

A circular logo with a teal background and the text "Lewisham music" in white. The background of the entire page is a photograph of a person's hands in purple and teal sleeves, working with silver foil on a wooden surface. The person is using a tool to shape the foil into various forms, including a large, flat, circular piece and several smaller, crumpled pieces. The lighting is warm and focused on the hands and the work.

Lewisham
music

Sonic Minds

**Evaluation
Summary
Report
2021-23**

**“When I
hold the
mic, it gives
me super-
powers!”**

(Young person, 17)

Con- tents

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Scope of work

Sonic Minds is an award-winning creative music programme delivered by Lewisham Music and funded by [Youth Music](#) and [BBC Children in Need](#). To date this two-year programme has already supported over 300 young people at elevated risk of experiencing mental ill health.

The project combines collaborative songwriting, music production, music technology and drumming workshops facilitated by experienced music practitioners. The music and creative direction of this project has been co-designed and shaped by young people from the outset.

Lewisham Music has worked with a range of education, statutory and voluntary sector partners across Lewisham, Bromley and Bexley, including virtual schools, further education colleges and youth centres. All of these settings are identified as trusted services and safe spaces where care experienced, and displaced young people engage.

The music and stories created by young people are shared with audiences through a 'sonified brain sculpture' created by sound artist Gawain Hewitt. The interactive sculpture features the music created by participants from across the programme, the installation has been exhibited in various South London civic and cultural venues.

Underpinning this programme of work is an aim to better understand the connectivity and correlation between music-making and young people's wellbeing. To help us explore this further Sound Connections were

commissioned as our independent evaluation partner.

"London Youth's 'Try Something New Award' recognises organisations that have expanded their delivery to offer something new to young people. The Sonic Minds programme was clearly designed to respond to the impact of the pandemic on young people's mental health. The extent of youth involvement in the programme, from design to introduction of young leaders, reflects best practice for youth organisations. The programme had demonstrably positive outcomes for the young people who participated." (London Youth)



Project context and back- ground

Last year, the [Office of National Statistics](#) found that the mental wellbeing of young people in the UK is in decline, with the charity [Young Minds](#) estimating that five children in every UK classroom have a mental health problem.

Care experienced young people (also referred to as looked-after children) have consistently been found to have much higher rates of mental health difficulties

than the general population, including a significant proportion who have more than one condition ([The Mental Health Foundation, 2002](#)). They are approximately four times more likely to have a mental disorder than children living in their birth families ([NSPCC, 2015](#)).

Displaced young people, including unaccompanied asylum-seeking children also face significant additional factors that contribute to the experience of mental ill health. These factors include: a sense of being different from their peers, not being listened to or understood, purposelessness, loss – of community, family, future, fear – of reporting, detention and forced removal. Whilst the national data is less clear around the mental health of displaced young people, it is clear that they are a high-risk group.

“It is so difficult – my brain is not working properly ... if I go to college anywhere I’m not listening to teacher – just thinking about family ... I don’t know where are they.” (The British Red Cross Tracing Service)

Care experienced young people and displaced young people are not a homogeneous group, and the link between their lived experiences and mental health is not deterministic, but both groups are significantly more likely to have experienced early adversity.



Pro- gramme headlines

Who we worked with

384 young people

255 hours of music workshops

14 music leaders training in Youth Mental Health First Aid

3 Young Leaders trained

11 Music Leaders employed through the project

205 days exhibiting the Sonic Minds sculpture across 9 venues

4500 members of the public engaged with the Sonic Minds exhibition

196 care experienced children (including those in foster care, residential care, kinship care, hostels or independently, or with their parents or relatives while under the supervision of social workers)

211 displaced and unaccompanied asylum-seeking children

23 different nationalities

38% Female **60%** Male

2% Non binary

12% Aged 9-11 **27%** Aged 12-15

61% Aged 16-25

"I think you need to know that they are the most brave, courageous, resilient, artistic young people, who, whether it's through trauma or experience, have been given an opportunity to represent themselves in a new way, with a new life, and there is a bravery and courage to their music that I don't think I can see in any other group." Yasmin Ali, AKA Y.A Poet, Project Facilitator

resilient

The Evaluation

Leading music education research charity [Sound Connections](#) were commissioned to undertake an independent evaluation of the programme. The evaluation took a qualitative approach to explore the views and experiences of participants, support staff and music leaders to understand if and how Sonic Minds is making progress against the intended outcomes, identifying any barriers to success and making evidence-based recommendations for improvements.

The independent evaluation was led and authored by evaluation specialists Abigail D'Amore (Abigail D'Amore Associates) and Kayte Cable (Big Leaf Foundation), with the support of research assistant Arun Janssens.

The programme evaluation is based on a comprehensive toolkit created by [BOP Consulting](#) as an outcome of initial work to evidence the connection between music making and wellbeing. Identified outcomes for the programme are:

1. To develop young people's wellbeing – creativity, self-efficacy, agency, motivation
2. To improve young people's song writing, composition and performance skills through collaborative musical experiences
3. To develop opportunities for music tutors at all stages of their professional career to collaborate, share practice and explore new ways of working

Preliminary evidence against outcomes

The following is a presentation of evidence towards programme outcomes. It has been collated from the following sources:

- Trial of a check in / check out scale (Music leader led)
- Semi-structured interviews with 9 setting staff from Lewisham, Bromley and Bexley settings and 2 sets of written feedback in response to the questions
- Informal interviews with young people (Music leader led)
- 18 Reflective feedback forms completed during the project, 16 from music leaders and 2 from setting staff. This included several prompts asking how many (All, most, some, none, N/A) young people were observed demonstrating certain skills, behaviours and actions. This was not a 'checklist', rather a way of capturing whether there were any trends towards certain outcomes. The data collection is ongoing, therefore the data we are presenting has been represented here as emerging.

'Setting staff' refers to those employed by Lewisham College, Lewisham Virtual School, Bromley College, Bexley Virtual School for Looked After Children and Welling Youth Centre who work with the young people on a regular basis.

'Music leader' refers to those engaged by Lewisham Music to deliver the project activity.

'Young people' refers to the participants in the sessions, who ranged in age from 9–25.

Outcome 1: To develop young people's wellbeing – creativity, self- efficacy & agency, & motivation.

Wellbeing

There was universal agreement from setting staff that they have observed positive changes in students' wellbeing during projects, although interpretations of 'wellbeing' differed.

Lewisham Virtual School for Looked After Children reported that:

"Music and creativity are a vital part of a child's development and can be a powerful therapeutic tool for children who have experienced trauma. Music gives children an opportunity to express themselves, their identity, and their feelings, as well as a chance to interact with other children in an alternative setting to the formal classroom environment. Creative experiences can provide an outlet for children to be heard and to share their stories and ideas."

