recommendations to help Evolve Music to develop Sound Lab Plus beyond a pilot project.

The Evaluation Consultant suggested a collaborative and pragmatic evaluation approach which was outcomes-focussed. An Evaluation Plan and Framework were created at the start of project, which drew on text from Evolve's funding applications to develop the aims and outcomes above. An Outcomes Framework identified outcome indicators and methods of data collection for each outcome. Plans for collecting feedback from young people were intentionally provisional, until the music leaders and

Evaluation Consultant had more understanding of young people's communication and support needs.

EVALUATION EVIDENCE AND DATA

Evaluation data collected and analysed for this report were: attendance records, weekly observation and reflection notes by a music leader, documentation of young people's verbal comments, Evaluation Consultant's notes made during 2 observation visits, notes from 2 meetings between the music leaders and Evaluation Consultant, and an audio-recorded semi-structured

interview with WPA's Youth Development Worker. Parents were invited to respond to a short online survey, although only one chose to do so. The information this one parent gave was so sparse, it has not been included in this report. It is characteristic of ASD to find direct questioning an uncomfortable experience, therefore, after consideration of young people's support needs, it was decided not to directly ask them for feedback, but to use observational methods to interpret their thoughts of the music-making. There are many documented verbal comments from young people which enables their voices to be represented in the evaluation.

SUMMARY OF THE DATA

Over the 6 sessions, a total of 12 individual young people took part (7 female and 5 male). The boxes below offer a summary of data from the different sources listed above which illustrates how the outcomes for young people were met.

Musical outcomes

- YP have increased opportunities for musical expression and creativity.
- YP learn new musical skills through a wider range of music making than they have previously done.
- YP have a broader range of musical experiences due to opportunities to use assistive music technology and instruments which are new to them.

Observational data

WPA's Saturday Club had not previously involved music activities. The staff knew that several of the young people loved music, but they acknowledged that they did not have the musical skills to support them to make music at the club. Sound Lab Plus was a new and additional activity to WPA's existing offer for young people.

There was creativity in how the young people played instruments and explored different techniques, for example, after playing a steel pan with a beater in each hand, M. tried playing a drum with a beater in her right hand and the steel pan with her left hand. C. used instruments in a similar way – playing a cabasa with his hands but attaching bells to his foot. The young people did not stick to obvious and familiar ways of making sound – but explored the instruments with creativity.

The approach to improvisation enabled young people to develop their skills. *“I made a mistake. I played a wrong note, but then – I turned it into a trill! And carried on!”* Young people were introduced to musical concepts which were new to them. A music leader said, *“can we take that and turn it into a waltz?”*. *“How do you turn it into a waltz?”* someone asked. When it was explained, they immediately understood and started improvising in 3/4 time on a thumb piano. Other musical concepts and terminology were introduced, for example, ostinato.

Regarding a broader range of musical experiences, each session involved the music leaders bringing a range of instruments for young people to play – keyboard, drums, steel pans, guitars, melodica, tuned percussion and held-held untuned percussion. The first session involved demonstrating music technology which was available for the young people to use throughout the project – Clip-hit, iPad / Thumbjam and Skoog. Some young people already had a degree of musical skills (one YP was confident at the keyboard, another was an accomplished singer and guitarist) whilst others had less experience. All of them were introduced to new instruments and ways of making music as a group which were new to them. The young person who confidently played the keyboard, both pieces he knew and through improvisation, said at the final session that it had been the first time he had played without sheet music at these sessions. The music

leaders were surprised by this revelation, considering the improvising skills he had been demonstrating during the project.

The music making involved lots of different styles of music yet was very responsive to young people's ideas. For example, one young person started talking about samba and immediately the music leaders brought out the fruit shakers, playing a samba rhythm, and handing out fruit shakers for everyone to join in.

The music leaders' session notes track the progress of individual young people. H.'s musical sensitivity is noted, *"his playing evidenced sensitive listening and phrasing, whilst considering choices of notes, keeping his playing simple, and developing riffs and themes"*. M. was noted as saying, *"I don't have any songs. I'm rubbish at composition"*. Later in the session she created a chord sequence, which others followed, and she said, *"can I use that for my GCSE composition?"*.

None of the young people had physical disabilities, therefore the use of technology in the sessions was not, "assistive".

Youth Development Worker interview

After the 6th session, WPA's Youth Development Worker took part in a semi-structured interview with the Evaluation Consultant which explored his reflections on how the project had (or had not) achieved the outcomes for young people. He spoke about how all the young people had new musical opportunities due to the project. *"They've all had the opportunity to come in and pick up instruments they've never seen or heard of before and the chance to experiment with them.... massive increase in opportunities for access"*. He went on to give more information about how individual young people had responded to the project. *"H. says that he's told at school that he's always "happy", and actually he's been expressing different emotions and different types of playing here, perhaps because he feels he can be a bit more free than maybe in a structured lesson"*. He spoke about another YP who was *"reclusive, very unconfident with instruments, but he's come out and become part of a group and picked up an instrument that he doesn't know and had a go with it"*. The youth worker was aiming to convey that what may appear to be very small actions, such as picking up an unfamiliar instrument, were significant achievements for some young people due to their neurodiversity or health needs. He also recognised that the young people who had more prior musical experiences had *"been able to push themselves by trying new music and playing in new ways and follow their own self-directed interests in the sounds they are making"*.

