



musical
connections



Musical Connections (The Phoenix) Summary Evaluation (Nov 2019 – August 2020)



Introduction

Musical Connections is a project for isolated and vulnerable adults living in Birmingham & Solihull. The project has been running for 22 years and achieved highly commended for the Art, Mental Health and Wellbeing category at the National Positive Practice Awards 2015 and was shortlisted as finalist for the National Lottery Good Causes Awards (2016).

Across the period November 2019 to August 2020, our Awards for All (National Lottery Community Fund) grant enabled us to offer musical support to address the social isolation of vulnerable and disabled adults who don't fit NHS commissioning criteria for our new Personalised Health Budget offer (those entitled to Section 117 aftercare as a result of being sectioned under the mental health act). The project has developed a strong model and evidence base in regards to using creative music making and collaboration to build participants' confidence, personal and social skills, initially through individual sessions in order and then managed progression to group activities.

In Spring 2020 the Covid19 pandemic significantly affected our ability to offer any face-to-face sessions as result of the national lockdown. As a result, the majority of our activities moved to online/remote provision of support from 16th March 2020. We have worked incredibly hard throughout the pandemic to make sure that our offer remains inclusive and accessible to those most in need. We have liaised with each participant about how they would like to continue engaging in the project and offered people the choice of regular telephone or Zoom sessions (individually or in small groups, as preferred) and also produced a range of worksheets, newsletters and video materials sent out by email or post to each participant, to keep them musically engaged. As can be seen in our evaluation materials below, the project has thus met the two Awards For All funding priorities:

- Bringing vulnerable, isolated and disabled adults together to build strong relationships and a creating a supportive community through lockdown;
- Enabling more people to fulfil their potential in creative music activities based on the 5 Ways to Wellbeing.



Summary of Activity

The grant directly funded:

-Our Music Support Worker to work 1 day a week for 38 weeks across November 2019 to August 2020. Across this period the Music Support Worker engaged with 25 different people on a regular basis, delivering 114 individual sessions and 28 collaborative sessions of up to 3 hours. He also supported members at 4 Musical Connections group sessions and 1 project fundraiser concert. He also assisted members to attend other events in the local community, including supporting project members to perform at 5 external events/concerts (an Arts All Over The Place gig, 2 x Brainstorm open mic nights; 2 Brainstorm park gatherings on lockdown easing).

-4 larger group face-to-face sessions, each led by one of our Musical Connections Music Leaders with support from the Music Support Worker plus 2 peer mentors (longstanding project member volunteers). These group sessions benefitted 21 different members.

- 5 sets of newsletters, worksheets and videos, sent out to 65 members via email and post in place of the remaining 5 group sessions (which couldn't be delivered in person due to Covid19).

-5 specialist interest face-to-face group sessions, focusing on a specific skill/development area selected by our member advisory group. These included sessions on music theory, percussion skills, samba drumming, singing warm-ups/games/rhymes, and a 'mindful music' workshop. These special interest sessions benefitted 11 different members.

-4 sets of worksheets and videos sent out to members via email and post in place of the remaining 4 special interest sessions (which couldn't be delivered in person due to Covid19). At the request of our members' advisory group, these focused on 'World' music and improvisation, keyboard skills, folk music and performing together.

-1 Musical Connections fundraising concert, held on 24th January. This raised £124 with an audience of 35, plus performers. 2 other fundraising concerts planned for 1st May and 17th July couldn't be held due to Covid19.