"[They would] Come in quite meek, but in the music sessions having a lot of fun, expressing themselves and come into their own which doesn't happen in [other] lessons. As far as wellbeing, it's a positive thing for them to do".
(Setting staff)

In this presentation of 'check-in check-out' data, there is an incremental increase in average scores at the end of the sessions:

Session	Check in (average)	Check out (average)	+/-
Lewisham College entry 1: Week 1	3.78	4.28	+0.5
Lewisham College entry 1: Week 2	3.54	3.59	+0.05
Lewisham College entry 1: Week 4	3.84	4.39	+0.55
Lewisham College entry 1: Week 8	3.92	4.84	+0.92
Lewisham College entry 2: Week 1	3.71	4.03	+0.32
Lewisham College entry 2: Week 2	3.94	4.33	+0.39
Lewisham College entry 2: Week 4	4.02	4.83	+0.81
Lewisham College entry 2: Week 8	3.94	4.92	+0.98
Bromley College pre-entry: Week 1	3.5	4	+0.5
Bromley College pre-entry: Week 2	4.06	4.21	+0.15
Bromley College pre-entry: Week 4	3.82	3.7	-0.12
Bromley College pre-entry: Week 8	4	4.96	+0.96
Bromley College entry 1: Week 1	3.5	4.46	+0.96
Bromley College entry 1: Week 2	3.82	4.84	+1.02
Bromley College entry 1: Week 4	3.6	4.76	+1.16
Bromley College entry 1: Week 8	4.02	5	+0.8

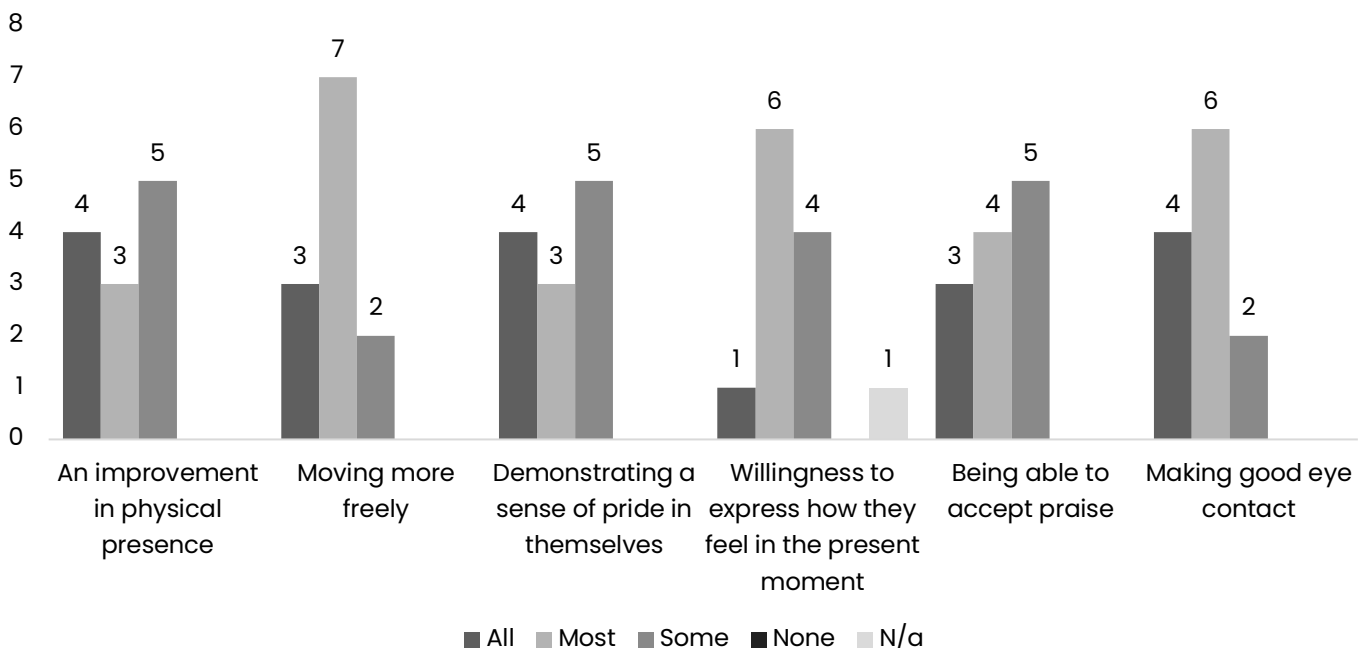
heard

“At the beginning of the session, a young person appeared somewhat withdrawn. [They were] disengaged and appeared distressed. After discussing their needs and intentions for the session, they appeared significantly happier, commenting that they felt ‘heard’. They expressed their gratitude for having access to instruments that they otherwise would not have access to. When they initially played the piano, [they were] dismissive of praise, however throughout the session, they appeared more accepting of the acknowledgement of their musical talent. The change in their wellbeing was visibly evident through their words, level of engagement, facial expressions, posture etc.” (Setting staff)

“Most young people were able to communicate their feelings throughout the sessions especially at the start of every workshop where we had open discussions and morning check in.” (Music leader)



Reflection on how many young people in the sessions were observed displaying the following indicators of wellbeing:



This implies a slight leaning towards the physicality of the music sessions – movement, eye contact, and slightly less around self-expression and accepting praise.

Amna's Story

Amna is a young woman from Pakistan who participated in the Sonic Minds project at Bromley College. She explained that she always enjoyed listening to music – in particular the dhol – but had never had the opportunity to play or learn prior to her involvement with Sonic Minds.

Over the ten weeks of the project, Amna learned how to create her own rhythms on djembe, compose melodies, and sing in groups. She highlighted the drums as her favourite part of the workshop and responded positively to leading and conducting the rest of her classmates during group pieces.

Towards the end of the workshop cycle, Amna began to volunteer to sing more often. During discussion, Amna explained that she would often laugh because she was nervous about singing. She acknowledged that she would like to develop her voice so that she can become more comfortable singing in front of people.

Amna indicated that playing music improves her mood and increases her confidence.



confidence



Agency

Setting staff reported evidence of increases in young peoples' agency. Staff recalled that the sessions allowed students to express themselves and their emotions through the music activity, especially for those young people who experience shyness, or for whom English is a new language. The non-verbal, often physical-cue-based communication involved in the drumming is an example of this.

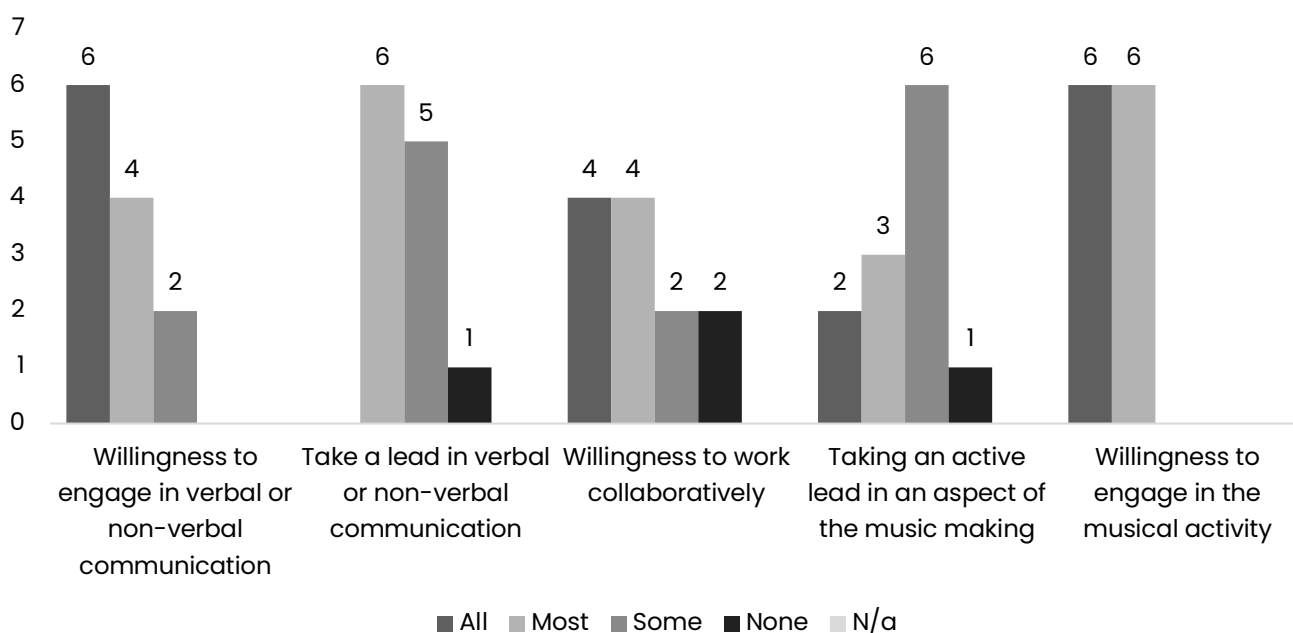
The musical activities were considered an effective way of the young people being able to express themselves in an equal way, in contrast for example to other more academic sessions with a focus on English (in the College settings).

