

MusicFutures

Evaluation Report



B Sharp

B Sharp (www.bsharp.org.uk) is a young people's music charity based in Lyme Regis, and working across West Dorset, East Devon and South Somerset. We work with young people in regular groups from age 8 supporting them to make music together, and create original tracks and songs, in any genre. The aim of the work is for the young people to develop as individuals and citizens, through making music with others

Project overview

Music Futures was a pilot programme aiming to support the young people in the local area who don't have parental connections and support, to use the musical talent and skills they have developed in the wider world, and to help them see how they might connect to a musical career.

We wanted to connect them to professional musicians to show them options for continuing their music making in the local area. We hoped this would benefit both the young people themselves and wider community through the development of stimulating, aspirational, paid employment for young people locally.

We wanted to try and address the accepted narrative for young people growing up in rurally isolated areas, such as this, with poor transport connections to college, FE/HE and cultural and social life, that the only way to progress in a creative career, is to do well enough academically to leave the area via higher education.

Project background

We noticed that there is often a hiatus in the young people's progression at around age 15/16, when they start looking for something additional from their music making. When they are younger the benefits of participation are clear, with young people showing improvements in confidence, self-esteem, social and communication skills through taking part, as well as musical skills. But at this point some young people start asking how they can earn money - they want to use their music in the real world, not just make music in a group, or in a band in someone's garage.

We have observed that young people with the least parental support are the most likely to drop out and give up their identity as musicians. Some young people are starting to get paid gigs at this age, or starting to try and record and share their music. But our observations show that these tend to be those who have extremely extensive parental support, often with some connection to the music industry. Inequalities of opportunity exist across all areas of life, but rural isolation, and living in an area of cultural deprivation, exacerbates these inequalities – and music seems particularly effected.

We wanted to pilot a programme that replaces parental connection and support with mentoring by professionals connected to the music industry, and exposure to professional experiences and places of work. The aim was that this gives the young people the tools to develop their music locally, as a career or as an element of a career.

As an organisation, we wanted to learn how to do this - how to use our organisation as a connector between young people and local professional musicians, such that we can support a wider groups of young people to develop their music skills and aspirations further.

Intended outcomes

Young people in rural areas of West Dorset, East Devon and South Somerset, who are rurally isolated, and lack music industry connections, gain the understanding, tools and experience to use their talents professionally in the local area. We intend that through the programme, participants:

- Are more actively involved in music making, through which they continue to develop their confidence, self-esteem, social skills and self-identity
- Have increased their understanding of the range of ways they can use music in a career
- Have increased confidence in their capacity to use music as part of their career
- More participants are earning money locally through music

We also intend that:

- B Sharp will, through piloting the programme, have developed a model for supporting a broader range of young people to keep developing their musical skills.

Funding

The project was funded by Thomas Deane Trust, with in-kind support from Bridport Arts Centre, and match funding from Dorset Music Hub.

Programme Structure

B Sharp's MusicFutures programme was a 1 year programmes, and consisted of 11 monthly group sessions, and 1 to 1 mentoring sessions by request. The project was led by 3 local professional musicians acting as Music Mentors – Robert Lee, Rob McVey and Lucy Broddle. The young people were supported by a Pastoral Support Worker – Claire Gannon.

The group sessions included:

- practical collaborative music making, focussing on working collaboratively with others to create original music
- discussion and information about music industry careers and routes
- discussion sessions about creative process, responding to a brief, building confidence
- talks and workshops led by visiting industry professionals. These included:
 - Introduction to the Music Industry, and range of careers (Rob McVey, Robert Lee, Lucy Broddle)
 - Composing Music for Film (Andrew Dickson)
 - Live Sound and Stagecraft Workshop (Tom Hughes)
 - Starting out as a young musician (Leonie Prater, George Fields, Emily Cross)

The 1 to 1 mentoring sessions were led by the Music Mentors, and young people were supported to develop their own projects, and further their skills and confidence.

Participation

12 young people were recruited to the programme, aged 15 – 22. Sessions took place in Bridport, at Bridport Arts Centre. The young people lived across a wide area of Dorset and East Devon – one travelling 28 miles to sessions. The group included young people with SEMH needs, ASC, Care Leavers and LGBTQ+. 1 young person was not able to take part in the group sessions, and only participated in the individual mentoring aspect of the programme.

Young people were recruited through open call-outs on social media, and through partners such as schools and youth clubs. Partners included those who support young people with vulnerabilities including ASCape, Annesbury Guidance, the YouTrust.