All Musical Connections videos created and sent to members through lockdown can be viewed at: <https://tinyurl.com/MCOnlineSessions>

Newsletters and worksheets created and sent to members through lockdown can be viewed at: <https://www.quench-arts.co.uk/musical-connections-covid19-resourc>

Examples of musical tracks created can be heard at:

https://soundcloud.com/quench_arts/sets/musical-connections-2020-sessions





Evaluation

As a result of Covid 19 our normal monitoring and evaluation processes have not been able to be completed. For example, we have not been able to observe members completing the worksheet and video activities provided since lockdown and under normal circumstances we would hold reflection meetings with each participant to review their aims for the project based on the 5 Ways to Wellbeing and to revisit baseline activities with them. As a result of Covid19 an evaluation to this level of detail has not been possible as the activities do not translate well over Zoom/written questionnaire due to the needs of our participants and the necessity of being able to respond to any non-verbal communication. However, our Music Support Worker has given some examples of member progression below and we have also collated some quotes of participant feedback regarding the activities supported by this funding

Musical Connections Music Support Worker Examples of Progress (written by Steve Ison)

Participant KH

KH is a long standing member of Musical Connections who was involved in a car accident when he was young. This left him with brain damage and, as a result, learning difficulties and mobility issues which remain with him as an adult. As result of these challenges, he has faced regular bouts of depression. I've been recording music with KH at ACMC since before lockdown, using multi-tracking to help him realise his vision for his songs. Since lockdown our sessions have been on Zoom and he's been able to use the sessions as an opportunity to perform a lot of new tracks he's been writing to an active listener (me) in a safe environment. KH has responded to the isolation imposed by Covid in a positive way, using the time to write a lot of original new songs and develop his skills with computer software to explore production possibilities that he's never tried before. This is how he plays his work to me now, singing live over a backing track he's created. I've been able to encourage him in this, responding positively to his new songs and reflecting back to him how much he's been developing as both a writer and performer

Participant PM

PM has been involved with the Musical Connections project for a number of years and has diagnosed anxiety and depression. I've supported PM with his music as a second guitarist and

harmony singer at a Musical Connections and a Brainstorm gig since November 2019, using 1-1 sessions to practise for these. He has a lot of fear and reticence about performing live but I've encouraged and supported him as best I can with this and he's always said he's felt good after performing, even if he had to face his fear beforehand. My main role in our 1-1 sessions, though, has been helping PM develop his original songs, suggesting different structures, chord changes, etc, and giving him encouragement and support. Since Covid 19, this role has continued, although we both noticed there was a lot more difficulty doing this on Zoom than face to face, such as the time lag making it impossible to play along live with each other and make suggestions in the moment. PM expressed to me he's been a bit depressed since lockdown but has still used the time to develop as a guitar player, listening to a lot of blues music and bringing these techniques into his new songs. He's said that having regular sessions with me, where I've been able to help him edit and shape his ideas, has given him the impetus to finish songs, as well as being something he really looks forward to. A very recent song I helped him to develop and shape was one he wrote for his sister, who he'd just regained contact with for the first time in 30 years. He was very nervous about performing it to her beforehand but said he was so glad he did afterwards and that the feeling and words in the song he'd written actually brought her to tears.

Participant BB

BB has been involved in the Musical Connections project for a number of years and was referred to the project due to suffering from anxiety after an illness which resulted in her having to cease working (which previously was an important part of her life). Church is an important element in her life and a key focus to her social life. BB has sickle cell anaemia and has had to shield through the Covid19 pandemic. I've been working with BB since November in my Music Support Worker role on music that expresses her Christian faith. She usually has a tune and lyrics in her head and relies on me to find the chords that go behind them on guitar to shape them into complete songs. After a few sessions together working on a particular track, we record a version of it and make CDs that she's able to proudly share with family and friends. She's also used these CDs as backing for singing the songs live with in her local church, which she says has given her a lot of joy and positive feedback. As well as this, prior to Covid19, I supported BB in a live Musical Connections performance singing an original song, which although she was quite nervous about beforehand, went successfully and she expressed to me afterward how happy she was doing it.

When face-to-face sessions were affected by Covid19, BB downloaded the Zoom application so we could continue doing sessions online. Through the Zoom sessions she's broadened her musical horizons from writing purely Christian music to making a rap, writing a song about her family and creating other work about her feelings on lockdown. These Zoom sessions are not ideal, as we can't sing live together as we would face to face, due to the slight time delay. However I can still help her translate her musical ideas into reality through back and forth feedback between us, finding out what BB likes from my music/lyrical suggestions and what she doesn't. Due to the aforementioned time delay constraints, the finished songs with guitar have unfortunately be sung just by me rather than by BB herself as before. However, between us we managed to make a rap song that BB wrote work, recording it live with her rapping the verses and me singing the chorus - more by luck than anything though! Even given the limitations of working this way, BB has expressed to me how much she's enjoyed these sessions, as they give her an opportunity to express herself creatively, lift her mood and provide her something positive to look forward to.

