



**Evaluation of the Birmingham Early Years Music Consortium
Early Years Music Project
“Sounds of Play” Phase 2 (2023-2025)**

Final Report – Executive Summary (Autumn 2025)



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Executive Summary

Sounds of Play (Phase 2) was a three-year initiative (2022–2025) to strengthen early years music practice across Birmingham. It aimed to expand music-making across all 10 districts, promote co-designed family sessions, and improve citywide music opportunities. Key strands included enquiry-based residencies, one-off workshops, continuing professional development sessions and enhanced consortium communication, largely facilitated by Early Years Music Champions.

The EY music enquiry-based projects involved two cohorts of ten-week residencies across Birmingham, designed to explore respectful and effective co-design of family music-making activities. Musicians and educators collaborated closely, tailoring sessions to children's developmental needs and interests, with a strong emphasis on observation, reflection, and inclusivity—particularly for neurodivergent and non-verbal children. Families became more confident using music at home, and educators gained professional confidence, integrating music into daily routines. Co-design became a dynamic, shared process, fostering stronger partnerships and extending music's impact beyond individual settings. Overall, the residencies demonstrated music's power to enhance communication, inclusion, and professional growth, while reshaping early years practice across Birmingham.

The 65 one-off music sessions delivered in early years settings were collaboratively planned and tailored to children's interests, offering inclusive, hands-on musical experiences that supported engagement, communication, and emotional wellbeing, especially for children with SEND and EAL. Feedback highlighted strong child and family participation, increased staff confidence, and a renewed enthusiasm for integrating music into daily routines. Sessions inspired educators with fresh ideas and techniques, encouraged further musical training, and fostered a deeper appreciation of music's developmental value.

Between July 2024 and August 2025, Champions delivered 44 CPD sessions, offering over 73 hours of tailored professional development to more than 360 attendees. These sessions, responsive to local needs and inclusive of diverse professional roles, covered themes like SEND, musical storytelling, sensory engagement, and low-cost music-making. Smaller sessions enabled personalised support, and many provided resource packs to promote sustainable practice across settings. Additionally, three Musical Development Matters CPD sessions engaged 42 practitioners, boosting their confidence and knowledge in early years music.

Consortium partners reported that their involvement in Sounds of Play significantly deepened their understanding of Birmingham's early years sector, enhanced their appreciation of music's developmental value—especially for children with SEND—and strengthened cross-sector collaboration. Partners praised the project's success in bridging music and early years education, highlighting its impact on workforce development and calling for sustained CPD to preserve momentum and expertise. They identified the need for a dedicated liaison or 'champion' to maintain up-to-date information and foster collaboration across sectors.

The Sounds of Play project expanded early years music-making across Birmingham by building workforce skills, embedding music into daily practice, and fostering collaboration through the Early Years Music Champions, residencies, CPD, and workshops. Co-designed family music-making was strengthened through reflective, inclusive practices that empowered children, families, and educators to shape sessions together, with Champions playing a key mentoring role. Consortium partners also deepened their understanding of each other's music offers, with regular meetings enhancing cross-sector relationships and laying the groundwork for future collaboration, despite capacity challenges.

What is Sounds of Play- Phase 2?

Background

The Sounds of Play Project – Phase 2 was a 36-month continuation of the original Sounds of Play workforce development project (2019-2022) funded by Youth Music which offered a range of CPD opportunities and initiatives. Led by The Springfield Project, a leading partner of Birmingham Forward Steps (BFS), this project developed the partnership of 18 early years and music organisations in the city who together make up the Birmingham Early Years Music Consortium (BEYMC).

The Aims and Outcomes of Phase 2

The Overall aim of the programme was to develop a sustainable network of EY music practice between EY services and music organisations to support children's musical entitlement across Birmingham through a range of workforce development. There were three specific project outcomes set at the outset:

Outcome #1 To develop EY music making in settings across all 10 Birmingham districts.

Outcome #2 To increase co-designed approaches to family music making in settings across all 10 Birmingham districts.

Outcome #3 To further develop consortium partner's understanding of music making opportunities offered by consortium partners across the city.

The Strands of Phase 2

Phase 2 set out to offer a range of initiatives to support EY practitioners, musicians, consortium partner organisation leaders, families and children through the following 4 key strands:

i. **Early Years Music Champions - recruited, mentored and supported to lead the development of EY music across all 10 districts of the city of Birmingham.**

Four Early Years Music Champions were recruited to work across the 10 Birmingham districts (two districts per Champion, with one Champion taking on four districts). The funding allowed for each district to be supported approximately one day per fortnight. The role of each Early Years Music Champion was to support Early Years educators and settings within each district to embed music within their practice by:

- Mapping current provision
- Facilitating sharing sessions within each district
- Providing links between settings and musicians associated with the BEYMC
- Identifying CPD needs in their districts to be co-designed with settings, commissioned and funded via the project
- Working closely with musicians in the organisation of residencies (see ii).

Champions supported 10 EY music enquiry-based projects through residencies (see ii.), 65 one-off workshops with early years settings (see iii.) and more than 73 hours of professional development to over 360 attendees. Through this activity, and wider related networking, Champions kept detailed reflective notes.

ii. **EY music enquiry-based projects**

Musicians associated with the consortium were funded to each have 10-week residencies to work closely with families and children in settings to explore co-creation. The intention was for one residency per district in the city with each residency exploring and developing approaches to music sessions which placed the interests and needs of the families at the heart of the sessions. These residencies were completed in two phases – the first phase (Autumn 2024) involved 4 musicians, the second phase (spring 2025) involved 6 musicians. The recruitment of settings for the residencies was supported by the EC Music Champion in each district creating links between musicians, BEYMC partner organisations, musicians and settings.

iii. **One-off workshop sessions with early years settings**

Musicians associated with the consortium were funded to deliver 8 x one-off workshop sessions at a variety of settings across each of the 10 districts. The intention was to extend the reach of the musicians beyond the settings engaged in the residency, and also to learn to what degree co-creation can take place when sessions are delivered in this way. The recruitment of settings for the residencies was supported by the early years BEYMC partner organisations.

iv. **Communication and knowledge sharing to be deepened at consortium level.**

Research was undertaken involving partners to explore possible digital platforms and solutions to enable partners to have live and up to date information about all EY music activity that is currently being offered by consortium partner organisations. Face to face regular meetings of the EY Music Consortium enabled partners to share, understand current activity, and communicate with one another easily and effectively. Actions were planned to diversify the consortium by bringing in further partner organisations to represent a wider range of backgrounds, ethnicities, cultures, and disabilities.

The funding allowed for the delivery of a small number of one-off early years music focussed CPD sessions for early childhood educators. Three sessions of Musical Development Matters were delivered to 42 educators in 2025 with the aim of increasing their knowledge and confidence in delivering early years music within their setting.

