



**Evaluation of the Birmingham Early Years Music Consortium
Early Years Music Project
“Sounds of Play” (2019-2021)**

Final Report – Executive Summary (Spring 2022)



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What is Sounds of Play?

The Sounds of Play Project was a two year workforce development project (2019-2021) funded by Youth Music and offering a range of CPD opportunities and initiatives. Led by The Springfield Project, a leading partner of Birmingham Forward Steps (BFS), this project built upon the partnership of 18 early years and music organisations in the city who together make up the Birmingham Early Years Music Consortium (BEYMC).

What did it set out to achieve?

1. To develop a sustainable network of Early Years (EY) music practice between EY services and music organisations across Birmingham through a range of workforce development;
2. To increase music making within EY services across the city;
3. To support EY practitioners and musicians to develop their EY music practice.

How did it do this?

The Project involved EY settings and music organisations from BEYMC working together to promote and develop music provisions and practice. Over the course of the project a range of CPD sessions for EY practitioners, teachers and music leaders was delivered including:

- A project launch event
- 8 mini projects where musicians worked alongside Early Years practitioners (EYP) for 6 half-day sessions
- 8 one-day Musical Development Matters training sessions
- A three-day course on Championing Music in the Early Years
- 5 community of practice sharing sessions
- 9 Consortium partner meetings, formally structured and minuted.
- A 'Musical Experiences & Communication' recorded CPD resource- available July - Oct 2020 created and shared during the height of COVID-19 restrictions
- 40 half-day 'one-off' sessions where musicians worked alongside EYPs in settings with children and families.
- 9 CPD sessions for music partner workforce
- 27 two-hour twilight virtual workshops. Topics of the sessions were:
 - Delivering Group Music Sessions Online
 - Body Percussion
 - Bringing stories to life with music
 - SALT music - communication and music
 - Songs in EY Settings
 - Role of parents in EY Music
 - So You Think You Can't Sing!
 - Planning & developing music provision
 - Music and Creative Physicality
 - Family Music Making a Creative Approach
- 10 x short films for families to access in lockdown and available via our [YouTube channel](#).
- 10 funded places for musicians and EYPs to complete the Certificate for Music Educators in Early Childhood (Level 4 course)

How well did it do?

In terms of project reach:

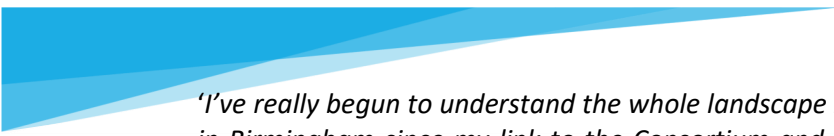
- 816** children and young people reached directly
- 88** group sessions for children and families delivered
- 59** CPD sessions for the workforce
- 449** staff or volunteers (EY and Music) who had training or workforce development through the programme
- 18** consortium partners

This Sounds of Play Project has evaluated its processes and its performance against 5 project outcomes with support of the Centre for Research in Early Childhood (CREC). A series of reports have been produced and below is set out a brief summary of our performance against the 5 project outcomes.

3 illuminative case studies are also included in this report to illuminate the impact of the programme on practice in Birmingham.

Outcome 1: To strengthen the relationship between the local music organisations and early years services across Birmingham.

Despite the momentous challenges caused by COVID-19 and the significant pressures on time and capacity placed on all partners as a result, there has been consistent and continuous engagement by the project partners from beginning to end. Furthermore, it is clear from the data that during this time, the quality of interactions at Consortium meetings has improved as relationships have formed and levels of understanding have grown. Discussions have been increasingly strategic and examples of joint-working (between EY and music) partners have been shared. The result is that partners feel the strengthened relationships are bringing benefits to their organisation. The impact of the bringing together of early years and music partners through the Sounds of Play project is perhaps most readily demonstrated in the case study of a musician and consortium member who told us:



'I've really begun to understand the whole landscape between Early Years and Music in Birmingham since my link to the Consortium and that understanding arose both from the growth in my operations and just becoming more connected and working with these other organisations with similar and sometimes overlapping aims.'


(Case study 3)

Outcome 1 has been met, the challenge for all partners is now how to build on this and maintain the relationships after the end of the project. Work was already underway at the last Consortium meeting (January 2022) suggesting that there is a consensus and commitment to make this happen.