9 young people completed the course. All those that did not complete the course took part in several sessions. All 9 were very consistent in attending. The 3 young people who did not complete the programme attended several sessions, but dropped out due to changes in personal circumstances.



Evaluation Methodology

We looked for evidence that there was progress towards the project outcomes, and investigated if:

- Young participants were recruited to the programme
- Young participants were being retained to the programme
- Mentors were being retained to the programme
- Young people were getting more actively involved in music making
- Young people were improving in confidence, self-esteem, social skills and self identity
- Young people were increasing their understanding of the breadth of a music career
- Young people were beginning to increase their confidence in their own capacity to use music as part of their career
- Young people were earning money through music or developing routes into this
- There were unintended changes in the young people's musical or personal skills, behaviour or intention through the programme (positive or negative)

Beginning: Young people completed an application form and interview, and benchmarking questionnaire

Formative: As the project was running we carried out formative evaluation and reflected on the progress of the project every 3 months as a B Sharp and music mentor team. This reflection process involved speaking to the young people and the music mentors, and asking for their feedback on their experience so far through the programme. We asked the young people to re-visit the benchmarking questionnaire at 6 months.

End: Young people revisited the benchmarking questionnaire, and took part in a one-to-one feedback interview with Pastoral Support Worker

Music Mentors gave observations on young people's progress against the outcomes

Project Impact

Participants are more actively involved in music making, through which they continue to develop their confidence, self-esteem, social skills and self-identity

Above all else, the young people who took part in MusicFutures really valued the opportunity to meet other young musicians and play music together. It was surprising how many of the group rarely played music with others, despite all being committed young musicians. There were some of the group who never played with others, outside of the sessions. Even those that had regularly been making music collaboratively before the pandemic, had seriously missed this during the pandemic – and felt this was lacking in their lives.

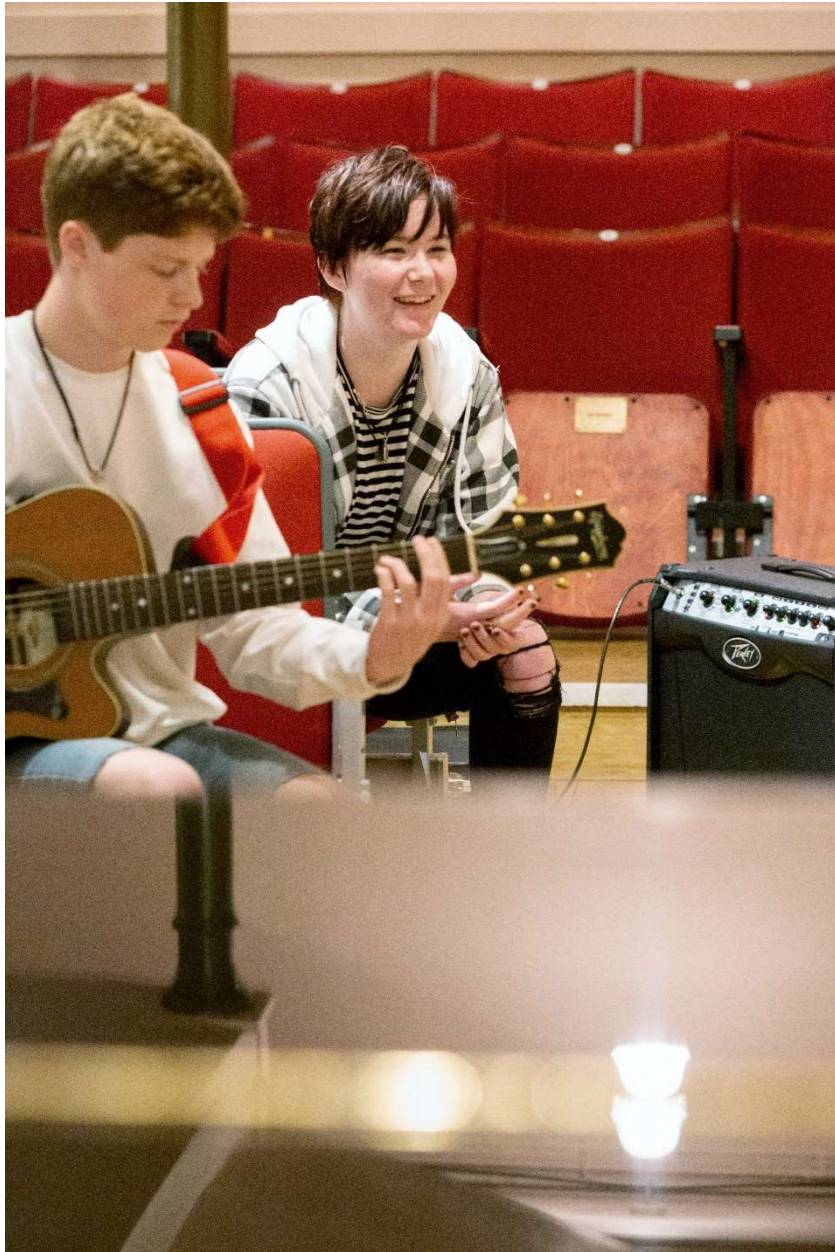
From young people's questionnaires - 50% said they were satisfied with the amount of music they were making, or who had increased the amount of music they were involved in (outside the programme itself) by the end of the programme.

