

Learning disabled young people: A place for us and for our creativity

Case study: Zone Club at Wiltshire Music Centre



Brief description of the work

The monthly Zone Club at Wiltshire Music Centre is a lifeline for learning disabled young people. In the past seven years it has reached more than 400 young people, helped other organisations to set up their own clubs, and is now developing the next generation of specialist practitioners in this field of work. It is so popular that it has a long waiting list, yet it is still a 'Cinderella' project which struggles to secure funding.

This case study looks at how it began, what happens in the Club, and its impact on young people, parents and arts practitioners.

Who's involved

Zone Club is run by Wiltshire Music Centre and is part of the **Music Inclusion Strategy of [WiltshireMusic Connect](#)**, the county's music education hub.

The aim of the Strategy is to **address gaps in music opportunities for young people in challenging circumstances who may miss out on music education**, and to work with partners outside of music education to **improve musical and non-musical outcomes** for children and young people.

It is currently funded by grants from charitable foundations, including the Blagrove Charitable Trust, the Sobel Foundation and the Odin Charitable Trust, with additional funding from [Youth Music](#) as part of their Musical Inclusion module.

Read more about the [musical inclusion partnership work](#) in Swindon, Wiltshire and Gloucestershire.



The challenges faced by school leavers with learning disabilities

Leaving school can be a daunting prospect for any teenager, but it is especially hard for young people with learning disabilities. Almost overnight they lose social contact with their peers: important at any stage of life, but particularly for school leavers. Whether they move to a care home, or stay at home, their opportunities to socialise and get involved in activities like other young people will be severely limited.

They often become isolated and without access to the sort of fun, creative activities that other school leavers take for granted and to which they have everyday access. They don't necessarily live near the friends they made at school, as special schools have a wide catchment area; and they often can't travel independently, use the internet or even a phone to keep in touch.

Enter the Zone Club



“He has his ideas built upon in the sessions – his musical interests are often reflected in the themes explored and his enjoyment is palpable.”

Wiltshire Music Centre recognised that this was the experience of many of the young people they'd come into contact with through their annual Special Schools Festival. As a result, they created Zone Club, in collaboration with these young people and the artists they had worked with.

Zone Club gives learning disabled young people aged 16-25 an opportunity to meet up for a day each month to make music, film and dance with specialist musicians and artists. Just as importantly, it provides a safe, supportive place where they can socialise. Participants' impairments are

very mixed and some have complex and multiple disability. Wiltshire Music Centre staff work closely with parents, carers and support workers to make sure it's accessible for all those wanting to take part.

What happens here?

The meetings are made up of four-hour sessions of multi-arts activity facilitated by professional musicians, dancers and film makers, but participant-led in terms of what happens.

Alex Lupo, lead Music Facilitator explains: *“Before each session begins, parents, carers and participants meet to catch up and for the workshop leaders to create a relaxed and fun environment. Once in the main space, the lights are dimmed and it creates a real sense of anticipation. Each session starts with watching a film of the previous session. The participants themselves always play an important part in creating those films.”*

The film reminds everyone of the last session, introduces any newcomers to the Zone Club experience, and celebrates what's been achieved. *“It creates quite a buzz,”* says Alex, *“It really fires everyone up for the day ahead – and it also provides valuable documentation of the development of the work.”*

The Club then begins with a warm-up activity followed by choices which will include DJ-ing, breakdancing, storytelling, filming and improvised music creation.

DJ Gregg Mason, who has a learning disability himself, runs a half-hour disco to end the session and often individuals or couples may share a skill: from belly dancing to hammered dulcimer to a Michael Jackson tribute dance!

“Everyone takes part to whatever degree they feel comfortable and everyone gets a chance to lead,” James Slater, Artistic Director of Wiltshire Music Centre continues: *“Zone Club doesn't value one participant above another: everyone gets equal attention and the artists work hard to ensure that everyone can engage on their terms with support as and when appropriate. Those who take part appreciate this ethos, which helps cultivate trust and mutual respect. As a result, the clubs are safe spaces in which to be creative, uninhibited and completely oneself.”*

At the end of each session the participants and artists come together to discuss the day's activities, how the session has worked, what they have enjoyed the most and what they'd like to do next time.

The difference it makes

Due to the specialist skills and experience of staff and specialist arts practitioners, as well as the model of delivery that has developed over time, the Club is able to work to each young person's individual strengths and needs, and this has a powerful effect.

For participants:

"I enjoy it – I like working with Tom, he's my friend and he makes it all happening."

"I meet my friends, I am happy here. I meet my girlfriend."

Reducing social isolation and encouraging self-advocacy: through opportunities to interact, create and work with peers, and a place for participants to lead creatively; taking control and being in charge as part of self-advocacy.

Increasing a sense of well being: a natural result of both social contact and participation in art. Participants are able to create and share songs, dance and films about how they feel and what they care about, and to explore these feelings. They can learn to make music on iPads, with instruments or by writing songs; to create films using camera and editing skills; and to create dance and movement – a valuable vehicle for self-expression, particularly for wheelchair users.