Outcome 2: Increase music making within EY Services across Birmingham.

The project included a range of in-person and online CPD opportunities for early years practitioners across the city which aimed to increase levels of knowledge and understanding of Early Childhood music among practitioners. By investing in staff development, it is hoped that there will be an increased confidence to make music within EY practice thereby increasing its incidence across Birmingham's EY services. The feedback and testimonies are powerful and suggest where CPD has been taken up it has impacted on practice. As a pertinent example, for one nursery school, who started to take up the CPD

sessions when they were delivered virtually during lockdown, music making has increased a great deal as a result of what their staff have accessed. Moreover, music has shifted from being a standalone element of their curriculum to becoming a recurring thread which weaves throughout a whole range of other activities and learning opportunities (case study 2). Other settings told us:




[D]ue to increased staff confidence they actively promote musical opportunities and provide this in the sessions. They have been inspired by the impact and are keen to deliver more musical opportunities and want to focus on this as an area of development.

'I'm also the lead on planning and assessment. We've rearranged [planning and assessment] across the whole of the organisation to incorporate the Sounds of Play and changed it all to 'Play and Learn' three phases: Birth – Under Two; Over Twos; Under Fives. 3 models, so the whole cycle is now redeveloped to include music in speech and language and making sure it is part of the universal offer. It really has shifted us dramatically.' (Case study 1)

Whilst it is not possible to quantify the change in music making within the city as a result of Sounds of Play, the uptake of CPD opportunities by a significant number of early years practitioners and the positive and powerful testimonies of the impact that training has had on practice would certainly suggest that **Outcome 2 has been met.**

Outcome 3: To improve Birmingham EY practitioner's knowledge and understanding of Early Childhood Music.

Evaluation data showed that EY practitioners perceived themselves to have increased knowledge and understanding of Early Childhood Music after attending Sound of Play CPD opportunities. All sessions reported increased knowledge and confidence scores according to pre and post session feedback. Accessing these courses (and over the whole programme almost 600 CPD places were taken up by Early Years practitioners) has had a significant impact on practitioners, with many respondents reporting shifts in practice.



Through my involvement in Sounds of Play I now have more knowledge and ideas to add into the planning of sessions. The music workshops I have completed with Sounds of Play have been the most beneficial training I have received due to how practical they were.

Knowing how music can help with learning and the different pathways it uses has shown me there is more to Music in the early years than just learning colour or numbers. Music helps in all aspects of the EYFS.

Increased staff confidence was a major factor in the development of this shift, as stated, 'Our setting now has a real passion for music and that grabs the children. It gives the staff confidence too to express themselves and we now know you don't have to be a musician or be able to hold a note to enjoy it. (Case Study 2)

Data from across the project, quantitative and qualitative, supports the view that **Outcome 3 has been met.**

Outcome 4: To develop and strengthen the knowledge and understanding of music practitioners about the EYFS and the characteristics of effective learning.

This has perhaps been the hardest outcome to meet; across the project, attendance by music practitioners has been perhaps lower than partners might have hoped for at the outset. The contrast with the high levels of commitment and enthusiasm to the project shared at Consortium level by Music partners (reported against Outcome 1) suggests that capacity and work pressures, possibly exacerbated by the impact of COVID-19, have been the barrier here.

Where music practitioners and music partners have engaged in the programme, and in particular through the CME programme, an increased understanding and level of knowledge is demonstrated, although there is clearly an ongoing need for further support

Progress has definitely been made against Outcome 4 and there is evidence to support the notion that Sounds of Play has developed and strengthened the knowledge and understanding of music practitioners (in regards to the EYFS and the characteristics of effective learning) *where* music practitioners have engaged in the opportunities offered. There is however a need for the BEYM Consortium to consider how it continues to develop and deepen music practitioners' EYFS knowledge in the future, and how it engages more musicians in the process.

Outcome 5: To develop the partners' understanding of what families need to engage in music making in sessions and at home.