"It was very positive experience, really good for the class to be able to express themselves in a different medium, when they had to work as a whole group and follow instruction." (Setting staff)

"Because at times there is no need to speak, they are able to [express themselves] quite efficiently themselves. They're all working towards one goal, whereas in English [lessons] there are some who are better and others who take ages to catch up. Music is a leveller." (Setting staff)

"There is still reluctance for some young people to share individually and often the language barriers mean that sometimes there is a challenge to articulate their feelings and express themselves how they want." (Music leader)

Reflection on how many young people in the sessions were observed displaying the following indicators of agency:



There is a marginal trend towards observing individual engagement, and slightly less towards taking a lead, but this is very incremental. However, where taking an active lead in the group (for example by leading the improvisation) was observed it was felt this was a highly empowering experience:

“Little things like a young person opting to be the drum leader [dictating] how many beats they want the other students to do. That kind of activity was very empowering. The young people were leading at the front.” (Setting staff)

Setting staff observed a willingness to work collaboratively and in some cases building and/or strengthening friendships, even though in some cases this was met with initial resistance.

“Initially, there was some resistance to working collaboratively with others, however throughout the session, some young people began building positive relationships, and worked together to create powerful musical pieces whereby various instruments were used.” (Setting staff)

Many comments referenced how the programme helped the young people to work together in groups, and this bonding continued into other classes.

“In the class there is one student who has various learning difficulties. There had been ongoing problems between [them] and other students. [They] in particular flourished in the [music] sessions. They like music, that’s what they do to relax.”

skills

"They really enjoyed it and in the final session when we did the recording he got up and sang. [They were] extremely confident and others saw that. [Music as a] really important thing for them and for their relationship with other students." (Setting staff)

There is limited evidence in this data set that this project developed English language skills, however some music leaders observed that this could be an area for further consideration:

"A positive outcome was how the musical learning and the learning at the college overlapped, especially when it came to learning songs and looking at lyrics. A number of young people in our group got very into learning lyrics and going away and looking up the words and a couple even came in and said that they learnt the other verses. So, I think, in developing their English skills, it was nice to see how music could impact that learning as well." (Music leader - reflection session)

Iniyavan's Story

Iniyavan is an 18-year old young man originally from Sri Lanka who has been in the UK for nearly four years. He took part in the Sonic Minds project at Lewisham College.

Iniyavan was enthusiastic throughout the project and enjoyed the full range of activities within the Sonic Minds programme. However, he highlighted the social activities and games such as Musical Chairs and Red Light, Green Light (introduced by the facilitators to energize the participants and develop their listening skills) to be his favourite part. Iniyavan took on the challenge of making his own music with great energy. The facilitators and participants



particularly enjoyed hearing him improvise lyrics while drumming. Iniyavan feels that creating original music was the hardest part of the project, as it is difficult to 'find the correct sound'.

An aspiring Youtuber, Iniyavan acknowledges that he has picked up transferable skills through Sonic Minds. *"If I create any music, I can use these skills. If I do, [for example] intro for my video, yeah, I can use the things I learned from music."* Iniyavan is eager to keep learning music and has indicated that he wants to learn piano or guitar so that he can come up with melodies to complement the rhythmic and compositional skills he's learned through Sonic Minds. Iniyavan feels that activities like "playing and music makes you have higher energy" and can help with stress.

Motivation

In the majority of project environments, setting staff observed an increase in motivation for the music activity as the sessions progressed.

An example was given by one of the College staff of young people initially arriving late and refusing to take the drums and play. They arrived on time for the second session, took the drums and started playing without any prompting. Following this they started asking about when the next music session was.

"[Motivation] varied a bit. One student was sometimes reluctant, but they always came and participated. Some were nervous at the start – music was such an unfamiliar thing to them at the beginning but the fact that [the music leaders] kept [the] same routines helped them to feel more familiar, knew what to expect."
(Setting staff)



"Sonic Minds was a beneficial project, and it is a shame that at times it was not well attended, this is often the case with displaced young people that have many other life circumstances to manage. Nonetheless the young that did attend really enjoyed it. Confidence grew and brilliant pieces of music were produced."
(Setting staff)

Some staff also commented on the positive behaviour, focus and concentration observed from young people in the music sessions, sometimes in contrast to other lessons.

"On the whole [they] were more cooperative and more focussed. [As they] have something to do with their hands, they will put their phones away – I have to confiscate them normally. Their concentration was good."
(Setting staff)

Self-efficacy

There are indications that the programme is improving self-efficacy among the young people, particularly relating to an increase in self-confidence and self-esteem, being more

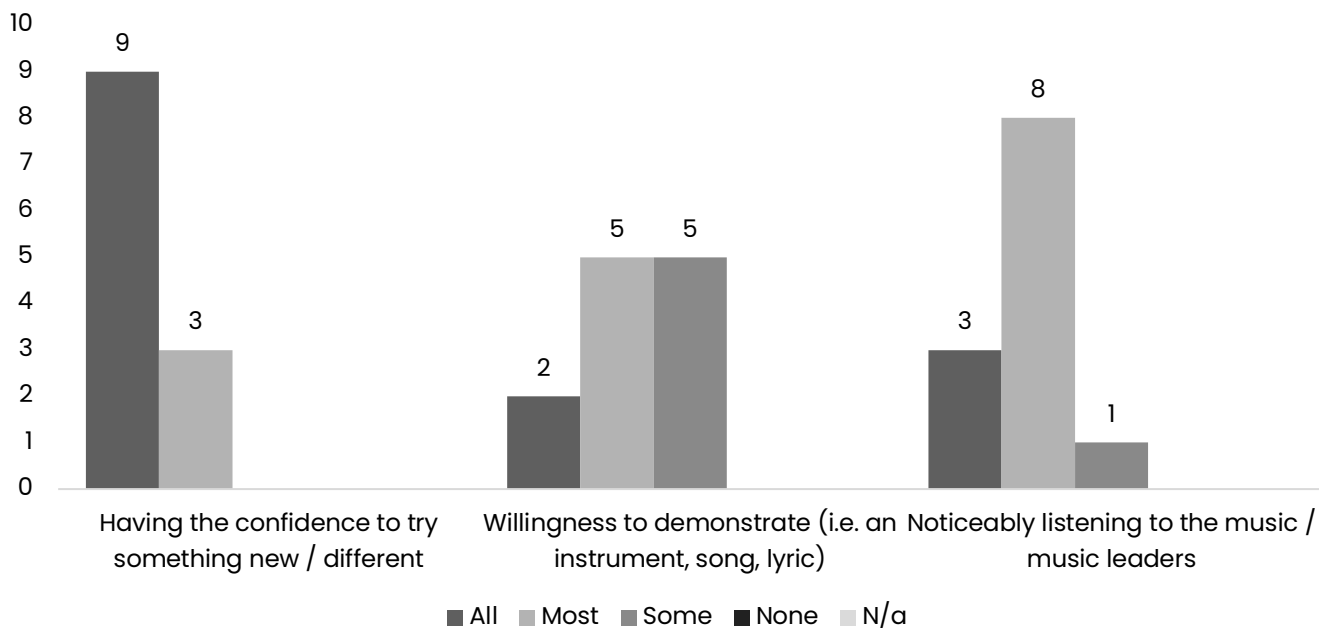
willing to demonstrate and to step outside of their comfort zones with the music leaders in a safe environment.