[Evaluation Team](#)

Centre for Research in Early Childhood (CREC) undertook the initial Sounds of Play evaluation and its findings and recommendations framed the action plan to develop Phase 2. The evaluation work for this project has been conducted by Dr Helen Lyndon and Sean Delaney, and CREC has continued its role as Learning partner in Phase 2, leading on the evaluation and feeding project learning back to the delivery team and BEYC, specifically in relation to project outcomes #1 and #2.

Project outcome #3 was overseen separately by Quench Arts who consulted with stakeholders to explore and set out recommendations for future practice in this area. This work is included within this report for coherence.

Evaluation Methodology

Evaluation Focus

The evaluation has been designed to focus on project outcomes #1 and #2 by exploring how, and to what effect, the first two work strands were delivered. The intention is to ‘tell the story’ of the work strands by considering two research questions:

1. What do effective and impactful ‘early years music champions’ do and how do they do it?;
2. How and in what ways can you effectively and respectfully co-design and deliver family music making activities?

Project Outcome #3 sits outside these research questions and was addressed by Quench Arts through consultation with stakeholders and desk-based research.

Methodology

Overall the research methodology adopted has used a participatory action research design. In this way it has sought to capture how each musician co-designed and delivered appropriate and effective musical practice within their districts, supported by an Early Years Music Champion.

The research team has therefore been more than the CREC team – it has comprised the 10 musicians and the 10 Early Years settings they worked with, and the four Early Years Music Champions who supported them, alongside the CREC researchers. Setting leads, practitioners, children and families have also contributed to the research but as active participants rather than requiring their engagement within the core research team.

Data gathered by Residency musicians

Each musician and setting pair were responsible for documenting their unique enquiry-based project journey within their district outlining a clear starting point, considering specific lines of enquiry/ actions and planning for evaluation. Reflective logs were completed each week and a post-residency reflection was also captured. The approach to projects within each district was participatory and sought change within everyday practice. In this way the following types of data collected included:

- Pre-programme reflective statements outlining practitioner researchers’ expectations for the programme, their expectations of skill development, their plans regarding actions to be developed etc.
- Sessional reflective documentation outlining both actions and the critical reflections of practitioner researchers (linked to specific research questions).
- Feedback from families (including children’s perspectives).
- Post-programme reflective statements from practitioner researchers outlining key findings for children, families and settings.

Documentation was collected from all residencies to build a cross-city case study to contribute to the overall project evaluation.

Data gathered by Early Years Music Champions

Music Champions recorded their two-year developmental journey through completing a regular reflective log, extracts of which were shared with the research team, and through participation in an end-of-project focus group. They additionally documented CPD sessions considering the reach, rationale and impact of each session.

Additional data collected

To support triangulation of data, additional data was captured from consortium stakeholders and early years settings via online survey.

- Post project Consortium Stakeholder feedback
- One off session feedback
- CPD feedback

Thematic analysis of this gathered data has been undertaken in order to respond to the two project RQs and presented below. Stakeholder consultation and desk-based research contributed to the knowledge generation against Outcome #3.

Ethical Protocols

All CREC's work is underpinned by strong ethical principles relating to the dignity and safety of participants and which is constructed round the following set of principles to ensure all actions should:

- Be done with, not to, participants;
- Be open and honest, and secure informed consent;
- Be collaborative and inclusive;
- Be empowering and developmental;
- Have utility;
- Be respectful;
- Protect all participants from harm;
- Keep confidentiality and anonymity;
- Provide feedback.

All participants in this evaluation provided their informed consent following a full explanation of how the data would be gathered, by whom, for what purpose, how it would be used, how it would be stored, and when it would be destroyed. Participation was voluntary with the understanding that their contributions would be generalised and/or anonymised to protect confidentiality. All participants were given the right to withdraw at any stage. Data has been kept securely for the duration of the project, and for a further 12 months before being destroyed, in line with CREC's data protection and security policy.

CREC has worked with the Early Years Music Consortium to raise awareness of the evaluation work being conducted with relevant partners and provided project information which was distributed to relevant staff and partners, to ensure that there was awareness and understanding of the evaluation, its purpose and timescales. CREC believes that through this ethical approach it has been able to ensure the highest level of quality and integrity in the evaluation activity and that the subsequent report reflects the authentic lived experiences of all participants.

Project Learning

i. Early Years Music Champions

Four Early Years Music Champions (hereafter called 'Champions') documented their SoP journey through a reflective diary and by cataloguing the additional professional development that they were able to engage with. A final focus group, conducted September 2025, enabled a collective discussion on the initial research questions and focused on the overall professional impact of SoP.

Champions expressed a strong personal and professional investment in the project, frequently highlighting feelings of privilege, fulfilment and inspiration derived from working in early years settings, *'I just felt honoured... seeing what's happening... I just found that really kind of rewarding;'* *'The whole thing has been amazing;'* *'It's been fun, amazing... new friendships.'* For one Champion it has been a central factor in their ongoing professional journey, *'It's opened a lot of doors for me... [I was] a little bit lost for what direction I wanted my career to take.'* The Champions have relished the opportunity to observe the positive impact of music on educators, children and families.

A consistent theme within the Champions reflections was that of collaboration, *'To have a team of four of us to get it out there has been amazing.'* Champions emphasise that working as a small team has been vital for sustaining motivation, problem-solving and sharing expertise, *'We all bring different things... break it down into bits... it's manageable.'* This has been particularly effective because some members come from musical backgrounds and others from early years practice. This combination of skills is perceived as essential for navigating the complexities of educational systems and ensuring that musical activities are developmentally appropriate, *'It needs to be a bit of both... not just one generic musician.'*

In the final focus group there was debate as to whether music champions must be musicians, concluding that passion for music, openness to learning and understanding of early years pedagogy are more critical than technical musical expertise. They also argued that success requires balancing *'music for music's sake'* with the ability to position music within broader developmental priorities, particularly when advocating for its value in multi-agency contexts. The group saw their advocacy role as central through perceptions of early years music, *'It's our job to bring that level of respect up as well,'* as well as *'Leading by example... not just talking about it.'*

The mentorship that the Champions have experienced from the project lead has also been a central part of their collaborative experience and Champion's reflective journals illustrate the significance of the project lead role. This collaboration has extended their thinking and modelled the key message of early years music advocacy, *'I was asked to 'pop down to nursery' (which we both agreed is an unhealthy phrase, as, it implies that music for early years is 'simple, easy, needs no thought') - although the school is well intentioned, there is some subtext here. It put into perspective again how brilliant our work is.'*

Throughout the Champions reflective diaries and their subsequent focus group, relationship-building is evident as a central part of the role. Champions describe how network connections across districts, children's centres and steering groups have helped raise the profile of early years music and increase practitioner engagement with CPD opportunities, *'The Birmingham Early Years Network... has been the big platform... where it's really taken off.'* They note changes in professional recognition over time, shifting from initial unfamiliarity with the programme to wider awareness and enthusiasm, specifically at a regional level, *'People know who we are... they've heard of us.'*

Champions also reflected on the operational challenges experienced. These include organisational changes within settings, administrative burden, unpredictable circumstances in stay-and-play

environments and varying initial expectations among educators and visiting musicians. The *'ever changing early years landscape'* specifically local restructuring resulted in Champions having to *'re-explain sounds of play... attempting to keep a foot in the door.'* Outside of the project challenges, there was the potential for additional tension balancing SoP with other paid work, *'Having two jobs at one time... it's been challenging'* or with wider family commitments and personal well-being. The group agreed upon the need to be flexible, adaptive and proactive in identifying context-specific solutions.