Despite differing views by EY and music organisations at the outset, by the end of the project there was a coherence among consortium partners that the most effective way to support families engage in music making activities, in the community, and at home, is through:

- providing **plentiful opportunities for social, inclusive and engaging family musical activities** which are;
- **facilitated by a knowledgeable and confident practitioner** who can raise awareness of the importance of music to children's holistic development; and
- **provide them with the confidence and resources to continue being musical with their child when they go home.**

This is a belief shared by practitioners 'on the ground' albeit they place greatest emphasis on the importance of appropriate support for families. Whilst this might not be unexpected, what is most striking is the shift over the course of the project, from multiple divergent views to this one more coherent belief. Given this noticeable development, **Outcome 5 can be said to have been fully met.**

Case Study 1: An Early Years Organisation

Who are you and how have you been involved in Sounds of Play?

This case study focuses on a national charitable organisation that provides **support to families with children aged 0 to 5** through city Children's Centres. Two senior leads for the organisation, one a senior outreach worker and one an early years lead within the organisation have led the Sounds of Play work within the organisation. Both leaders have undertaken the CME course.

What did you hope to get out of it?

Primarily it was hoped that those involved would develop their skills, expertise and confidence in offering early year's music activities and be able to disseminate this knowledge and skills to the wider organisational team. One said, *'I like to up-skill myself, keep myself fresh and bring something new into our sessions. This programme reinforced all that and widened it and meant I could bring in parents too. And I was able to disseminate it to the rest of the team – I made a presentation across all four of our settings. I made great use of NB's music book.'* It was also felt that the musical activities would add value to the sessions offered to children and families and develop social and communicative interaction between parents, children and the practitioners. In addition, it was hoped that the introduction of live musicians within the sessions would be an attraction to parents and encourage them to attend sessions. As commented, *'Having musicians into our sessions – the way children react, it was just wonderful. The parents were really pleased with it too.'*

What worked well?

Regular meetings with the SoP Programme leader and other senior leads involved in the CME were important and meant that, *'We were all kept in the loop, sharing ideas, supporting each other, sharing resources, we can ask each other questions, we've a WhatsApp group. Responses from other practitioners to what we've created off the back of this have been great.'* The mentoring support for students on the CME was also much appreciated, *'I've had really supportive Mentors. They've gone out of their way to support us – always there, generous of their time. I'm very positive about the external support.'*

What was difficult?

COVID has meant an increased volume of work for the organisation and completing the assessments for the CME has been challenging. Some participants have needed an extension in order to complete the course. As one commented, *'CME has been amazing but it's been a lot of work and the portfolio has stressed out some. However, the experience is more important than the qualification.'* The impact of COVID on the project implementation was clear, as one lead commented, *'There have been glitches, we did have musicians coming in at first and then COVID hit and it stopped. We managed a few sessions in the summer and it then came back and has hindered us again'.* The pandemic also impacted on the sessions the organisation was able to run, with a lot being moved online, which limited reach and impact, as reported, *'We had to have virtual sessions of course and we did communication and sharing stories. A lot of staff from our communities didn't want to be on Face Book. In the summer we came back but outside. Parents were reluctant at first especially about singing and risks of spread and that but we took them outside and brought in the outdoor sounds – birds etc. – the listening.'*

What difference has the project made?

Despite the challenges, the leads reported that the project had impacted significantly on their provision and practice. The training opportunities for staff were very welcomed as providing a boost to morale and motivation during a difficult time. As one commented, *'It's the wealth of training we've been able to access free of charge. Staff come back from sessions excited – we don't have to be singers or tuneful, I'm dreadful but you just need to be informed and confident.'* And another, *'It's just the quality of the music we've developed across the board. It has built confidence, brought in new ways of*

working and ideas with families too. The leaders made a strong case for the link between music and early language development and felt their ability to support children with language delay had been enhanced by their introduction of musical activities, as stated, 'Speech and language delay is a really big issue in Birmingham, we get big messages about that BUT rhyme and rhythm is important in that development. I said widen the curriculum but of course language is important. Movement and music were previously side lined but we now see it links to language. I'm ELKAN trained and exercise is a universal message that the synergies in music and movement can impact on speech development. The project had also made staff more aware of the importance of music in the home and how it had opened up new ways of working with families, as shown in the comment, Early Years doesn't just have to be nursery rhymes. I've had more than 10 parents give me lovely accounts about singing our songs at home with their children – singing whilst shaking out the duvet. We have been asking parents what music they liked – Bob Marley? What do you sing at home? This has led to more understanding and valuing the cultural and social aspects of the families. Yes, we are literally tuning into to home experiences more than we did before and we've changed and adapted our recording to include music. It's part of our assessment portfolio now. The practitioners could also identify some impact on the children who attended the sessions, as stated, I've seen the impact on my own son, his communication and language especially. My son was just 16 months at his first session, sill babbling really. I saw real change in his approach to listening, deep focus. Then sounds of animals- walking through the jungle with the movements that accompany it – so there was physical development, reducing immobility and isolation, and the socialisation of these young children.