"During the session, I noticed a significant difference in a young person's self-efficacy. [They were] initially reluctant to engage in singing and songwriting, commenting that their vocals were 'not good enough'. Towards

the end of the session, they appeared more confident, actively engaging in singing activities and positively contributing various ideas."
(Setting staff)

"It has been a real journey with this group, the group have found their voice and confidence through this process. We have seen young people start to gain the confidence to lead activities, record and listen to themselves."
(Music leader)

Reflection on how many young people in the sessions were observed displaying the following indicators of self-efficacy:



The observations in the reflective feedback forms above for self-efficacy were the strongest, in comparison to wellbeing, agency and motivation.

In the College settings staff reported that some young people, particularly in the pre-entry groups who are new to English and to this country, entered the project lacking confidence. As the sessions progressed a growth in confidence among some of these young people was noted:

“Confidence grew. We had one young person that doesn’t talk very much but by the end they were able to talk about what they enjoyed, what they wanted to do. Wellbeing was definitely impacted in a positive way.”
(Setting staff)

“[One student] who was very shy was one of the ones who performed a song in the final session. To see [them] stand up – [they] speak very quiet normally – but [they were] prepared to come up to the mic and perform.” (Setting staff)

“The group are engaged and passionate about music, they appear at times to lack self-belief and confidence, but they show support to one another and are willing to engage collectively.” (Music leader)

One member of staff felt that being able to make mistakes, and have the opportunity to do something well no matter what their ‘academic’ ability, was an important factor for this:

"One student struggles with English and Maths, they never went to school in their home country. Tends to be quiet and shy in class. Then throughout the sessions I have noticed, they really want to lead, as there is no right or wrong, whatever [they try] with the drum is fine. Because the tutors are so encouraging, students are free to try whatever they want, and they can't make mistakes. In the third session, they volunteered to lead the group, and started to take initiative. Last session before Christmas they asked where they can buy a drum! For me, it was a sign that they really enjoyed doing what [they were] doing in the sessions." (Setting staff)



Prefna's Story

Prefna is a 16-year old girl from Cameroon who participated in the Sonic Minds project at Lewisham College. Prior to her participating, she had no formal music education, but had experience with music-making through church with community members and family. She notes that 'in [her] country, [they] do a lot of singing with voice'.

Prefna's favourite part of the Sonic Minds project was the day where she was asked if she could sing. With the support of the facilitators, Prefna was able to sing church songs in her native languages while being accompanied by her classmates on djembes. A highlight of Prefna's participation from the facilitators' point of view was watching her grow more comfortable with performing each week, which culminated in Prefna volunteering to sing for her entire program at the end of year awards ceremony.

Prefna acknowledges that developing her musical skills through the workshops has boosted her sense of confidence, indicating that she feels 'more security' within herself. She is eager to keep learning and has identified Afro-dance and piano as skills that she would like to develop in the future.



Outcome 2: To improve young people's song writing, composition & performance skills through collaborative musical experiences

Yasmin's Story

Yasmin is a 19-year old young woman from Egypt who participated in the Sonic Minds holiday intensive project in Lewisham. Prior to being involved in the project, Yasmin had no formal music education, although she enjoyed listening to music when it was available.

Yasmin identified learning how to drum as her favourite part of the workshops. In particular, she enjoyed leading call and response activities, where she was able to engage in



musical exchanges with her classmates by playing rhythms and directing how they should respond. One highlight of Yasmin's participation from the facilitators' point of view was when she introduced the class to a popular Egyptian rhythm called 'Shik Shak Shok' and helped teach the class how to play it using djembes and tambourines.

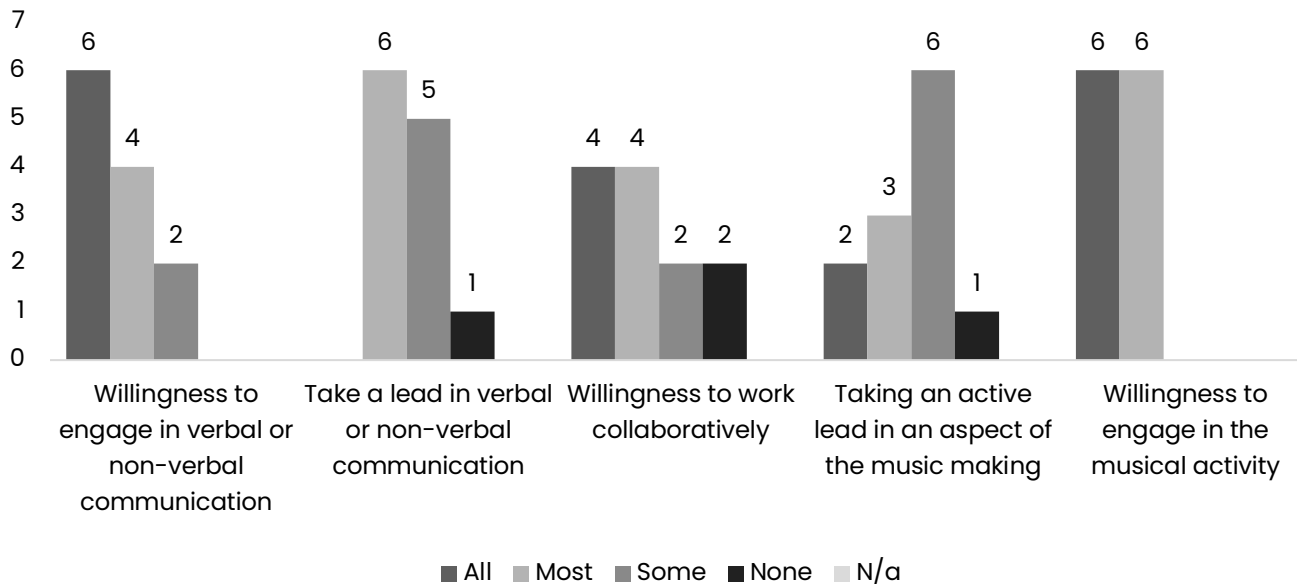
During the latter stages of the workshops, Yasmin was asked to compose an original piece of music, which she described as being 'so difficult but still good to try something new'. Although she rates her improvement in music as 'so-so', Yasmin acknowledges that developing her musical skills through the workshops has boosted her confidence in tackling new challenges. 'I think maybe in the future, I can do something because I like to practice'.