Participant YS

YS is a longstanding member of Musical Connections who has a long history of poor mental health, including depression and psychosis, having been sectioned in the past. She has a mild learning difficulty and has been involved with the project since being discharged back into the community. YS has been having regular sessions with me through lockdown by telephone, as Zoom isn't an option due to her fear of technology. She's felt very isolated and has been suffering with her mental health through this time and has used the sessions with me to express her feelings through music. For our 1-1s, I ring her up and she talks a little about the poems she's been writing and what sort of musical style she'd like to go with them. I then play guitar in the way she's suggested and record her singing live with the phone on loud speaker. She instantly finds tunes for her poems from my chords and improvises a song melody from this in the moment. In each of our sessions, YS works on 2 or 3 poems that she turns into songs, following this process. Although YS has told me that she misses the face to face sessions a lot, she's said our regular one-to-one sessions have given her the impetus to keep writing and express herself freely in music which "always makes me happy."

Participant BC

Participant BC joined Musical Connections in 2018. He was referred to the project from his mental health hub and, many years ago, used to be a gigging musician, playing bass in a reggae band. As a result of a previous drug addiction and depression, he had lost musical confidence and hadn't played for many years but was keen to join the project and start playing again. Within my job as Music Support Worker, I started running one-to-one sessions with BC playing bass, initially just jamming together. He expressed an interest in getting a band together, so with another regular Musical Connections member, VS, on drums/vocals, myself on guitar and volunteer Jameela on vocals, the band "Mellow Vibe" was born. Since November (before lockdown), Mellow Vibe practised regularly, developing a small set of songs which were written collaboratively by members. This culminated in a 3 song set performed at the last Musical Connections concert. BC really enjoyed the camaraderie of being in a band, saying how much he loved the music and how great it was to finally be in a band again (it had been about 20 years since his last experience). BC would often comment on how he would practise his bass lines at home and how much he looked forward to band practises, giving him a positive reason to get out the house, which he said he normally wouldn't do. Since Covid19, BC has regularly been in contact with me by phone, checking in and asking about other Musical Connections members and staff, although initially he didn't want individual Zoom sessions. He's very enthusiastic about Mellow Vibe starting up again when restrictions are lifted and wants me to let him know as soon as we're able to practise again. Recently he's expressed an interest in having one-to-one sessions with me online. I've been encouraging him to download the Zoom application so that we can do so.



Participant Feedback Quotes

"Musical Connections is amazing! It has provided purpose, lifted my mood, lowered my anxiety, improved my confidence and given me the opportunity to develop skills. For example, I have learned to sing, play a few instruments, as well as write and perform songs with others and on my own. For me, Musical Connections is the sound of hope in these difficult times.

During these difficult times Musical Connections has enabled me to remain connected and continue making music as part of a community. This has helped alleviate feelings of isolation and despair. The classes, videos, and other sessions have been great for developing musical skills and for getting feedback.

Another great thing about Musical Connections is that they actively listen to the members. For example, after every session feedback is collected and used to shape the service. Another way is via the Members Advisory Group where we are encouraged to choose the kinds of sessions that will meet our and other member's needs and interests."

E. Campbell, Musical Connections member

"Things have been very difficult. In February I had a brain tumour removed and then I came out of hospital to Covid-19. Just before the operation, Nicola (Musical Connections music leader) ran a group session and we wrote a song around 'The Calm Before the Storm'. It was great because we were bouncing ideas around and there were about ten of us there.