Mentoring and supporting residency musicians is discussed as another aspect of the role. Champions describe helping musicians unfamiliar with early years contexts to develop confidence and responsive practice, *'We had to coach him through it... it was overwhelming for him.'* They identify this developmental support as particularly important where musicians experience overwhelm or mismatch between their usual practice and the demands of early years environments. One Champion commented that, *'I am most proud of the number of people I have managed to support through this project'* and reflected on the breadth of support offered beyond the specifics of the Champions role extending into Birmingham Early Years Networks and Stronger Practice Hubs.

Champions recognised that their support was experienced on several layers depending upon the depth and duration of the participation. In CPD sessions this could be brief *'[we] made the smallest difference such as introducing Early Years Practitioners to a new song that they now use regularly in their setting. This perhaps extends to those who now explore a different way of using music in their setting - thinking outside the box of why they use the songs they do, introducing music from the children's homes into their nurseries etc.'* Through reflective logs it is evident that the rationale for one off CPD was typically local demand and sessions were scheduled and formatted to meet local need e.g., *'settings are often unable to release staff for CPD elsewhere due to costs and struggles to keep staff/ children ratios.'* All four Champions found that there was a need for SEND support locally and offered CPD that specifically supported this aspect of Early Years Music. In monitoring attendance at the CPD sessions it is also evident that Champions supported a breadth of attendee from settings managers to trainees and students and the reported feedback was overwhelmingly positive:

'Thanks so much for the new ideas. I can't wait to use them!'

'Having never really touch an instrument before, this has been really helpful – and hope to start learning at home.'

'The lycra and the songs that went along with that [were] a hit for me and I'm sure it will be for the families.'

'Definitely will start to use more household items for sound making...'

Overall, the Champions present their role as dynamic and evolving. Their reflective approach has determined the trajectory of the project, *'Nothing stands still... if you're not researching, you're not relevant.'* They view themselves as connectors, facilitators, advocates and reflective practitioners, with ongoing learning essential to remaining relevant within a changing system. They believe the programme has created sustainable progress, personal growth and strengthened a culture of early years music in Birmingham, *'People are talking about music and the importance of it... we've hit the nail on the head.'*

ii. EY music enquiry-based projects

Two cohorts of ten-week residencies formed the basis of the enquiry-based projects and sought to answer:

RQ2. How and in what ways can you effectively and respectfully co-design and deliver family music making activities?

Across both cohorts, ten residences were completed across Birmingham's districts (with just one residency not running the full ten weeks).

Educators and musicians reflected on their ten-week family music-making residencies across Birmingham through weekly reflective logs and then during an end of residency focus group. Two focus groups conducted in Dec 2024 and April 2025 summarised collective reflections of the residencies. Educators, musicians and music champions contributed to the focus groups that described significant growth in co-design, collaboration, and impact on children, families, and staff.

Weekly reflective logs indicate that co-design developed differently in each setting depending on the context of the sessions e.g., number of children, families attending, environment etc. Planning typically began with children's needs, developmental goals, and observations from sessions; observation at the outset was an essential element as musicians built relationships with the children and setting team.

'[I] took the opportunity to meet the staff, view the venue and meet the children without running any musical activity. This felt very important particularly being a SEND setting.'

'...get a feel for the group, see children's interests and speak to families to introduce [myself] and get starting points and feelings towards music.'

'A sense of rapport was evident, especially as the musician sat alongside the children for conversations - intensive interaction method- and did not present or perform.'

Reflection time after each session was also crucial, activities could be traced back through the reflective logs. The focus group also provided the opportunity to consider this further, *'The reflective culture was powerful... what did we notice, what might we do differently next time?'* Educators, musicians, and families increasingly contributed ideas, themes, and ways of using familiar and new songs. *'It was very much a dialogue between us as to what order we would do things, what we would fit in, what new games and activities we would try.'*

This flexible approach enabled 'live' or in the moment design, with activities changing in response to children's cues and group dynamics. *'Live designing... not just what you've planned... leaning on your expertise and being like, what do you think they need now?'*

There was a strong emphasis on inclusivity, especially for non-verbal and neurodivergent children. Music offered alternative ways to communicate, make choices, and participate. Some children who were initially disengaged became highly involved by the end of the residency, *'The child who would look from a distance... in the last session he joined in, he was jumping around, dancing in his own way.'*

Proximity to the musician, eye contact, and turn-taking reportedly improved over the ten-week period, *'He actually managed to sit there for a full 10 minutes, fully engaged... making the connection between the spider and the spider song;'* *'Proximity changed... children coming very close to me, dancing with me... fully engaged.'*

New interests emerged and familiar interests such as planets or transport shaped content, *'We recognised and made sure the material was familiar enough for the regular children, but allowed new parents to join in as well.'*

Parents were influenced to use music more confidently at home, *'Parents were sharing songs with the family at home... she's been asking for them at home.'* Parents and educators noticed developmental gains including communication, patience, and emotional connection, *'They learned to be patient... waiting their turn... massive improvement in children.'* Some parents and carers began volunteering musical skills in sessions. Families reported children singing newly learned songs after sessions and adapting them in everyday life, *'A parent came and said, I've learned a new song. Can I sing it to you?'*

Educators also developed professionally, *'Practitioners were singing louder, stronger... exploring ukulele and chords themselves.'* They gained confidence leading musical play, singing, and introducing new instruments, like the ukulele. Many shifted from seeing music as a separate activity to understanding it as something that can be woven throughout daily routines, *'Music can be a language rather than a subject... not just musical instruments in a corner.'* The reflective culture and protected reflective time helped the residency teams to recognise progress they might otherwise miss, *'It helped bind us as a team... everyone was reading the reflections so we all knew what happened.'*

Across all residencies there is evidence of busy or complex early years environments with the potential for challenge e.g., new children and families, complex SEND, additional visitors/ adults within the space etc., however weekly reflections illustrate a collaborative approach from the SoP team. Musicians valued guidance from educators on children's needs and setting routines, while educators appreciated learning new approaches to music and could see the wider value across the EYFS e.g., fine motor skill development through exploration with instruments.