Several young people have made significant steps towards much greater future involvement in music: 2 starting FE/HE courses locally, and 1 more taking steps towards an access course in order to start. For 2 of these 3 young people this is a major step – 1 struggled to attend school through social anxiety, and 1 had dropped out of education and all social contact through autism and anxiety. However, the programme was not successful for all young people in facilitating a step-change in their levels of music making outside of the programme. The pandemic made accessing group music making opportunities difficult for everybody, and young people's ability to independently set up opportunities to play with others outside of the sessions did not develop as far as we had hoped.

Taking part in the music making during the sessions did impact the young people's personal and social development. These supported opportunities to play together, to collaborate and to learn to create new music as a group helped them improve their musical, composition and 'musical communication' skills. They became more comfortable playing together, suggesting ideas and improvising.

Several young people mentioned that MusicFutures improved their communication skills and confidence, to talk to people they didn't know and speak in public. They felt listened to and their ideas were valued, which improved their confidence to participate.

From young people's questionnaires - 75% of participants felt musically confident, confident some of the time, or improved their level of confidence by the end of the programme



My skills of working and playing with others has improved.

It's helped me with talking and working with other people. I'm more confident now.

A lot of the time, people my age are not that interested in music, so it's always good to meet up with people that are.

I feel like whenever I did say something or played something people genuinely listened. It felt natural; it's what people should do.

I enjoyed being around a lot of people in the same boat as me; people with the same interests and people who knew what they were talking about.

Talking to people has improved a bit. Before Music Futures I didn't go out for a long time but I now feel more able to go out and meet people.

The main benefit was meeting others and playing with others.

I thought it was good fun because it wasn't just me coming up with ideas but other people were offering their take on things. That meant we could make some more interesting music and do things we may not have thought about personally.

I think it's been really useful. I don't really hear about what many people are doing in Dorset musically so it's good to meet up with those people and see what they're up to as well, be that the mentors or the other people there.

I have learnt to stop second guessing myself as much when playing and writing music

Participants have increased their understanding of the range of ways they can use music in a career

From young people's questionnaires - 75% of participants felt that had some understanding, good understanding or who had improved their level of understanding of the ways they could use music as part of their career through the programme

In general, the young people had lower levels of understanding at the start of the programme than anticipated in the programme design. Few had thought consciously about the range of ways music can be used as part of career. They found the information from the Music Mentors about their own careers illuminating, and the guest professionals interesting and informative. They were particularly inspired by the 3 young professional musicians who talked to them about their career paths – and how they had self-produced and released music, and driven the whole process themselves. However, this interest in the meeting and hearing from a range of industry professionals did not seem to have significantly helped them identify an industry route for themselves. In fact, the 2 participants who were most confident at the beginning of the project rated their own levels of understanding about industry routes lower at the end. This perhaps suggests that a great understanding of the diversity of music industry routes created greater choice and hence uncertainty.

It was nice having people in: listening to what they had to say from the industry, in particular Leonie and how she released her album in lockdown.

I liked the various talks surrounding composition; different methods of composition; I learnt how other people go about making music and the way they approach things.

Also some of the lectures from some of the people who had a lot of experience. I liked Andrew Dixon's session a lot. Leonie's was also quite interesting about making her own album: it was an interesting view of how to launch something yourself.

I gained knowledge about the music industry e.g. production, studios etc. That information is really valuable.