How the project contrasted and complimented the music young people were doing at school was discussed. The freedom to explore music without having to follow a curriculum was different to music young people do at school, but the youth worker also highlighted that some of the young people were not getting any access to music making at school as they were older teenagers and had chosen to focus on other subjects. He spoke about some young people not engaging with music at school and they had been able *"to have a second try at it"* through the Sound Lab Plus project.

The youth worker felt that there had not been that much technology used in the sessions because things, *"had been shaped by the needs of the group. People have been quite focused on playing instruments rather than exploring what they can do with the sounds when they have made them. They've enjoyed knowing that their music is recorded – some of them have recorded the music themselves on their iPads. They're really keen to share it on the website – they want people to know what they have produced – and they are proud of it"*.

Social and community outcomes

- YP have enhanced friendships and social interaction due to enjoyable group activities.

Observational data

The approach to group improvisation, which was the backbone of the sessions, enabled the young people to work together on a group activity in a way they had not before. There were episodes where the music leaders were clearly supporting interaction between young people, for example, E. said that she wanted to play the keyboard, but another

young person was already playing it. One music leader suggested that they both play it together, which they did. This was a very subtle intervention by the music leader, but it led to more interaction between young people.

At other times the young people were evidently sensitive and caring towards their peers without adult support. H. wanted the others to come into the room so there were more people to make music. Entirely unprompted he said, ***“I’m going to see if I can entice the others in”***. They seemed aware of each other’s emotional needs, explaining to the music leaders if someone was tired or feeling anxious, and needed to take a break from the music making.

Several of the sessions ended with everyone being invited to say something about the music making. The young people’s comments were always positive, including:

I liked joining in with the music – a whole group of my friends.

I just really liked everything – it makes me happy to see my friends happy.

It was very enjoyable.

This demonstrates that the young people did indeed, find the sessions enjoyable. There were observations of friendship and social interaction within the music making session.

In the Youth Development Worker interview, discussions around this outcome was inextricably linked with the personal outcomes, therefore are presented in the personal outcomes box below.

Personal outcomes

- YP will have developed their social skills through group activities and musical communication.
- YP have increased confidence to take part in group activities, try new things and share their music with others.
- YP’s wellbeing is supported through opportunities for musical expression and creativity, and a supportive environment.

Observational data

For most of the young people, they were often confident to join in group activities and have a go at new kinds of music making. The young people themselves were aware of what was taking place:

I couldn’t believe how much we were in sync! It was like we didn’t need words to communicate.

The young person who was a singer and guitarist performed to the others – everyone was appreciative, and she was visibly proud of her peer’s recognition. A lot of laughter and enjoyment was observed by the Evaluator during her visits. The music leaders’ notes document, ***“humorous elements with swanee whistle. There was a sense of relaxing and playfulness”*** during one jamming session. On YP, when playing a melodica for the first time said, ***“It feels so good”***.

Feedback at the end of the sessions included:

I loved that I was able to perform with my friends and get it down (i.e., recorded) – and listen back to it.

I liked that you could do what you wanted [with] rhythm.

The approach to group activities did not, however, meet the needs of all the Saturday Club members. O. particularly could not cope with the group activity yet was really interested in the music making. He came into the room during the break and after the session had ended. He did a small amount of 1-2-1 music making with a music leader – but joining in with a room full of people which included lots of unfamiliar adults was just not possible for him.

Youth Development Worker interview

Regarding the social and personal outcomes, the youth worker said, *“I strongly agree all of these things have been achieved”*. He gave an example about M., who had joined the club on the day of the first Sound Lab Plus session and this had helped her to bond into the group. *“M. has a lot of social anxiety, but music is one of the few areas where she is confident.... It’s given her a platform to share her music with others. We’ve seen the journey she has gone on where each session she’s more and more confident, bringing her own songs and instruments. Today, I’ve seen her teaching other people how to use instruments and helping them. She observed H. feeling quite anxious about leading the beat, so she went over and said, let’s swap, I’ll have the drums and you have this – and the relief on H.’s face!”*.

The youth worker spoke about how the project hadn’t been able to involve some YP who found group situations difficult. *“O. finds loud noises and lots of commotion really stressful. He often closes himself off and finds a small quiet space to sit at the far end of the building where he feels safer. I have seen him go in when they’re packing up or having a break and he wants to pick things up and touch things – they [the music leaders] have been brilliant about encouraging that. They have brought things in to show him in the other room, so it’s been slightly separate. Longer-term, we would have liked to encourage him to take small steps towards becoming more involved, but because of his individual set of needs, walking into the group room with all the noise was one step too far for him”*.