Key features of cohort 1

For this, the smaller of the two cohorts (four residencies), educators and musicians described how children's engagement transformed over the 10-week residency. Many children, particularly those who were non-verbal or initially withdrawn, showed new communication skills, increased confidence, and a stronger desire to take part. By the final sessions, children who initially stayed on the edges were sitting close to the musician, making eye contact, laughing, dancing, and choosing songs independently.

Families gained a better understanding of the developmental value of music. Parents noticed improvements in their children's language, turn-taking, ability to wait, and comfort in social interactions. Music began to extend into family life, with parents reporting children singing project songs at home and adapting them in their daily routines.

Educators also developed confidence. They began singing more freely, experimenting with new instruments like ukuleles, and incorporating music throughout the setting rather than keeping it confined to a corner. The reflective approach used in the project helped staff recognise, progress and embed music into wider early-years practice.

Overall, the December focus group highlighted growing confidence, inclusion, and joy, along with a sense that this approach had reshaped attitudes toward music-making in early years settings.

Key features of cohort 2

For cohort two, summarising six residencies, the focus group participants explored how co-design developed in their sessions. Planning initially centred on children's interests and development goals, but over time, collaboration expanded. Early-years educators challenged and contributed more ideas, parents suggested songs and themes, and children's preferences helped shape the direction of each session. Reflection time after every session was key in refining structure and content.

Musicians emphasised learning how flexible co-design needed to be, especially in very busy settings. They valued guidance from educators on routines, additional needs, and behaviour dynamics. They also described 'live design,' where activities changed in the moment depending on children's attention, sensory needs, and emotional state.

There were notable challenges in larger, more complex environments, but teamwork remained strong across roles. New parents could join sessions easily because familiar routines were balanced with creative improvisation. Several settings now planned to continue music-making approaches and spread learning to additional staff teams and stay-and-play groups illustrating a reach beyond the residency settings themselves.

The April focus group highlighted co-design as a shared journey: confidence grew on all sides, and music became embedded as a collaborative practice rather than a performance delivered to families.

Summarising Co-design

Co-design looked different in each setting but for all residencies became stronger over time. Musicians and early-years educators planned together using observations from each session to shape the next one. They focused on children's interests (such as planets or transport) and adapted activities to match their developmental needs, including for children with SEND and for those children who were preverbal.

Co-design was supported in two ways. Reflection after each session was essential, supporting honest, non-judgmental conversations about what worked and what to change next time. This helped teams challenge each other supportively and test new ideas. Parents and children increasingly influenced session content, *'Parents... have been part of our planning. Although they've not sat with us at the planning table, their comments influence what we do next.'* Families shared favourite songs, offered musical skills, and continued music-making at home, feeding ideas back into planning. Co-design happened 'live' during sessions too, with musicians, and educators, adjusting direction according to group energy and cues from individual children. The two aspects of co-design became embedded informally within SoP, *'Co-designing with the children was one thing... then co-designing with you took the form of those reflections and a lot of informal conversation.'*

Educators built confidence in singing and leading activities themselves; musicians built confidence in child-centred practice. Over time, roles shifted from musicians leading content to shared responsibility and creative input from the whole team, including children and families.

Summarising residency outcomes

Settings reported that some children showed marked improvements in engagement, communication, confidence, and social interaction, *'Our non-verbal students... found their own ways to communicate and express how much they enjoyed it.'* Non-verbal and neurodivergent children found new ways to take part through music, *'Music can change the whole room... more inclusive... non-verbal children just enjoyed listening and moving.'* Those who were reticent initially or avoided

instruments became fully involved by the final weeks; this applies to children, families and some setting educators.

Families recognised the developmental value of music. Many reported children singing new songs at home, learning to take turns, and using music to express themselves. Some parents who were initially sceptical became strong advocates, even contributing musically in sessions, *'The most vocal sceptical parent ended up giving the most positive comments and initiating music-making.'*

Many educators gained confidence and musicianship, trying new instruments and leading songs with stronger voices, *'It brought me so much confidence to sing... even my manager said, you've got a lovely voice.'* They also began embedding music throughout the day rather than keeping it as a separate *'corner activity.'*

Partnerships across staff teams were strengthened through shared planning, reflection and problem-solving, even in busy settings with many external pressures. The work influenced wider early years practice, with ideas and methods being shared across children's centres.

iii. One-off workshop sessions with early years settings

There were 65 one-off music sessions delivered by musicians in early years settings (out of a target of 80). Following each session early years settings were invited to provide written evaluative feedback on their session, to better understand:

- What happened in the session and who decided this?
- What was the impact of the session on children and families?
- Any other reflection(s) on the session such as impact it had on your staff or any future plans you have as a result of what you learnt/experienced?
- The number of children engaged.

Eighteen settings responded to the call for feedback on the one-off music sessions that took place as part of SoP.

What happened in the sessions and who decided this?

Decision-making was collaborative between musicians and staff at the settings (Family Hub teams, Early Years leads, Childminder partner, librarians and other educators). Typical planning included pre-session discussions about expectations, structure, resources, and children's needs and there was often times agreement to follow the children's lead and 'go with the flow.' There were occasional planned elements, such as stories, and these aligned with children's interests. The content was also shaped by the musician's professional expertise and what they were able to offer.

Across the different sessions, musicians delivered engaging, hands-on musical experiences for young children and their families. Activities typically included:

- Free exploration of instruments (including unusual instruments like a harp);
- Musical play linked to children's interests;
- Singing, vocal interaction, copying actions, numbers in music;
- Story time elements;
- Parachute and group singing activities;
- Play invitations rather than highly structured instruction;

- Background music during arrival to set a calm and welcoming tone.

The sessions were described as positive, flexible, inclusive, and particularly supportive for children with SEND. Children often led their play, with musicians responding to their interests and interactions. Parents were involved and engaged, and many expressed delight afterward. Staff also found the sessions refreshing and inspiring for their practice.

What was the impact of the one-off sessions?

Positive Engagement & Enjoyment

Every respondent spoke positively about the sessions, many reporting that children were enthusiastic, smiling, and eager to join in and that families commented very positively with many asking for more sessions. Attendance increased in some groups because the music session was specifically advertised. Some settings indicated that parents and carers enjoyed watching their children interact, especially those who are usually less engaged; others indicated that the music brought parents and children together in play and families appeared relaxed, exploring instruments alongside their children. Childminders and setting educators enjoyed sessions and reported feeling inspired to continue incorporating music into everyday learning.