There is consistent evidence in the reporting from setting staff and music leaders that the programme facilitated the development of a range of musical and creative skills, for example songwriting, drumming, listening skills, and developing a sense of rhythm and pulse. This emerging 'mastery' could be a factor towards increased confidence, motivation, and agency.

"The sessions themselves are brilliant – I'm really impressed that the students are following instructions, I'm amazed by how much progress they made." (*Setting staff*)

"Several of them have got really good skills in drumming, different bits of music so having that opportunity to see that part of themselves and have that valued." (*Setting staff*)

This was reflected in the positive numbers of observations of all/most young people being willing to try instruments, participate and producing musical and creative outputs:



The music leaders focussed the activity around creativity, improvisation and play. In some cases, young people wrote and performed their own lyrics, in others they experimented with and explored playing sounds.

“The way they expressed themselves [through songwriting], they expressed themselves in a way I haven’t seen elsewhere.” (Setting staff)

“Some young people had the confidence to share their wishes and feelings. We also identified a young key young person confident in English to voice other young people’s ideas as he spoke in their native tongue.” (Setting staff)

Examples were given of young people being willing to share music from their own countries, and to listen to and appreciate each other’s music. This was seen by the setting staff as a positive – particularly the social aspect of this, sharing identities, and learning about each other.

“They had a pride and a sense that they were able to embrace their own identity in a borough that isn’t very diverse.” (Setting staff)

“They don’t necessarily understand the language, but they were polite, listened to the end and made positive comments. In the past this hasn’t happened, there has been conflict and argument. Here I could see the sharing –

and they found a lot of similarities in their music.” (Setting staff)

“Here they don’t have to have English to express themselves. Because everybody is made comfortable – they can sing songs in their own languages, which is amazing – they had enough courage to stand up and sing in their own language.” (Setting staff)

“From the very beginning we discussed with the young people the aims for the project and asked students to come up with different ideas to make the project relevant. Young people were happy to contribute and shared stories which made it easier for them to be engaged and established an identity for the project.” (Music leader)

This desire for being able to better prepare the young people for the musical activities in advance was also noted by this staff member:

“If I knew they were going to have six weeks of the drums earlier on within the year, I could have built up towards it, and prepared them for it. And help them to see it as part of their learning. Most of them come from traditional educational environments where self-expression and the arts aren’t prioritised.” (Setting staff)

One setting staff member felt that having the music work accredited might be a

development that the programme could consider to further increase motivation.

"If they got some sort of certificate at the end to say they had done it, they need to feel that it's worthwhile. Getting a bit of paper saying you have done six weeks of drumming, this shows excellent team playing skills, and it might be something that makes [the young people] appreciate it even more." (Setting staff)

Adilsia's Story

Adilsia is a young woman originally from Guinea-Bissau who participated in the Sonic Minds project at Bromley College. Adilsia had grown up with music in her environment when she was living in Portugal, as her aunt is a singer, and her family friends are percussionists. She enjoyed dancing to music growing up but had never had the opportunity to learn how to play music.

Over the ten weeks of the project, Adilsia learned how to create her own rhythms on djembe, compose melodies, and sing in groups. She highlighted the drums as her favourite part of the workshop, and the facilitators were impressed with her ability to learn and improvise rhythms.

Adilsia was occasionally willing to demonstrate the way djembes and dance were used in her culture's songs. Initially shy about sharing, she became increasingly confident with leading and demonstrating musical ideas over the 10 weeks of the project. During our discussion, Adilsia noted that music lifts her spirits. She listens to songs that match the mood she would like to be in, noting that she rarely ever listens to 'sad music'. Adilsia acknowledged that she would like to continue with the music workshops, and indicated that she would like the sessions to be extended to between one and a half and two hours.



mastery

Outcome 3: To develop opportunities for music tutors at all stages of their professional career to collaborate, share practice and explore new ways of working

"I believe Sonic Minds was a successful project, young people were introduced to music production and various musical activities. It was an interactive series of workshop where young people seemed to be engaged at all times and even though we faced challenges with cultural beliefs we were still able to communicate collectively through sound."
(Music leader)

During this project the team of experienced music leaders were able to explore and refine their approaches when working creatively with displaced young people. Much consideration for example was given on how to start sessions particularly during initial sessions where building trust was crucial. For example, this included icebreaker games and

starting discussions:

"Starting a conversation, asking them how they're feeling. Sometimes it's just the consistency of being able to articulate your experience over the weekend, and being asked how you were, especially under the circumstances, some of these young people don't get to answer very often." (Music leader - reflection session)

Music leaders discussed some of the considerations with navigating the less 'formal' spaces:

"The community spaces are nice because it's definitely more relaxed. But the issue with that is attendance and retention, it's definitely a lot harder to get those young people there at the right time and day." (Music leader - reflective session)

Modelling was felt to be an effective approach for engaging with the young people:

"Delivered in a friendly way. [They] do a lot of modelling which they really need. [The] two leaders are learning that these groups need a lot more modelling. They give a lot of confidence, fun and sense of belonging."
(Setting staff)

The music leaders were able to be flexible in their approach to meet the needs of individual young people for example:

"Two young boys appeared somewhat disengaged a few hours into the session, struggling to focus and participate in the activities. Music leaders witnessed this, and adjusted their approach, creating a specialised musical task for them. I immediately saw a difference in their level of motivation, and they created an impressive musical piece, appearing proud when showing others their work." (Setting staff)

"I think there's two things that work to help me in this kind of practice. One is just being present and trusting I can find the solution to most situations if I'm present enough, and two

believing in your experience, staying centred, and responding to the needs of the group.”
(Music leader – reflective session)

Music leaders reflected on how making each session feel ‘fresh’ was important, rather than following a prescribed plan. There was some interesting discussion about how different music leaders approached ‘sticking to a plan’, or being fixed on the production of a creative output:

“[It is better] making things fresh every session sometimes rather than having a prescribed plan that was set.” (Music leader – reflective session)

“[Music leader] made a point that sometimes he’ll come in with a plan of how he wants things to go. And there’s a tension that is created when he feels like he’s trying to orchestrate young people to do the thing that he’s got in his head. What’s often, both helpful for the session and also good for his practice is to be more present and aware of what contributions young people are making. Young people’s contributions can be used to build the music from, instead of dictating next steps. It’s about being present and responding to what’s happening in the room.” (Music leader – reflective session)

Creating a safe environment

Music leaders were able to establish safe environments and trust for the young people to be creative in, and to make mistakes in:

“They’re professionals, doing a fantastic job, really well qualified. I’ve learnt from them – they’re very inclusive, handle the noisy students really well with dignity. They do it very nicely, I like their approach.” (Setting staff)

“Towards the end I found that they were writing lyrics that affected them with regards to their personal experience. They wrote something and mentioned, ‘I love my mom, I love my dad’. Obviously, given their lived experience and their vulnerability, it showed an impact on them in terms of building their trust with the course, but also their... willingness to... relay this creatively to reflect [their] experience.” (Music leader – reflective session)

Music leaders demonstrated much awareness of the barriers and challenges faced by the young people, and the need to constantly reflect on whether approaches are effective for individuals:



"We [talked] about people overcoming the fear of sharing things that were important to their own identity, and how that played out in different ways. In different settings, we have to be sensitive to that. [Music leader] mentioned the situation where something beautiful thing happened... a group of children wanted to sing a religious song in Arabic, but they were very apprehensive about it being recorded. So [while there was] nothing to 'evidence' that activity, it was a great moment nonetheless." (Music leader - reflective session)

There was also an awareness from music leaders of the power dynamics between themselves and the young people, and the sensitivities needed around this. This was particularly apparent with initiating conversations, and with the practitioner-led interviews due to a risk of courtesy bias.