What are your future plans for EY music?

The organisation is fully committed to sustaining the SoP approach throughout their organisation. They have now set aside additional funds to continue to bring live musicians into the sessions, as stated, *'We are using our own funds now to keep our links with the musicians. Music had slid down our priorities and we hadn't realised how important it was to these young children. The project had also fundamentally changed the way the organisation is now conducting its planning and assessment procedures, embedding the SoP approach within this, as one lead stated, 'I'm also the lead on planning and assessment. We've rearranged it across the whole of the organisation to incorporate the Sounds of Play and changed it all to 'Play and Learn' three phases: Birth – Under Two; Over Twos; Under Fives. 3 models, so the whole cycle is now redeveloped to include music in speech and language and making sure it is part of the universal offer. It really has shifted us dramatically.'* The leaders also have plans to extend the project more widely in the organisation, *'We are planning to do a music project to share with other groups. Watch not teach is our advice for parents – be responsive and attentive. We've created a fund for the musicians, the live music is really beneficial– children, parents, practitioners sharing the experience.'* The organisation has further music CPD sessions planned for all its staff using the SoP resources to further embed the approach, as shown in the comment, *We have an EY away day planned and when we are out of Plan B our intention is to do a music event across all teams.'*

Case Study 2: An Early Years Setting

Who are you?

This case study focuses on a Maintained Nursery School offering early education and care from birth, with breakfast and after school care activities and holiday provision. It offers workshops for parents and works collaboratively with local Health Visitors and Family Support and other local family services (e.g. Speech and Language) and with other settings through the Early Years Networks.

How have you been involved in Sounds of Play?

The setting has been extensively involved in the training offered by SoP. They particularly appreciated the offer to all EY settings as one stated, *'It was offered to all provision not just NS – half day afternoon sessions- and it was really inclusive of all the sector e.g. play and stay groups, which was great meeting others including staff working with babies and little ones. Another training was whole day workshops with ideas for Speech and Language development. There were lots of ideas and it really raised our awareness and possibilities, that it was much more than just nursery rhymes. You can use loads of other stuff, and culturally different stuff. Another training was music and books – We're going on a Bear Hunt, Hungry Caterpillar – I'm still using all that. Another practitioner commented, 'I did all the training but on Zoom because of COVID and tried things I'd never done like Body Percussion, storytelling through Nursery Rhymes and musical narratives, the evening story and lullaby.'*

What did you hope to get out of it?

This setting has always had an enthusiastic music focus but reported that this was quite traditionally delivered and they wanted to develop this work further and stated, *'Historically we have always had an interest in music but we did it as events with visiting peripatetic musicians and 'the music session' so this was a real development and a natural next step.'*

What worked well for you?

Despite the online delivery of the training through Zoom, it was felt the training sessions worked well and reported, *'I prefer working with people F2F and there were annoying technical difficulties of course – music, rhythm and music is better not in a Zoom box, but it worked. The Opera training was simply brilliant.'* The SoP trainers were seen to be inspirational and highly knowledgeable, *'She was so passionate it was contagious and she was knowledgeable with a strong understanding of these young children. She helped me see Music everywhere and be opportunistic.'*

What was difficult for you?

The pandemic had clearly impacted on how the SoP project had been experienced and implemented but the setting believed they had a clear plan for implementation looking ahead, as indicated in the reflection, *'It didn't help that the pandemic arrived, that's been frustrating, but now we are really planning and looking forward to spreading this more broadly.'* And another commented, *'The timing was unfortunate, staff isolating in bubbles, so we are only now in the process of extending it. We have plans now to embed it further with the rest of the staff, developing in-house and training of skills, involving parents, using it to support home learning, the HLE possibilities. We now have to reset and develop.'*

What difference has the project made?