Inclusive Communication & Language Development

There was some evidence that children became more vocal during sessions and were copying actions and sounds, and in some sessions new vocabulary was introduced through songs and musical stories. Children experiencing SEND or for whom EAL were able to participate confidently, according to some respondents.

Inclusion & Emotional Wellbeing

Several settings stated how music helped to calm and focus the group, reducing anxiety and restlessness and that the sensitive adaptation of activities helped children overcome fears (e.g., letting a special teddy join in a parachute game).

Learning, Skills & Confidence

For the children there were benefits reported across the breadth of the prime areas of learning (EYFS) e.g., developing rhythm and timing skills (e.g., through stop/go games) and motor coordination through instrument play. Concentration and listening skills were naturally part of all sessions and some children explored musical structure e.g., notation.

The setting feedback illustrates a positive professional impact, with staff reported as feeling energised, motivated and inspired by working alongside musicians. Observing children's strong engagement validated the importance of music in early years practice and those reporting articulated an increased confidence in leading musical play themselves. Several respondents stated how sessions provided fresh ideas, new songs, and techniques such as games, integrated Makaton, song adaptations, and use of everyday objects.

As a result of what they learned, staff reported their intent to play more music in future sessions, balance guided musical play with child-led exploration, incorporate whole-body movement and introduce new and less familiar instruments to the children.

There was also an intent to bring more music into daily routines and add to musical resources expressed by respondents. Some staff have signed up for further musical training (e.g., Ukulele workshop) and borrowing instruments to practise. There is an interest expressed in working more closely with musicians in the future.

The number of children engaged.

Not all respondents provided this specific data set but it is clear from setting feedback that group sizes ranged from small, intimate opportunities for a personalized approach, to larger groups accommodating mixed-ages and up to 300 participants e.g., family hub launch. The median group size for these one off sessions appears to be 12/15 children.

Overall Summary

Settings reported that the sessions had a significant positive impact on children's communication, engagement, emotional wellbeing, and learning. They also stated how parents and carers felt connected, inspired, and delighted to see their children immersed in music, and that staff also gained new confidence and ideas to support ongoing musical development.

For the early years settings themselves, the sessions appear to offer a lasting professional impact, with reported gains in building staff skills, boosting confidence, refreshing musical practice, and inspiring new ideas. Many settings now plan to embed music more deeply and sustainably in their provision.

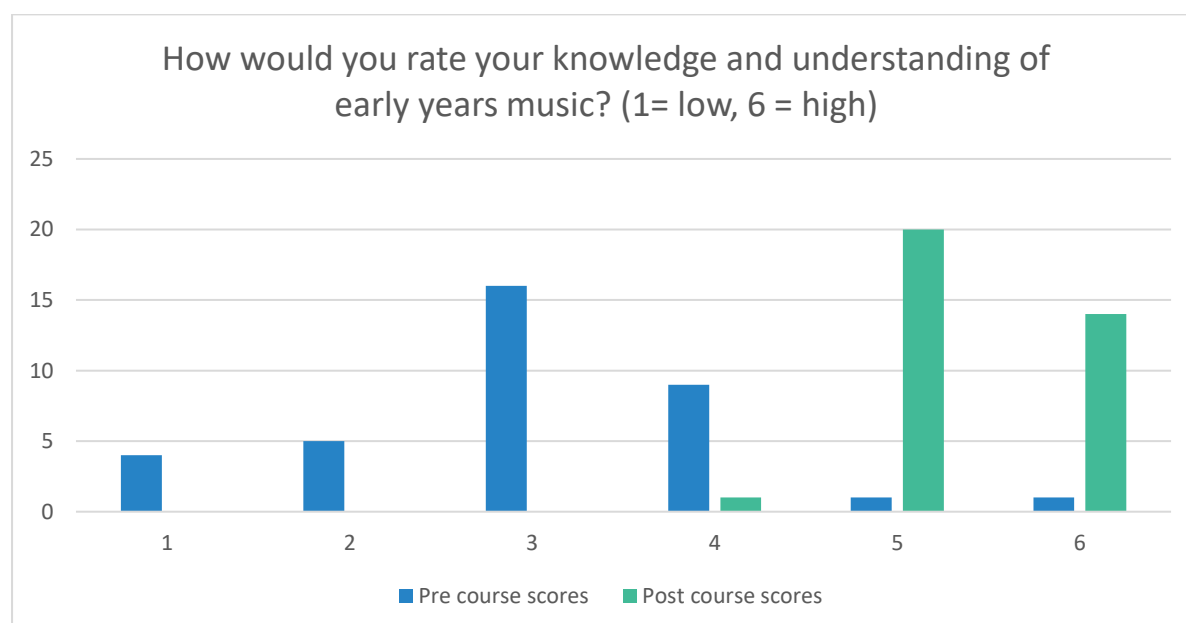
iv. CPD sessions

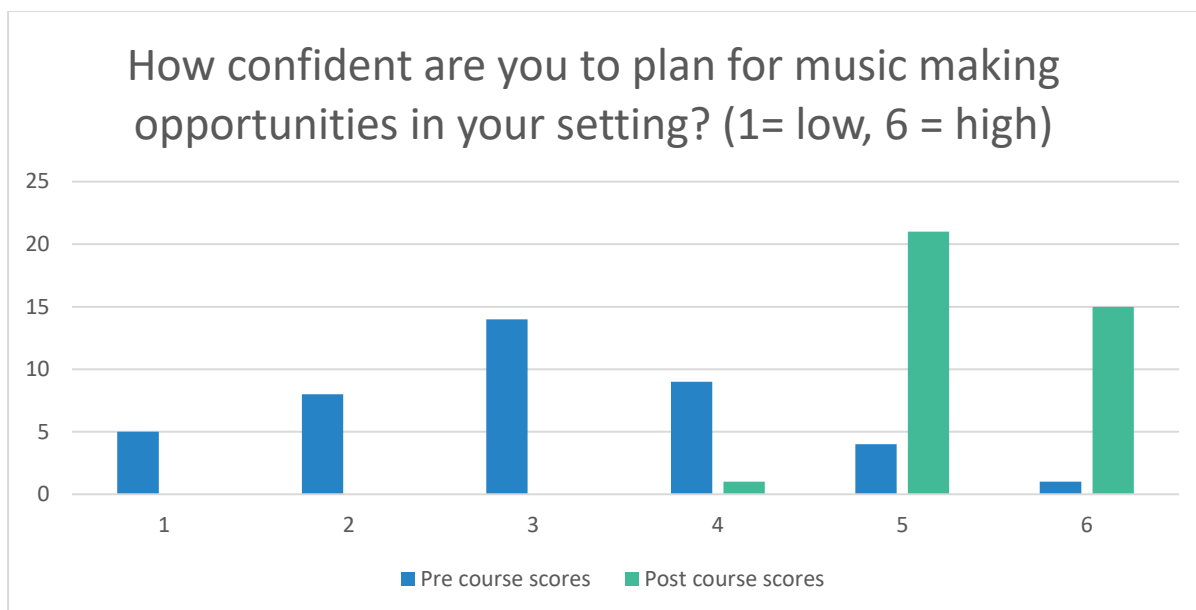
44 CPD sessions were hosted by Champions between July 2024 and August 2025 offering over 73 hours of professional development to over 360 attendees. This formed one of the central aspects of the Champion role. As discussed above, these sessions were responsive to local need, were pitched at a range of professional attendees, including trainees, and were well received by those who attended. Between the four Champions there were some consistent themes within the sessions e.g., SEND, but there was also the opportunity to focus on different aspects of early years music through instruments, musical stories, inexpensive music making, sensory engagement and so on. Whilst most of the sessions were well attended, there were some sessions when bookings far exceeded attendance. Champions reflective training logs reveal that these smaller sessions were then used as the opportunity to provide a more intensive opportunity for attendees, *'a small group but this allowed for 1-2-1 support.'* Many of the sessions provided resources or packs to attendees enabling them to share with their whole setting and providing a sustainable approach, *'attendees left with a resource pack of calming music ideas, strategies for reducing overload, and a greater confidence in supporting auditory-sensitive children in their daily practice.'*