Opening doors to education and training: these media and creative skills are fulfilling in themselves, but for some young people this has led to an interest in furthering their learning.

Building confidence and self-esteem: being able to learn and create, and to lead creativity, has a deep impact on participants' confidence. Performing what they've created takes this a step further: Zone Club members perform in festivals at the Centre alongside community bands, choirs and soloists, and last year performed at a gig with the band, 'Babyhead', which includes two of the music practitioners.

Evaluation reports have noted changes in:

- **positive behaviour** – parents/practitioners have noted more positive behavioural patterns
- **confidence** – in creative participation, social interaction, working with others and taking the lead
- **attitudes and understanding** – eg trying new things with music and technology, songwriting, sharing
- **moods** – improved moods after sessions and an eagerness to attend Zone Club
- **a sense of value and pride** – in those given responsibility for using photography, film and music equipment, particularly in those with high support needs

For young people further afield:

Recently, the Centre created a network with two similar local clubs. Friends Meet Up, part of Open Storytellers in Frome, was a similar project which wanted to reach more people; and Salisbury Art Centre has set up a new club with the contacts and knowledge gained from Zone Club. Ideally, the aim is to develop a similar club in Swindon.

A website has now launched which helps participants to connect with each other, including young people in the other Zone Club groups. It features photos, songs and other materials that have been created, and members can access the site with their own login to use it for safe social networking.

For parents and carers:

"Sometimes there's a hush when something magical is about to happen – just a little gesture or movement – the world stops!"

"When Peter gets to film and is given the expensive equipment, something changes for him. He rarely gets given this sort of opportunity for him to feel valued, trusted and to feel part of something social and creative."

Parents and carers benefit not only from a break from their caring responsibilities and/or an opportunity to meet other parents and carers, but also, as the evaluation has noted:

- **an increased understanding** – of their young people's abilities and interests
- **benefits in the home** – "it's more than just a rest for me it provides them with new stimulus in their life and I feel the impact of that"

For musicians/artists:

"...every session is surprising, different and individuals come through with new things."

"The young people ... thrive in the environment and feel they own it."

"The addition of the iPad ... has opened up a world of possibilities ... the work that is being produced is truly expressive."

In 2013, the Club began to employ two student music therapists from the University of West of England, Bristol and to support them with their professional development.

This helps to reduce costs (enabling an extra five young people to join), and also importantly to develop the next generation of practitioners. *“This is really important: there aren’t many musicians who specialise in working with learning disabled people, and they need very specific skills and understanding,”* says Alex. *“We’ve had to bring musicians in from outside the area, from Wales, Bristol and Oxford – they’re not local to Wiltshire, because their skills are so particular.”*

Evaluation reports have noted changes in:

- **new skills and ways of working** – mentorship by experienced artist/musicans gives new artists opportunities to learn, deliver and lead, and to reflect on their practice
- **broadening of practice** – through working with different art forms and diversifying their usual art form delivery style
- **developing of practice** – learning how to construct an experiential, safe user-led space through ideas and happenings (suggesting) and art (making and sharing)
- **understanding of this client group** – new perspectives on their abilities, interests and preferences and how to support them, including the role of parents and carers
- **increased confidence** and desire to work in this field

“The quality of the partnerships, the materials and the professional practice [is] consistently high ... The commitment to focus reflection and innovation within ... [the] practice is to be celebrated. All respondents including artists, unanimously agreed that it has an impact on the emotional, physical and mental wellbeing of the young adults involved so that they can express themselves and self advocate. This is clearly its impact, its legacy and its core message.”

Evaluation report, December 2013

Further insights into the approach

This work is part of a wider, highly skilled approach to music education, sometimes described as ‘musical inclusion’ or an aspect of ‘community music’ work. Its principles are based around active and creative participation in music, equality of opportunity and the importance of social as well as musical outcomes.

Key organisations involved in supporting and developing practitioners are [Sound Sense](#), the community music association, [Drake Music](#), which breaks down disabling barriers to music, and [Youth Music](#), the national children’s charity.

How is it funded?

Participants pay between £16-£18 for each session, often from a personal budget provided by their local authority. If a young person struggles to pay, the Centre will look at ways of reducing the cost. The rest of the cost is met by funding gained from trusts and foundations, but as Clare Jack, Executive Director of Wiltshire Music Centre says, *“it’s a constant battle”*.

Because of the nature of participants’ disabilities and the high standards the Club sets for participation and engagement, the ratio of practitioners to participants is high (1:4). In the current economic climate, this makes it even harder to raise the funds needed. *“It’s the Cinderella of projects,”* Clare continues. *“Most funding is for learning disabled children, older young people just aren’t considered. Added to that, the costs are high because to make it really work, we need six practitioners plus volunteers for around 26 young people.”*

This also means that the Club is unable to meet demand. Currently, it has a waiting list of 23 young people, some who’ve been waiting for 18 months to join.

It’s clear from both formal evaluations and feedback from parents, carers and Club members, that the model works. The challenge is to continue to secure funding and commissions, to create a sustainable future for Zone Club.

Could you help us with funding or support, or could we help the young people you work with?



Contact us:

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