Participants have increased confidence in their capacity to use music as part of their career

From young people's questionnaires - 75% of participants felt they were totally confident, confident that they would be able to use music as part of their career, or had improved confidence at the end of the programme.

The outcome was closely linked to young people's musical confidence; because of their confidence as musicians grew, and they were aware that their skills had developed, and they were more confident that they would be able to use music as part of a career. Their confidence that they would have a creative career appeared to be less linked to a greater understanding of career routes, and industry roles.

Also, [I found the] stuff that isn't composing [useful] e.g. setting up a stage, microphones, how to release a record, artwork etc

I have realised that there's a lot of people who are working in music independently who are willing to help. It's a lot easier to get involved than I thought it would be. In terms of music making, collaboration and the music industry.

I'm feeling more confident musically and using music in the future.

It's not so much skills which have improved but I have gained knowledge of the industry, what different acts are doing to promote themselves and how they're making a living. I've started thinking about that as an option for the future. To promote my music.

More participants are earning money locally through music

From young people's questionnaires - 25% of participants (2) have started earning money locally through music since the programme. This outcome was significantly affected by the pandemic and the lack of performance and live music opportunities since March 2020. It was not really possible to analyse this outcome in the pandemic context.

B Sharp will, through piloting the programme, have developed a model for supporting a broader range of young people to keep developing their musical skills.

B Sharp has gained significant learning through piloting this programme for how to support a broader range of young people to keep developing their musical skills. B Sharp's learning is discussed below:

Recruitment of young people to the programme

We recruited to the programme during the pandemic and were therefore unsure what the uptake would be. We were aiming for a cohort size of 15, but in the circumstances were very pleased

to recruit 12 young people aged 15 – 22 who met the programme criteria. We worked intensively with partner organisations to reach a broad range of participants, and were successful in recruiting a diverse cohort of young people, including those experiencing challenging circumstances. The cohort included Care Leavers, Autistic young people, Young people experiencing poor mental health difficulties and a trans young person. All were interviewed and were passionate young musicians, with ambitions to have a career in music, but with uncertainty about their next steps or how to progress. None had familial music industry links.

The successful recruitment, and retention of young people showed that there is a need for this programme in the area, and that recruitment through partners reaches young people who will benefit.

Recruitment of Music Mentors

We recruited 3 Music Mentors to the programme, and 1 Pastoral Support Worker. 1 Music Mentor was unable to finish delivery for the last 2 months of the programme due to a change in family circumstances. The Music Mentors and Pastoral Support worker created an inclusive and nurturing environment in the sessions in which young people felt listened-to, supported and able to put forward ideas. Their skills in facilitating the young people to collaborate were excellent.

They were also very able in working individually with the young people to assess their need and interests and work with them to develop their own musical interests. They were great as ambassadors for the industry – and between them were able to talk about an extremely wide variety of roles within the industry including song-writing, performing, arranging, composing, teaching, live-sound, producing and session musicianship.

The Mentors were definitely successful in providing support and inspiration to the young people, and encouraging them to keep making music and to develop new musical skills. The programme was successful, as intended, in supporting young musicians to continue their musical journeys.

The Mentors sometimes struggled with the level of ‘push’ that the young people seemed to need, and were disappointed that despite the young people’s obvious commitment and enjoyment in music, most of the young people were not coming to them with self-driven work for feedback and development. They struggled with balancing the nurturing aspects of the mentoring role with feeling the need to provide messaging about the need for individuals to be strongly self-directed and driven in order to forge a career in music. The mentors also felt that their skills in providing high-quality feedback, encouraging the development of specific musical skills and tailored career guidance were under-utilised.

However, it was useful to have a team approach – with a pastoral support worker working alongside industry professionals, such that the young people could be supported in different ways to develop and learn, depending on their current level of personal, musical and career development. The young people found it really beneficial to work with professional musicians as mentors, who had a wealth of diverse industry experience.

We were initially unsure about whether B Sharp would be able to bring in the kind of music industry guests that the young people wanted to meet, as these were not links we already had in place. However, the cohort of young people came to the programme did not seem to need to meet executive-level industry representatives with very specialist roles. They were most interested in the guests who were local young musicians who were producing and releasing their own material. This perhaps was because they were able to relate to these career paths, or perhaps as the cohort had

not thought in-depth about their careers before the programme, contacts with guests who were involved in a wide range of aspects of the industry were interesting.