In addition to the CPD sessions run by Champions across the districts, three Musical Development Matters CPD sessions took place (November 2024, May and June 2025) across which 42 Early Years practitioners participated. The aim of the CPD was to:

- Increase early years educators' knowledge and understanding of early years music;
- Increase educator confidence in planning for music making opportunities in their setting.

As can be seen in the graphs (below) the self-perceived shifts in both domains (knowledge and understanding; confidence) was incredibly positive with the overwhelming majority scoring themselves 5 or 6 out of 6 by the end of the course (the lowest post-course score against either domain was 4 (out of 6)).





This data suggests that the delivery of this CPD supported Sounds of Play to deliver against Outcome #1 by upskilling part of the workforce with the knowledge and confidence to increase their music making activity and thereby develop EY music making in settings across all 10 Birmingham districts.

v. Stakeholder feedback

BEYM Consortium partners were invited, at the end of the project, to share their perspectives on the impact that their involvement had had on their organisations. Five partners (four music partners; 1 early years partner) responded against a number of open-ended questions as follows:

- What has your organisation gained through being involved in the Sounds of Play (SoP) project?
- What, if anything, has changed in your organisation's practices as a result of your involvement in SoP?
- Any other reflections you have on the SoP project

What has your organisation gained through being involved in the Sounds of Play (SoP) project?

The organisations collectively highlighted significant learning and development through their participation in SoP, particularly identifying a deeper understanding of Birmingham's EY sector, its challenges, and the wider creative landscape supporting it. Respondents shared how they valued increased knowledge of best practices and opportunities for collaboration, especially around the role of music in supporting children's play, communication, and development, with specific mention of children with SEND. The benefits of building personal and professional connections across the sector were noted, as well as recognising the need to strengthen internal capacity to engage more fully in future focused projects.

More knowledge of Birmingham's EY sector - I have had the opportunity to get to know more about the EY landscape and challenges they face. -More knowledge of what other arts organisations are offering for the EY sector - I do get to hear about some of this through the

Birmingham Music Education Hub but EY is not a key area they cover so it's been nice to hear about the opportunities in more depth.

... some [of our] students and staff have been involved and gained a lot of new skills and knowledge of the sector as a result of the programme. [We have] now appointed a new person ... it made us realize that we needed to add capacity for future early years focused projects, to enable a more full contribution as a partner.

A deeper understanding of the role music and sound can play for children with SEND, enhancing play and aiding communication and development. Working in partnership with musicians and other professionals has given us the opportunity to learn and develop on a level that would otherwise not have been available to us.

SoP enabled us to qualify a member of staff (who has since left the organisation but continues to work for us on a freelance basis) via CME and develop an EY offer that was appropriate to [us].

It's been incredible in the focus and growth of our organisation

What, if anything, has changed in your organisation's practices as a result of your involvement in SoP?

The organisations reported gaining valuable contacts, knowledge, and confidence to develop future Early Years projects, with stronger awareness of sector needs and opportunities for partnership. Several organisations shared that they had deepened their commitment to EY practice by embedding new expertise within their teams, particularly through staff appointments with early years experience. The early years partner who responded indicated that they had integrated music more intentionally into their sensory and educational work, using it to strengthen communication and engagement with children and their families. Overall, it seems that the experience of engaging in SoP has inspired a clearer focus and passion for Early Years as a core area of development and impact.

More contacts and knowledge - we don't currently have an EY project but now we are much more informed for when we do develop something new, we have good contacts to develop something in partnership to ensure we are addressing a need.

We have thought about how to best support our students accessing early years practice and providing them with the skills and knowledge to work within early years settings more. This includes appointing a new member of staff with a lot of early years experience on the Learning and Participation, Pedagogy and Community Engagement department team.

As a service we place a greater emphasis on music and sound play, this is now a more prominent part of our sensory play and we plan for it in the groups we run. Through our work supporting parent/carers, we help them to understand how they can communicate with their children through musical play and how it can help them to understand more about the way their child communicates.

We had a general educational 'wing' to our company, but now we have a particular, focused passion for 'Early Years'

Any other reflections you have on the SoP project

There was a common agreement in the responses that SoP successfully achieved its goal of bridging the music and Early Years (EY) sectors, by fostering meaningful collaboration and professional

learning across both groups. A strong positive impact on the EY workforce through CPD and residency opportunities, enhancing skills, planning, and understanding of musical play was reported —particularly its benefits for child development and children with SEND. One respondent highlighted the importance of sustained investment, with some concern about losing momentum or expertise as staff move on, underscoring the need for ongoing, rolling CPD opportunities. Partners deeply valued the partnerships, mutual learning, and creative exchange the project enabled, expressing enthusiasm for future collaborations and a shared desire to continue the work and secure funding to sustain its legacy.

I think that Sounds of Play had a really clear goal - to bring together the music and EY sectors - which I do think has largely been successful. The success has depended upon the time invested by each partner, however, and it's a shame that some partners did not commit to the programme. I do think that there has been a significant impact upon the EY workforce through the CPD and residency opportunities - my worry is that due to the transient nature of staff, this experience and skillset could be lost if they moved to a different setting. I really do think there is a need for a rolling offer of CPD because of this.