Music leaders discussed how power dynamics to some extent could be overcome by music. For example, when music leaders and participants entered a 'flow state' with participatory music making together:

"There [are] those moments where everybody in the group is just playing together, there's that kind of collaboration and... you're all making music and it doesn't matter who's doing what.... you can just actually lose yourself in those moments. It's just joyful, and really freeing. When you're 'leading', you are constantly thinking about the next activity, it is important to remember those free moments and just enjoy them. And I think, I think students also can tell when you're enjoying yourself." (Music leader - reflective session)

Music leaders felt that in future, dependent on the needs of the group, meditative exercises and approaches could be incorporated into the sessions to support wellbeing:

"Sometimes it's strictly music, but it would be key to facilitate more of a mental health aspect, and then embed that more in the lessons. Perhaps you combine... breathing techniques, or just wellbeing exercises that could be incorporated. It goes hand in hand

with the music and the wellbeing a more intentional way. Combining emotions with music, teaching skills, but allowing them to also advocate things that are important to them." (Music leader - reflective session)

"There could be more room to spend more time on things like meditative activities, or dealing with stage fright, or performance anxiety or, sitting up with good posture and projecting, all these little things that I think are transferable skills towards life outside of music that can be very intentionally practiced in these sessions". (Music leader - reflective session)

This would be dependent on taking cultural sensitivities into account:

"Culturally, there might be some resistance, because obviously, some of these participants come from, cultures or environments where this kind of thing wouldn't be necessarily as easily taken on. So, I'm fully aware that some of these suggestions might not be appropriate for all groups." (Music leader)

Setting staff felt that having strong and positive role models among the music leaders was positive for motivation:

"[The music leader] guided us through, listening to the young people's needs. [They] speak well to the young people recognising that English is their additional language. We have seen the benefit of having a male role model to our young men. [They have] encouraged and ensured participation at all times." (Setting staff)

"They were very approachable, very positive and enthusiastic. Gave them a lot of good feedback. They handled the students very well." (Setting staff)

It was felt that the young people were trusting and embracing of new people in the space.

"[The music leaders] were very good at creating a nourishing and safe space for them. Take time to speak to each one of them individually. That part of it helped build

confidence with speaking, they felt very seen and heard.” (Setting staff)

Music leaders felt that the project could be even better if there was increased communication with the setting staff in advance, so they could learn more about the needs of the young people:

“[To] have a bit more of an understanding or overview of students and participants with learning difficulties, some general information on the young people, so [we understand] pupils who might need extra support”. (Music leader - reflective session)

“[We] liked the idea of [having] a zoom, so you’ve already had some interaction with the tutors and staff before outside of emails. We can then interpret any ideas that the setting staff has for the session as well. So that integrates the sessions with their lessons.” (Music leader - reflective session)

Another reason for communication in advance with setting staff is around logistics and expectations, which in some cases caused issues for the music leaders:

“I often said there needs to be a member of staff to support this group. Because that member of setting staff knows the group and can really add to that session and even though you communicate that and make it very clear, it doesn’t always happen.” (Music leader - reflective session)

Personal growth and development for music leaders

There is much evidence of the music leaders themselves growing and developing professionally through this process. It was felt that having time and space to reflect together was beneficial, and that in the future this could be extended to incorporate sharing practices, skills etc between each other. These points were highlighted at the music leader reflection session:

“It was really nice to have a really well facilitated reflection.”

“I’m keen on guided meditations and meditations. I love singing bowls. If we’re in the same space, you could then try and just incorporate bits and pieces. Also, creative writing is hugely important. So, to try and create spaces where it could facilitate some kind of free writing session where we all sit down and it’s like a free flow of consciousness and it’s just us connecting with things that centre us and keep us balanced.”

Music leaders were interested in how this could evolve, and also how broader training needs could be met for example increasing understanding of trauma-informed practice.



growth

The Sonic Brain: an exhibition of creativity

As part of this project, we collaborated with sound engineer and artist, Gawain Hewitt to create an interactive sound installation, a brain cast in pewter which when touched trigger recordings of the work made by the young people.

“The piece celebrates the unknowable creativity of the brain. It advocates for the participants of our Sonic Minds project to allow their music and sounds to be elevated and celebrated.” (Gawain Hewitt)

The sculpture is conductive and allows the public to take a journey through music created by displaced young people by moving their finger around the different parts of the sonic brain sculpture. With each touch audiences bring new music and stories to life.

Over the past two years our team of professional musicians have worked with groups of care experienced and displaced young people to create original music and spoken word, capturing their stories, experiences, hopes and ambitions. As the project has progressed, we have built a library of music and spoken word, which serve as a living collection and testament to these young people and their stories.

“I like the fact you can touch the artwork. It goes against the normal museum rules”
(Member of public)



The Sonic Mind on the move...

The Sonic Mind has been making appearances throughout Lewisham over the last few months, it's already been displayed at Royal College of Music, Deptford Lounge, Lewisham Library, Catford Library, Lewisham Shopping Centre, Crossing Borders Festival and a 4-month residency at The Horniman.

Lewisham Music received funding from **Goldsmiths, University of London** to explore the public's engagement with the Sonic Mind sculpture, working alongside community music guru and Goldsmith's lecturer Graham Dowdall.

Audience feedback was collected through a series of face-to-face public conversations/ interviews, alongside feedback collated through a QR code on the sculpture.



Public Feedback

Shifting Perceptions

"Super inspired to hear young people's creativity shine through their music and stories. It was interesting to hear the quality of the music too, I hadn't assumed it would sound as professional as it does."

(Audience feedback)

"Changed my thoughts on what is possible when kids put their minds to something. Very inspiring project and such an important creative outlet for these children."

(Audience feedback)

"Such a hopeful piece of art that made me stop and reflect on the experiences of these children. It was nice that the music wasn't all focussed on their past, instead for many looked to the future."

(Audience feedback)

"I think all too often we just take our perceptions from the news outlets and don't take time to listen and reflect on the actual voices of young refugees. The spoken word pieces knocked me for six and really made me rethink and challenge some of my perceptions."

(Audience feedback)

Music & Mental Health

"One of the teenager's wrote a song about their experience growing up in care, this song was very emotional."