We have learnt that B Sharp can be a useful conduit between young people and the music industry, and structures and support mechanism we have developed through our other participatory work can support these interactions to take place.

Digital sessions

The programme started on zoom, as all group gatherings were prohibited in January 2021. We held two sessions via zoom, and then met face to face for the rest of the programme. The young people struggled in the online sessions, and were much happier when we could get them together in person. We tried to encourage online collaboration via bandlab (www.bandlab.com) but the young people did not find this a useful space.

Rural Isolation

Rural isolation, as expected, was an issue in the programme. The young people travelled over large distances to take part in the sessions. They struggled to meet up to rehearse and play together independently of the sessions, and several mentioned that this difficulty was partially due to distance and difficulty with transport.



Programme design

The programme was ambitious, and potentially it was trying to do too much in the time available. There was also a potential mismatch between the young people recruited to the project, and the programme design. The young people recruited needed more musical support than anticipated, and were less self-driven than it appeared when they were interviewed. We had imagined that they

would all be creating their own work, and would be able to organise themselves into bands/groups to collaboratively develop their own work, but with guidance, feedback and development from the Mentors. In practice, the Mentors needed to facilitate the group music making much more intensively. The young people were less confident in creating their own work than it appeared on recruitment, and less able to independently collaborate or put themselves forward to create work with others. In the individual mentoring sessions also some of the young people needed more direction that anticipated, not working between sessions, and not coming with formed ideas of what they wanted support with.

There were young people with significant vulnerabilities and needs taking part in the programme. All were passionate about music and really engaged, and had the self-awareness to know that for them music was a life-long interest. However, they were less advanced in their thinking about a career than expected. All enjoyed meeting the music industry visitors, and found it interesting and useful – but it was less clear that this aspect of the programme helped them identify an industry route for themselves.

It is important to consider whether the recruitment criteria for the programme were not specific enough. We were looking for young people who had serious interest in music, and interest in a music career – and all young people recruited met this – they were all skilled and committed musicians. However, they did not all display high levels of self-direction, and therefore did not utilise the full range of the Mentors' skills. Some were facing significant challenges in their lives due to personal circumstances (eg. poor mental health, leaving care) and others were not at that stage of personal development. If we had added additional criteria to try and gauge self-direction in the recruitment process (eg. evidence of having produced, or recorded their own music) a large proportion of the cohort, including those facing the most challenging circumstances, would have been excluded from the programme.

In this rural area, there are not sufficient numbers of young people at exactly the point in their development and musical lives, to run viable programmes that require young people to fit very tight musical and developmental criteria. It is also difficult to see how an inclusive programme could be run that required all participants to be driving forward their own music making independently. However, the pilot programme has shown that there are sufficient young people with a serious interest in music and an interest in a career who need additional support, and are lacking a link into the industry. We therefore need to adjust the programme design, and the expectations of leaders and mentors so that it can meet the needs of a cohort with wide variation of self-directed learning ability.

All the young people developed through the opportunities to meet and play with others who are serious about music, and to meet and learn from professional musicians. They developed musical skills, confidence, and communication skills. They increased their understanding of the music industry and their confidence that they could have future in the industry. Some were able to utilise the high-level musical mentoring offered by the industry professionals. It therefore feels there potentially needed to be a two step or two strand programme:

Foundation stage – focussing on boosting musical confidence, learning to co-create, collaborate, and have confidence in your own musical creativity. Activity would focus on playing together, and facilitated co-creation as well as an introduction to the music industry, through meeting a range of professionals. This would be supported by pastoral mentoring to ensure young people facing barriers around confidence, organisation ability, transport etc could participate.

Advanced stage – for young people that are self-driven, motivated and able to drive forward their own work. Musical mentoring, feedback and supported development and sharing sessions. Q&As and industry visits, organised in response to the young people's specific interests and requests.

A programme designed from these beginning with an awareness that these are two separate strands, would be inclusive of all young people who have a serious interest in music as a career, but would allow the Mentor's skills to be matched more effectively, and to provide the most suitable level of industry link.

Conclusion:

Through the pilot programme B Sharp has learnt that there is need for this work, which can be met by working with music industry mentors through a supportive programme of group sessions, one to one mentoring and industry experiences. In order to be feasible in a rural area, the programme needs to be broad enough, and flexible enough to provide a useful experience to a wide cohort or talented and committed young musicians, who are at different stages of personal development and career understanding.



Ruth Cohen, B Sharp, December 2021