The project has raised our awareness as a team, of the benefits of musical play, it has enabled us to develop our planning and to better support the families who come to our groups. It has been invaluable to learn from other professionals and the opportunity to work with musicians in the groups has brought elements that we could not otherwise provide. I think that the musicians have also had the opportunity to learn a little about working with children with SEND. This project has been a true partnership from which I believe all parties have benefited.

vi. Communication and knowledge sharing to be deepened at consortium level

Quench Arts CIC was contracted with a brief (which related to Outcome 3 of the programme) to research communication and knowledge sharing between BEYMC partners, specifically:

- To explore and establish communication channels that are time efficient and effective.
- To undertake research involving BEYMC partners to explore possible digital platforms and solutions to enable partners to have live and up to date information about all EY music activity that is currently being offered by consortium partner organisations.

This was broken down into two separate elements, each of which required a separate approach. Firstly, to research communication and knowledge sharing methods currently used by consortium members, and secondly to develop an understanding of music making opportunities offered by consortium partners across the city. The learning against each approach is set out below:

1. To research communication and knowledge sharing methods.

The first step was to lead a session with the BEYMC partners within one of the quarterly meetings (May 2023). In this initial session, the consultation was structured around 4 questions:

- Is a digital platform needed?
- What is needed?
- What already exists?
- What are the challenges?

The attendees were deliberately split into two groups – one group consisted of music partners and the other group consisted of Early Years partners – in order to understand the views of the different parts of the sector. In these groups they considered the points above, with sub prompts to focus their thinking. Responses were collated on flip chart paper and transcribed (Appendix 1).

Both sectors felt the need for an individual ‘champion’ to liaise with both sectors. This ‘champion’ could be the person to update any kind of platform to ensure the offers are current and could act as an advocate for the work to ensure more ‘buy in’. Arts organisations reflected that they needed to think about how to present their offer in a way that was appealing to the families who would benefit the most. Stakeholders suggested that the ‘champion’ could act as a ‘go between’ between sectors, such as promoting offers, attending to requests for support.

The Consortium members broadly felt that, were there to be an online platform, there needed to be a commitment from both sectors to utilise it. It was noted that there are some platforms that already exist that could be utilised and that needed further research. Stakeholders reported that, whatever solution was found, it needed to be sustainable after the life of the Sounds of Play project; capacity was raised as an issue for both sectors therefore any solution is required to be time efficient, useful and used.

A second session was held with the BEYMC (October 2023), during which the following was explored:

- Email communication;
- Hard copy communication;
- Identifying quality opportunities.

These focus areas were chosen deliberately because of the experiences of Early Years Music Champions, and of Quench Arts as Sounds of Play coordinators, who were struggling to reach EY settings via some of the traditional communication methods. Again, Consortium members were grouped around tables and asked to discuss key questions and prompts before summarising views on flip chart paper.

Early years partners fed back that:

- Unsolicited emails that are generic and are not addressed to a person/specific role are unlikely to be passed on to the right person within the EY sector – it’s down to the individual judgement of the administrator. Each administrator will have informal guidance around what emails to pass on and what to delete. Advisable to at least put FAO the headteacher or music coordinator, better to have a name where possible. Settings can get up to 100 marketing emails per day.
- It is best to keep the email brief and to the point with key information. Use appropriate language, such as referring to EYFS. Make it clear if it is free or if it has a cost. Try and personalise it – such as mentioning the area they are located. This will make it more appealing and more likely to be followed up.
- Senders should think about the subject line of the email – this is where a lot of decisions around what to do with it are made!
- Any email should be followed up with a telephone call (and call beforehand to find out who to address the email to).
- Most settings prioritise responding to parental engagement on email with other emails having lesser priority.
- Most settings do not display hard copy promotional information, most just gets recycled.

- contact details and links should be obvious so it's easy for the schools/setting to find out more.

Following this initial consultation, desk research was undertaken around different platforms that could be beneficial if the BEYMC did decide that this would be a good route for increasing communication. The following sites were explored:

- BEP (Birmingham Education Partnership) – don't currently have an EY section
- 50 Things – would need to be physically updated
- Birmingham EY Network – pro: is EY specific – con: would need to be physically updated
- Slack/ MeetUp/ Glasscubes/ BaseCamp/ Wrike/ Screencloud – all would only work if they could be accessed by all organisations and some EY settings block such sites. Also, would again need to be monitored and updated
- Microsoft Teams/Google Hangouts/ WhatsApp/ Facebook- as above – these are more accessible generally but requires each organisation to manually input.

The options were presented to BEYMC partners but the overall feeling from the group was that they do not have the capacity to keep more than their own websites/social media up to date and, therefore, each organisation would only find out about the offers if they were proactive and visited/followed each others' sites. At each consultation undertaken with the group, the consistent message was that the best way that everyone could keep up to date would be to have a person dedicating time each week to communicating with everyone.

Given the financial barriers to having a person in such a post without dedicated funding, Quench Arts explored more creative options to see whether another solution could be possible and, as a result of some research, suggested that the following options should be explored by BEYMC:

- a) That a document could be created for all settings as part of staff induction stating who is part of BEYMC and a short description of each partner. This could be a physical and digital document possibly hosted on the Sounds of Play page on The Springfield Project website.
- b) Utilising AI, in particular web scraping¹, could be a way to have an up to date resource of what EY music activities are offered by partners. AI could be used to constantly keep the data current without the need for a person to manually check. If this is a route worth exploring, more funding would need to be sought to employ an AI expert to set this up. If each organisation had an EY page on its own website, the web scraping could be linked to that. This would mean that each organisation would only be responsible for keeping their own website up to date with current offers for it to work.

The second part of Outcome 3 explored was the aim: To develop understanding of music making opportunities offered by consortium partners across the city.

A key aim of the BEYMC meetings was to share knowledge about what music opportunities were available to the EY sector by bringing together the two sectors on a regular basis. It was felt that the best way to measure this knowledge and understanding was through undertaking a baseline

¹ Web scraping is the process of using bots to extract content and data from a website/websites. Unlike screen scraping, which only copies pixels displayed onscreen, web scraping extracts underlying HTML code and, with it, data stored in a database. The scraper can then replicate entire website content elsewhere

questionnaire with partners at the beginning of the programme, which was then revisited at the project end.

The limitation of this data is that over the life of the project there has been much change within the organisations, and many key people have moved on, and so are no longer involved in the programme. To mitigate against this, only the results of the questionnaire where we have a full set of start and end baselines (5 responses in total – 2 music organisations and 3 Early Years organisations) have been analysed however this does also only provide a very small sample size. It is also worth mentioning that all of the organisations completing this task has also been involved in phase 1 of the Sounds of Play programme, so had already been attending meetings over the last grant period.