(Audience Feedback)

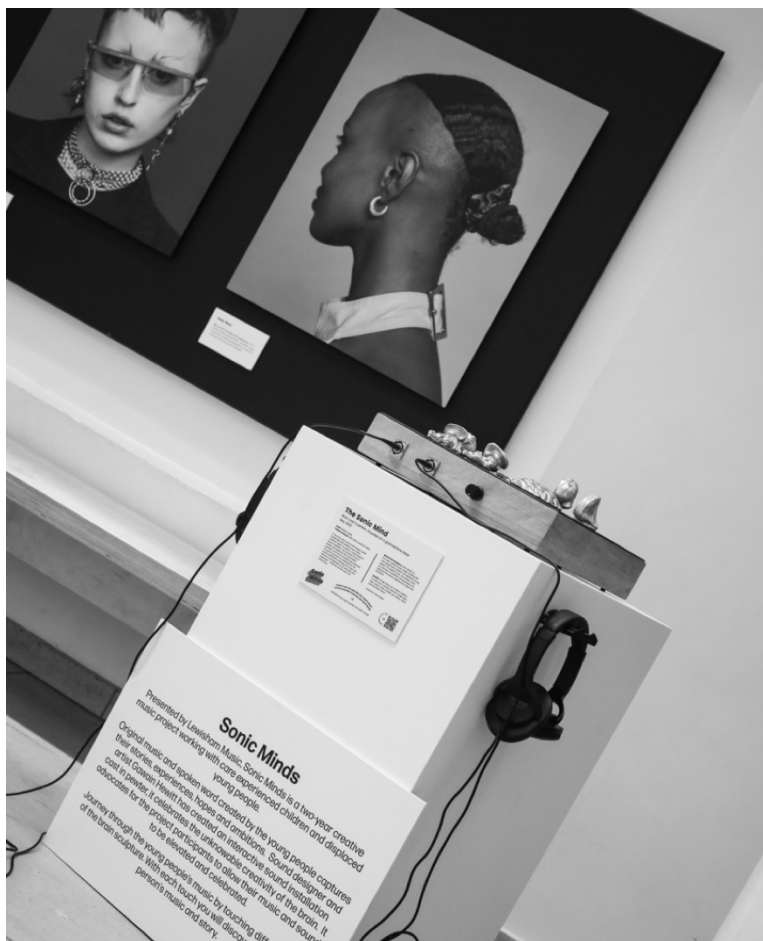
"The piece represents the brain and the link between music and creativity."

(Audience Feedback)

creativity

"I am a music teacher, and I just loved the way this project advocated for the unheard voices of children." (Audience Feedback)

"My experience of the Sonic Minds project is that it has been very successful in terms of balancing process and outcome. It allows for long term, sensitive participatory work with vulnerable young people and then the results of that work can be shared widely. The physical installation is intriguing and beautiful to look at and interact with, and the sound quality is excellent. These high production standards do justice to the young people who are exploring their identities but not currently confident enough to perform." (Assistant Head of Lewisham Virtual School)



Reflections from independent evaluator Graham Dowdall (Goldsmiths, University of London)

Finding meaningful ways to share and disseminate work created by young people, as well as presenting the personal and social outcomes of that work has always been a challenge. This becomes even harder when the

participant artists may have backgrounds, experiences and situations that mean the traditional ways of sharing like live gigs are not appropriate, and when the music and art created may have an intimacy or personal quality that isn't suited to performance in the traditional sense.

Against that background the Sonic Minds sculpture/installation is a highly creative vehicle to engage casual passers-by and present the work of young people who have created incredible music, songs and words expressing themselves, their identities, journeys, and aspirations.

I spent several days observing public engagement with the piece at the Horniman museum and engaging in conversations with the audience around what they got out of it, what they understand about the artists, and the pieces intentions.



Practical design restrictions

It was very clear that the sculpture was incredibly engaging – people wanted to touch, play with it, and people saw it as a beautiful object. The invitation “please touch” was very welcome in a museum environment and the fact that different sonic elements were triggered by touch was intriguing to the audience.

However, the tactile, playability of the sculpture also presented challenges. Few people touched and then listened for extended times. Many saw the sculpture as more of an instrument to be played, opposed to a conduit to longer listening.

For the audience a deeper understanding of the project the recordings needed a longer listen than most people afforded them.

Recommendations

- Shorter sound bites that landed

immediately, with their meaning obvious, will help audiences develop a deeper understanding of the context of the work.

- Placing the piece in quieter environments and perhaps with seats to encourage longer engagement.

The need for context

Photographs of the artist participants and the information boards helped to give context to the connection between music and mental health.

Recommendations

- Consider more soundscape, word bytes and pieces that could be overlaid by the audience playing the installation, and to involve the young people in this final stage of presentation as part of their creative expression.

Overall, the Sonic Minds sculpture is a very innovative creative approach to share the outputs and outcomes of such a valuable project. The challenges give us all some strong

learning and opportunities to reflect on in the search for new ways to advocate and articulate the benefits of this kind of music work.

Independent Evaluators' Observations, reflections and recommendations

Participant awareness and agency

With the sessions held at Lewisham and Bromley colleges, the fact that they were scheduled during the normal timetable meant there was a requirement to attend, and punctuality did not appear to be a problem. These factors can build confidence in a project, and lead to more positive and active engagement. The groups that were observed were fully involved in their sessions, with visible focus and willingness to interact independently, and young people also had the reassurance of their class teacher being present in the activity space.

The session in Welling Youth Centre in Bexley was a smaller group of unaccompanied asylum-seeking children held on a Saturday morning for those who had chosen to attend. This meant there was more flexibility in the group - some had been before, some had not. Due to the 'open access' nature of this project it was not clear ahead of time who would be attending; several participants arrived late,

and with some unclear of the project context. This sort of situation is entirely typical to non-compulsory projects with unaccompanied young people, especially those held during a morning, where many struggle with sleep.

Outside of a formal environment where attendance is mandatory, flexibility by project leaders / practitioners towards young peoples' attendance is vital. It is not uncommon for unaccompanied young people to be signed up for activities by social workers and key workers without having it properly explained to them. There is a strong benefit in regularly explaining the project aims, including the timescales and perceived benefits before, throughout and at the close of each session.

Recommendations

1. Ensure the project aims are clearly outlined and can be presented to a group of mixed level non-native speakers. Ensure that setting staff are familiar with the project so this can be relayed in advance and provide greater context. Include illustrations
2. or demonstrations of desired final outcome / product where possible. Main aims and proposed secondary benefits to participants (i.e., improving English, learning a new skill) are helpful to include. Reiterate (and then elicit) these before the start of the project and during each session. Ideally, all participants should be able to articulate (in their native language, if need be) why they are there and what they are aiming to achieve.
3. Work with setting staff on how aspects of the project can be integrated into other lessons/sessions (for example lyric writing)
4. Ensure the whole group recognises the time frame, including both the length of the overall project and the timings of each session.
5. Thank the participants regularly for their engagement and assure them they are important to the project aims.
6. Look for opportunities to encourage

interaction

agency. In later sessions, give participants the choice of warm up activities and give space for them to voice their opinion on how things are progressing.

7. If the project is not taking place in college time, allow space for young people to step back from participating without redress.
8. Ensure that any newcomer to the group is introduced and integrated and the group are confident about the reasons why they are there.

Space and environment

The sessions at Lewisham College took place in a small-space classroom, with desks pushed to the side and chairs in a circle in the middle. The tighter space of the Lewisham College classroom allowed time and room for us as evaluators to be more physically present in the activity. Rather than holding the position of a neutral observer, which can be unsettling for a group who are naturally wary of strangers, this

set-up enabled opportunity for introductions by the music leaders to the whole group, and an explanation for our presence there. This in turn facilitated the building of familiarity as part of a shared exercise, and time at the end to deliver the feedback activity. When we presented the form at the close of the session, we witnessed more positive interaction with this group, including eye contact, smiles, questions, and more time spent considering the answers.