This setting already used music in its work, but the SoP project has facilitated a significant shift and development in how music is viewed across the whole provision and is embedded in all areas of the curriculum, as stated, *'Well we had been traditional in our approach, we had music sessions. They were ok but not as broad, not as permeating. SoP encompasses everything, EYFS, Children with Speech and Language delay, listening skills, story-telling – all of it. Music just has so many possibilities. It's proto-language. Increased staff confidence was a major factor in the development of this shift, as stated,*

'Our setting now has a real passion for music and that grabs the children. It gives the staff confidence too to express themselves and we now know you don't have to be a musician or be able to hold a note to enjoy it.' The staff definitely felt that the SoP project had shifted their practice and enhanced many aspects of their curriculum, as shown in the comment, *'For me it is about being more broad-minded – offering the children more opportunities. It's not just about music sessions but using the techniques all the time in our setting, looking at all the opportunities to do music. I'm more confident to deliver the music, to see more opportunities for it and maybe not be prescriptive about it. It's everywhere and everything can be a song.'* And another, *'I think the same, everywhere is what it's about. We are all using songs, made up songs to support other areas of learning. Its spontaneous music now rather than prescriptive. Good opportunities to extend Speech and Language and it's not just happening in the music area, it's everywhere indoors and out. There's a song for everything.'* There was also evidence that the children were already benefiting from the musical activities, especially those with some developmental delay, as one staff member commented, *'I felt the children with language delay gravitated to music, it helped them communicate and express and belong to the community – not just singing but percussion in babies. You see the inarticulate child transformed with a different expression. Music definitely matters to them.'* And again, *'It offers a lot of opportunities with babies even before their words form. And you see their faces light up. Communal communication in music is such a great thing for our setting and for the pandemic babies especially. It creates a sense of belonging, something connecting us, there's warmth and emotion in music.'*

What are your future plans for EY music?

This setting is on a journey to fully embed musical activities in all aspects of curriculum and pedagogy, and also in its work with parents. It has plans to disseminate the project activities and resources through further staff training, as shown in the comment, *'It will come with our in-house training to develop the team. Music is everywhere, we've changed our mind set- music is not stuck in the music session. Music doesn't stand alone but permeates the curriculum, it's a cultural shift.'* They also plan to reschedule FtF workshops once COVID restrictions allow, as reported, *'Hopefully we will offer F2F workshops when we are through COVID. We've always done that for parents especially for those with children with Speech and Language delay. When you're cooking get music into it – any aspect of daily life – get music into it. It was a light bulb moment for us grasping that and we aim to pass it on.'* This setting also had views on how the SoP work could be further extended to other settings, and suggested a phased approach for less developed settings; the need and value of mentoring support to help implementation; and an inventory of musical resources and activities, as suggested in their final comments, *'There are a range and variety of settings regarding previous level of music. We are at the committed end of the spectrum. For some settings the SoP will be their baseline. There's a lot to take in so it can't be all at once – many settings won't be as confident as ours, so they will need staggered scaffolding, mentoring and support, and another suggested, 'A visual resource would be good, a book of ideas would be useful. An inventory of things we can do and use, books, instruments, an aide memoire of ideas and resources.'*

Case Study 3: An Early Years Music Practitioner

Who are you?

This case study focuses on an experienced and very active early years music specialist who works as an artist in residence for an early years setting in the city and also runs a well-respected music organisation which delivers concerts, music training and services aimed at increasing inclusion of families with babies across the city.

How have you been involved in Sounds of Play?

This practitioner has been involved in the SoP project at multiple levels, a consortium member, completing the CME, delivering training courses and also working on some of the mini-projects.

What did you hope to get out of it?

A strong motivation was the desire for enhancing partnership working between early years music organisations within the city which she felt have tended to be competitive rather than collaborative, as she suggests, *'In truth though we are working for the same ends it can become competitive with different groups and artists – I have a feeling with the consortium it's become more collaborative now – sharing, partnership, working together.'*

What worked well for you?

She has enjoyed the CME opportunity to find out more about the theoretical underpinnings of music experience in young children. She has appreciated the academic input of the training, feeling she had enjoyed developing her own knowledge and understanding, as she reports, *'For me it was a very rich learning experience. Of course, I was always intuitive in my observations and I'm a trained musician. Just understanding that research, Colwyn Trevarthen's work, it was very empowering knowledge – having the language, the concepts and the frameworks. Talking with families about the importance of music in development, and in rhythm, pitch and rhyme and its close relationship with speech and communication and social connectivity that's brilliant.'*

What was difficult for you?