From this data it can be summarised that the BEYMC partners perceptions of their own knowledge and understanding of the different partner offers has increased by attending meetings a part of the Sounds of Play programme. The pattern of responses does suggest, perhaps not surprisingly, that the knowledge and understanding of partner organisations that have been consistent attendees at the meetings, and/or have been actively involved in the delivery of the Sounds of Play programme, has increased (or at least, stayed the same). Where knowledge and understanding has lowered, this has tended to be where there has been less consistent engagement in the meetings and the wider project.

Project Findings

The Sounds of Play Project has evaluated its processes and its performance against 3 project outcomes with support of the Centre for Research in Early Childhood (CREC) (Outcomes #1 & #2) and Quench Arts (Outcome #3). Presented below is a summary of the project performance against the 3 project outcomes.

Outcome 1: To develop EY music making in settings across all 10 Birmingham districts.

The Sounds of Play project successfully developed early years (EY) music-making opportunities across all ten Birmingham districts by building networks, skills, and confidence within the workforce and embedding music into everyday early years practice. Through the work of the Early Years Music Champions, the project fostered collaboration between music and EY specialists, enhancing professional identity, advocacy, and reflective practice. Champions' diaries and focus group feedback show increased confidence, motivation, and a deepened understanding of music's role in early development. They reported growing recognition of EY music's value across Birmingham, as a direct result of deepening partnerships and engagement across the city. Champions developed into Early Years music advocates who could bridge musical and educational priorities, and through the development of a small team of Champions, supported by a Project lead, challenges such as workload, variable setting contexts, and role balance were mitigated, suggesting a sustainable future model for embedding music in early years practice.

The enquiry-based residencies, CPD sessions, and one-off workshops further strengthened capacity and reach. Across ten residencies, co-design between musicians, educators, and families led to a range of perceived benefits in children's engagement, communication, and inclusion— with particular reference made to neurodivergent and non-verbal children. The 10-week residencies recorded a range of benefits including parents using music at home, and educators gaining confidence to lead and integrate music throughout their routines. The CPD programme demonstrated marked improvements in participants' self-rated confidence and understanding of EY music, while one-off sessions extended access to new settings. Partner organisations reported that their involvement in SoP developed deeper sector understanding of effective and age appropriate practice, enhanced capacity for EY work, and embedded changes in practice, particularly regarding the developmental value of musical play.

Collectively, this evidence shows that Sounds of Play **achieved Outcome 1** by cultivating sustainable EY music practice, workforce development, and sector-wide collaboration, creating lasting impact across Birmingham's early years landscape.

Outcome 2: To increase co-designed approaches to family music making in settings across all 10 Birmingham districts.

There is a range of evidence to suggest that Sounds of Play project increased co-designed approaches to family music-making across all ten Birmingham districts. Through two cohorts of ten-week enquiry-based residencies, educators, musicians, and families developed practices rooted in shared reflection, observation, and responsiveness to children's interests. Co-design evolved differently across contexts but consistently strengthened over time as musicians and practitioners jointly planned, reflected, and adapted sessions based on real-time feedback. Reflection after each session proved crucial for shaping next steps, supporting honest and non-judgemental dialogue about what worked and what to change. Children and parents also became active contributors—sharing song ideas, bringing musical skills, and extending music-making into home life. This iterative, inclusive approach transformed sessions from musician-led performances into collaborative, child-centred experiences shaped by everyone present.

Outcomes demonstrated that co-design not only enhanced the quality of music-making but also deepened engagement, communication, and confidence among children, parents, and practitioners alike. Non-verbal and neurodivergent children found new ways to participate and express themselves; parents became more confident using music at home; and educators gained confidence to lead and integrate music within daily routines. The reflective culture established through the residencies strengthened professional relationships and built a sense of shared ownership, with musicians learning from educators about early years pedagogy and educators adopting more musical confidence. The Early Years Music Champions played a vital mentoring role in supporting co-design, guiding residency pairs to navigate challenges and tailor approaches for different settings.

The evidence also suggests that the work of the Champions (through delivering support and CPD across districts), as well as the one-off sessions delivered by musicians in early settings (co-ordinated by Champions) introduced principles of co-creation even if the period of engagement was short.

Collectively, these developments show that **Sounds of Play met Outcome 2** by successfully embedding co-design as a central principle of early years music-making across Birmingham, creating a model where a significant number of musicians and settings became experienced in positioning collaboration, reflection, and the interests and experiences of children and families at the heart of their music practice.

Outcome 3: To further develop consortium partner's understanding of music making opportunities offered by consortium partners across the city.

Overall, the BEYMC partners have noted that their knowledge and understanding of the different partner offers has increased by attending meetings as part of the Sounds of Play programme. There are some interesting results for individual organisations and, as a broad comment, the knowledge and understanding of the offers of organisations that have been consistent attendees at the meetings, and/or have been actively involved in the delivery of the Sounds of Play programme, has increased or stayed the same. Where knowledge and understanding has lowered, this has tended to be where there has been less consistent engagement in the meetings/ project.

To bring together two sectors on a regular basis is an achievement of note and, as a result, overall the knowledge of each other's work, challenges and sector has increased on both sides. There has been a mutual commitment to working together for the benefit of young children across Birmingham and, as a result, there are more links to be able to develop future Early Years music opportunities, where funding allows. What has been key is the building of personal relationships between people, in person and through online meetings. Both sectors report capacity issues but have valued the time to build relationships through the consortium meetings and the Sounds of Play programme suggesting that **the project met Outcome 3.**

Reflections and Recommendations

Early Years Music

- The Early Years Music Champions have developed an effective network across the ten Birmingham districts and this should be sustained. Relationships have been established and continuation of this will extend the Sounds of Play legacy.
- Co-design is an effective mechanism to support Early Years Music sessions; parents and educators see improvement in children's confidence and engagement as their interests are followed. This format should be continued within music and extended across the breath of parent/ carer sessions.
- Having strategic support for the project, as well as a citywide network, has ensured breath of impact across the whole city. Maintaining strategic support for music and a co-designed approach will further support the value of both early years and music within the city.
- Responsive professional development, including mentoring, is welcomed and impactful. A local offer supports contextual CPD that meets the needs of the sector. The district-led approach should be maintained to ensure the sector can access the professional development it needs.

Research

- The reflective approach embedded in many strands of SoP has provided extensive data as well as supporting the iterative process of project development. There is scope for further/ deeper analysis of reflective data.
- The vast quantity of qualitative data generated by this project provides a strength, in terms of trustworthiness of research findings there is a triangulated view with the perspectives of musicians, Champions, parents, leaders and sector partners etc. The detail offered through the qualitative nature of the enquiry, and the focus on process, mitigates the complexities of outcome-based measures within the sector and illustrates impact.