The presence of the teachers in a backseat position was also helpful, as they could bring their knowledge and unique experience of the groups and individuals within it, to make unobtrusive but informed observations, while members of the group were focusing on the tasks. For the participants, I would suggest that this also added to the sense of a “held space” – their teacher was there, in a well-known space, and was clearly very supportive of the activity. Building and maintaining trust is crucial when working alongside unaccompanied asylum-seeking children, and we noted how many of the group looked to their teacher when they

were praised by the activity leaders, demonstrating their positive response to praise and a desire to share it with their trusted adult.

At Welling Youth Centre in Bexley there was a wider use of general space, with a circle of chairs and sofas placed around the music leader and a games table just outside this circle. Participants were free to move in and out of the circle. The smaller number in this group probably made it more difficult for anyone to move from the circle during session time, as there was no way to do this without being noticed by everyone. We were able to introduce ourselves to the group, but our presence felt



slightly more intrusive in the group, due to the nature of the activities.

The session at Bromley College was in a lecture theatre style room, with fixed line seating requiring use of a much wider floor space, and therefore allowing freer choice of movement and space ownership. The warm-up activities responded to this space by being far more active - the group competed in movement games and in down time moved freely across the floor. There was plenty of space to sit away from the group, but no one made use of this, and were fully involved throughout. Again, the arrival of their teacher for part of the session was clearly welcome and she was able to sit to the side and observe, without bringing any disturbance to the group or activity.

It is important to consider that unaccompanied asylum seekers especially can experience music in different ways. Some may find it triggering of memories of home and these memories can become upsetting; others may have come from environments where music was actively discouraged or even banned, and may prefer to step back from active participation. With these considerations in mind, while it is of course important to gently encourage participation as much as possible, it can be useful to allow breakout space that people can quietly access should they feel overwhelmed.

Recommendations

1. Ensure that the space is contained enough to foster a sense of group ownership and familiarity.
2. Where possible, make certain that there is space for someone to leave the group without drawing attention to themselves, and that everyone is clear about this being acceptable at the beginning of the session.
3. Confidence can be built around newcomers to the group by taking time for introductions and involving them in warm up activities in the main area of the group activity, even if they step onto the sidelines later on.
4. Work with setting staff to ensure smooth logistics for running the sessions (i.e., suitable space, not being asked to relocate due to noise etc) to avoid interruptions to the sessions.
5. Increase focus with music leaders on strategies for building trust and rapport with the young people, particularly during the early part of a project. Meditative activities may be appropriate in some contexts.





Evaluation - methods and content

Initially the evaluation involved a paper-based survey that was distributed to young people at the beginning and end of project sessions. As the evaluation consultancy emerged, we worked with the team on the following:

1. Revising and shortening the paper-based survey, advising a full explanation of this to young people before use
2. Practitioners conducting 'check ins' at the beginning and end of sessions inviting a number in response to how young people were feeling.

3. Informal interviews with young people conducted by one of the practitioners Arun Janssens who worked with us to devise the questions and compile the case studies.
4. A series of prompts for practitioners based on a set of co-created indicators of impact that could be used as a reflective tool following sessions.
5. Conducted semi-structured interviews with setting staff.

The evolved survey was based around five questions and used emojis to record responses. Emojis were chosen as easily recognisable form of communication, which we already know are used widely in communications among displaced young people.

Differentiation between the two negatives and the two positives was emphasised in language by the use of '!' and bold type, both of which are familiar styles at E2-E3 level language.



No!

I **really**
don't
agree.



No.

I don't
agree.



Hmmm,

I am in
the middle.



Yes.

I agree.



Yes!

I **really**
do agree.

I enjoy creating something new.



I feel confident working with others.



I feel free to share my thoughts and ideas.



It is important to me to do my best.



Music helps people to communicate with others.



We find a recorded interview with participants is often the most reliable way of extracting honest comments on the experience of a project. Allowing confident second language speakers to share their ideas using their own choice of words, rather than having to fit their thoughts to a sentence chosen for them fosters a sense of ownership and responsibility for their role in the project and facilitates considered responses. However, in a mixed ability group this can also mean only the more

confident speakers take the opportunity to speak, or everyone chooses simply to agree with whoever speaks first in order not to have to speak out themselves. Therefore, conducting interviews in smaller groups or one to one is often helpful.

When conducting spoken interviews an informal style which gives people time to consider and formulate their answer is very helpful. It is important to make space between

respect

questions to avoid pressure of having to hold and remember more than one sentence at once.

Towards the end of the process, we recommended practitioners conduct a short 'check-in / check-out' verbal survey at the beginning and end of sessions. Young people were asked to represent numbers on a scale of 1-10 of how they were feeling, and this was captured by the practitioners. Some of this data has been represented below, and it was felt by practitioners who trialled this to be an effective way of gauging how the young people were on entering and leaving the space, as well as being an opportunity to start a conversation.

This music leader offered their observation of courtesy bias during the process of gathering feedback from young people:

"One of the support workers actually said to me that it was actually hard to gauge how some of the young people really felt because the way that they'd been brought up in their culture... keep respectful and polite. So, they were very much kind of giving the answers that they thought we wanted to hear, and they didn't want to upset or offend us. So [we] had to work kind of quite hard to just sort of allow them to sit to sort of feel comfortable to say what they really felt." (Music leader reflection session)



Key learning points

- Evaluations are very often an unknown activity to displaced young people
 - It is important wherever possible to ensure the group has some time to build a connection with the people delivering the evaluation. Introductions and their participation in a shared activity can be really helpful
 - They have mostly experienced traumatic questioning before and after arrival in the UK; consent should be sought and any refusal to engage should be accepted without countering
 - The purpose of the activity should be laid out clearly before consent is sought
- Interviews with young people either conducted by practitioners, Lewisham staff or an external evaluator
 - Gather feedback from setting staff – either via short interviews or a feedback form
- If a survey approach was continued to be taken, have the evaluator or activity provider go first as an example of how to fill out the form, and for this demo to show that the “disagreement” boxes can also be ticked
 - Build in reflection sessions for the practitioners as a group, to continually review and check practice, and to share strategies for working with displaced young people

Recommendations

- Review the purpose of the evaluation going forward, and limiting data collection to activities that will meet this purpose
- Present and demonstrate the purpose and meaning of the evaluation questions before encouraging use of translator apps, bearing in mind the inconsistencies of translation into some less common world languages
- Ensure the nature and wording of the questions are such that can be demonstrated to a mixed language ability group, so that people are not excluded by a simple lack of vocabulary
- Avoid any question which could trigger wider experiences of the displacement context. Ensure all questions are relevant to the project. E.g., I feel able to use my imagination to solve problems is not a suitable question for this group as they are constantly and painfully aware of their inability to solve the problems conferred upon them by their status and reliance on the state
- Consider restricting the evaluation to:
 - Check in / Check outs led by practitioners



Appendix:

Toolkit

Index

Click the link to explore the ↓
[Sonic Minds Evaluation Toolkit](#)

The Toolkit contains:

- 1** End of Project Survey
- 2** Observation framework / Reflective practice form (word doc and google form)
- 3** Informal questions for young people and guidelines for interviewing displaced young people
- 4** Interview or survey questions for setting staff
- 5** Questions for Sonic Brain audience members