Some of the demands of course work were challenging, as she comments, *'The paperwork – that's a bit overwhelming sometimes- the portfolio is quite heavy, yes, but reflections I saw do come out of it. It fed back into the setting and the leadership decisions.'* The impact of the pandemic on her SoP work is evident but on a positive note the project became a very positive element in her life, as she reveals, *'The pandemic was a very crushing experience for me and it was prolonged. Everything stopped, all my contacts. The Consortium then became a life line as a freelance back to reality. That connection was the antidote. I've delivered three CPD sessions for the Consortium on singing. Several groups would combine for sessions. It has supported me professionally, personally and financially. I'm creating training now, trying out ideas, especially online – it's been really helpful to my professional growth.'*

What difference has the project made?

Although this specialist music practitioner had been actively involved in early years settings in the city for some time, this involvement has deepened through her work on the project, as she states, *'I've really begun to understand the whole landscape between Early Years and Music in Birmingham since my link to the Consortium and that understanding arose both from the growth in my operations and just becoming more connected and working with these other organisations with similar and sometimes overlapping aims. The Consortium is a group, now I'm maybe less individual but across the West Midlands and it's sharper and more real.'* She has increased her links with schools through the project and this has enabled her to raise the visibility and value of music in the schools she works, as she states, *'There are many informal links I have now with schools. The schools Music Service was mostly peripatetic, with schools having an academic focus and music less a priority. Mini projects like the*

Sounds of Play have been completely different as we have been working with practitioners, parents and young children.’ She especially values the opportunity to work in a deeper way with families and identified some life changing experiences for some parents, as revealed in this narrative, ‘We established this much deeper relationship with families. One mother had a music degree, she been raised in care herself. We organised Nursery support through funding from BCC. This young Mum became a practitioner artist because we’d awakened possibilities for her.’ She feels that the SoP is about much more than music and has an important civic role to play in developing relationships and participation, as she states, ‘Yes it’s wider than Music – its’ about social justice and community building. I’m going in for six sessions, the continuity builds relationships, slowly knowing the families, the context and the environment and building on that. It is so much better than the one-stop ‘hit and run’ technique, which is of course better than nothing. But this is a much richer experience for us all, meaningful and building closer understandings and relationships.’ She also points to the value of the music specialist working alongside the early years specialist, and notes how dialogue really strengthens and deepens their collective ability to understand children’s capacities and development, ‘The other thing I should highlight is working alongside the EY specialist; they see things I’d miss. I usually work alone and I’m responsive to my audience but with partnered EY staff it is more enriching understanding their observations. The way I worked with staff, building in periods of reflection made a big difference in children’s progress. Having a space for that, things emerge. The staff continually gave me tools to unpack my observations. Dialogue with others gives a deeper reflection in oneself, it strengthens joint values. The impact of the SoP on her own confidence, expertise and self-worth has also been significant as she states, ‘Working alongside others I realise my level of confidence as a practitioner has grown. It’s been an affirming experience involved in this process of being included in this Consortium. I feel I’ve not only learnt but I’ve been able to contribute something, that I too had something to give. To be in with these big organisations and charities and to be acknowledge and have respect, a voice and a place, it’s affirming and strengthening. It accords with the very process we are trying to do with the families.’

What are your future plans for EY music?

This practitioner is intent on continuing to work in collaboration with others, having seen the benefits that this brings to all involved, and especially the children and families. She feels her practice has been transformed and looking ahead she says she will continue to work in this way, and hopes that the Consortium will continue, as she states, ‘The experience for me has been about interconnectivity. I continue to live out the things, the changes that have happened in me and especially these strong and productive relationships. I’d be very sad if the Consortium folded. There is great value in bringing us all together and certainly a much greater understanding of the Early Years and of Music and their intertwining. The empowering culture and quality of leadership in the project should continue. And families and our youngest children, real benefits, huge benefits, many unvoiced and informal but with great significance’. She is very aware of the political nature of this work and is passionate about promoting the future of music in our society. She feels that the SoP project has really demonstrated the value and power of this work, and says, ‘The political wider perspective concerns the place of music in society, in the curriculum and how that is acknowledged and properly funded – that macro level, maybe change will come but at a grassroots level this project shows how and why it is needed.’