The main thing I've been doing during lockdown are Zoom sessions with Steve (Musical Connections Support Worker). In true MC style the sessions have been great; I've written seven songs and I have played them to him. He has helped me get a home studio project on the go. I have fixed my computer finally and have got the soundcard, etc and Presonus software which means I'll try and work from home. Steve (Musical Connections Support Worker) said my writing has improved and I'm able to write quickly....I intend to show Steve my songs done using my computer. Hopefully I will show everyone the songs. You guys have been a great help as isolation has seemed less daunting and more like old times."

Gary Morris, Musical Connections member

"I found Musical Connections during the lockdown to be extremely helpful and beneficial. I also was involved with Pete (Musical Connections music leader) and his assistant last year. I really enjoyed it. I took part in the concert on the last day. Without Musical Connections I would have been lost. I enjoy singing and keeping in touch with other members. In the lockdown we were given so many things to do, such as newsletters, DVDs, which involved Paul, Arjun, Steve, James and Nicola (Musical Connections music leaders). We had information about Mindfulness from Nicola and also quizzes asking questions about the newsletters. There was so much information to keep us going. Liz and Nic (Quench Arts Directors) have been amazing and worked very hard.

This project has helped me through social isolation at this lockdown period to know there's someone and something to look forward to. I have also written 7 poems which have been shared on Facebook and in the newsletters. There is so many things to say but I value Musical Connections as much as going somewhere special."

Miss Bernie Beckford, Musical Connections member

"I have benefitted from Musical Connections weekly support from Steve Ison. He has helped me with performing on Zoom and also provided me with helpful guidance on working on my music album."

Andy Wickett, Musical Connections member

"Musical Connections (MC) has helped me to become more confident while performing. In the past I was very nervous, like at my first gig, but now I am lead frontman of MC rock band 'The Devilators' and we have done small MC gigs like at West Brom."

Paul Nicholls, Musical Connections member

"Musical Connections has helped me through the years with creativity and keeping me calm."

Kieran, Musical Connections member.

"Having the sessions with you has helped me keep at it, writing lyrics and singing. It's given me something to look forward to every week. I love singing and doing music always makes me happy. We've made some really nice songs. I miss the face to face and group sessions though."

Yvette, Musical Connections member.

"Basically Musical Connections has been especially useful at this time as I have been able to use the skills I've learned from coming to sessions previously to make compositions and do my own music. I also believe I've been able to become better as a musician through my experiences of working with other people. I feel connected with other Musical Connections members whether I'm actively involved with others there or just at home writing songs on my own. As a member I just feel that sense of connection to community and that helps me feel less isolated in myself. A new world of music possibilities have opened for me since joining Musical Connections."

Victoria, Musical Connections member

Next Steps

Towards the end of June, Quench Arts found out that we were successful with an application for the Coronavirus Mental Health Response Fund, managed by Mind, for the Musical Connections project.

This funding will provide funding for us to sustain the project until April 2021 and to:

- Continue the Musical Connections Support Worker-role for a further 28 days (1 day a week, October 2020-April 2021) to deliver additional one-to-one/small group activities for existing/past Musical Connections members (via digital, telephone, face-to-face), delivering 140 sessions plus supporting large group sessions.
- Recruit 20 new Musical Connections members, adults whose mental health has been affected by Covid19, to each receive 8 one-to-one sessions (via digital/telephone/ face-to-face), 45mins per session.
- Offer 60 existing Musical Connections members 4 'catch-up' sessions of 15mins (via phone/digital) (until April 2021), to support their continued wellbeing.
- Give phone calls to 50 past Musical Connections members not currently engaging to see whether they want to re-engage in group sessions/Music Support Worker sessions.

- Run 8 monthly large group sessions (delivered by a Music leader plus Music Support Worker), from Sept 2020-April 2021, 3 hours each session, delivered either online/face-to-face/via post, dependent on Government/sector guidance.

Through creative music-making supported by Mental Health First Aid trained professional music leaders, this funding will allow us to continue to help members to understand and express their emotions, to build resilience through a support network and to develop soft and transferable skills such as self-esteem, social skills, self-discipline, the ability to listen, compromise and team-working.

Quench Arts Directors are committed to finding further funding to support project activities beyond April 2021.