The young people had been, *“collaborating on the songs they have been making. Turn-taking, swapping and sharing instruments, listening to each other, making positive comments about other people’s playing. Those who are more experienced have been sharing skills with those who are less experienced – and sharing between themselves – ‘do you know this song? This is the start of it’ – and sharing with each other. This is really hard for us to achieve in other ways. The young people often parallel play – they’ll do the same activity alongside each other and show the end result, but they don’t collaborate in the process even when they’re sat next to each other. That’s what we’re always working towards. We’ll try things like baking cakes together or compiling a shopping list, but those things only go so far. I think the music evolves.... The project has been great at supporting group activities. The music leaders have been great at having chats with people and encouraging them to join in, bringing them instruments, explain what they’re doing, and giving them time to get used to it. Allowing the young people to dip in and out of the sessions (because their attention span isn’t very long) has worked really well”*.

The interview then explored how WPA might wish to develop further work with Evolve Music. The youth worker was clearly really pleased with how the music leaders had responded to the young people’s needs and the way the activities had been structured. He explicitly said that they would welcome further work if funding were available, and that the pilot had enabled them to understand how things could be developed, in terms of structuring the sessions, involving those who found group situations difficult and how to use the different spaces in the building. A once a month session had worked well for them – often enough for continuity, but not so often that it dominates other club activities and is something which the youth worker would like to explore if there were to be further work.

Although the quality of the project was not explicitly discussed, there were many exchanges during the interview which indicated that WPA staff thought the work was high-quality, in terms of how the music leaders encouraged and supported the young people and responded to their needs.

WERE THE AIMS AND OUTCOMES MET?

Yes – the evaluation evidence shows the majority of intended outcomes were met. Outcomes were not completely met concerning assistive music technology and increasing YP’s confidence. This was not a failing of the project – but rather a limitation of selecting an outcomes-focussed evaluation approach, and of articulating intended outcomes before meeting the young people and understanding their needs. Although the YP did use music technology, it was not “assistive” as no one had physical disabilities. YP took part in group activities, tried new things and shared their music with others, however, for the majority, they were not lacking in confidence to do this, therefore it cannot be said that their confidence increased due to the project. Some young people did not increase their confidence at group activities, as it was not a realistic intended outcome for all young people, within the project structure and timescale of Sound Lab Plus.

CHALLENGES, LEARNING AND THINGS TO IMPROVE

The music leading team adapted the structure of the sessions to better meet the needs of young people as the project progressed. It became evident early in the project that the original structure (a 2 hour session with a break in the middle) meant that young people became interested in other activities during the break and fewer returned for the second part of the session. The music leaders decided to try a different structure of a shorter session with no break which kept young people engaged for longer (for session 6 there was a continuous 1 hour 20 mins of music making before young people became tired and the session naturally drew to a close).

The physical space at the youth club was not ideal being a little small for the activities and the number of young people. Young people who chose not to take part found the noise of the music making a little overwhelming. The Youth Development Worker suggested that for future work, using another room in the same building might be better.

One of music leaders felt that having 3 music leaders working with the number of young people who took part was not necessary – 2 would have been adequate. With 1 or 2 youth club staff present there were sometimes more adults than young people in the room.

There were pros and cons of offering a music making project in a youth club environment where young people could dip in and out of the activities. It was beneficial for some young people to be able to withdraw whenever they needed to, being quite self-aware that they required a break to manage their anxiety. However, the focus of group music making was sometimes lost because of this. The music leaders demonstrated a high level of skill in providing new musical stimuli to keep young people engaged, yet were responsive to their needs and interests.

Due to illness and changes to one music leaders' personal circumstances, there was not a consistent music leading team throughout the project. Although there is no evidence that this impacted on the quality of the music making from the perspective of the young people or WPA, the lack of continuity could have proved challenging, given the support needs of young people with ASD.

CONCLUSION, RECOMMENDATIONS AND WHAT NEXT

Sound Lab Plus fulfilled an unmet need for the young people at WPA's Saturday Club who took part. The young people greatly enjoyed taking part and the project offered music making experiences which they otherwise would not have had. As a short pilot project, Sound Lab Plus can be judged as a success – the aims and majority of outcomes were met, there is more understanding of the young people's support needs and interests, WPA staff were really pleased with what Evolve Music had contributed to the club and were very definite that they would like more.

The pilot project and this report provides good evidence of need for further music making opportunities for these young people. Evolve Music and WPA could work together to identify further funding opportunities which could support a longer-term project, or ongoing music making sessions for the Saturday Club. For any potential future work, the evaluation recommends more consideration of:

- The balance of music leaders and adults to young people. What is the optimal number of musicians, now that there is more knowledge of the club environment and how the young people chose to dip in and out of the sessions?
- How to enable young people who cannot cope with a group activity to take part in music making. Could the session be structured to offer both group activities and time for 1-2-1 music making?

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