



Re-engaging vulnerable young people in learning and in life

Music Matters – Wiltshire Youth Arts Partnership

MUSIC MATTERS

Case study: Jack



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Brief description of the work

Music Matters gives 13-19 year olds the chance to write, play and record music – and in doing so learn a range of skills, raise their self-esteem, and achieve. It began seven years ago, and combines open access youth work with targeted work with young people who are vulnerable or at risk, and are referred by various services as a result of mental health problems, low self-esteem, or lack of engagement in learning. Many participants are also rurally isolated.

Who's involved

Music Matters is run by Wiltshire Arts Partnership, part of Wiltshire Council's Integrated Youth Service, and is part of the **Music Inclusion Strategy of Wiltshire Music 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 to **improve musical and non-musical outcomes**.

It is supported by the Integrated Youth Service at Wiltshire Council, commissions and referrals, trusts/foundations, and by [Youth Music](#) as part of their Musical Inclusion module. Read more about the [musical inclusion partnership work](#) in Swindon, Wiltshire and Gloucestershire.



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Jack's story

"We're not trying to create musicians, but to use music as a vehicle to encourage and re-engage young people. Part of our job is to get them excited about something, and through that give them a chance to be social and independent, in their learning and in other areas of life."

Carrie Creamer, Project Manager, Music Matters.

Jack (not his real name) was 15 years old when he was referred to Music Matters. He suffered from low self-esteem, was binge-eating and had poor personal hygiene. He struggled with social situations and had few, if any, friends. To make matters worse, he was isolated in a rural village because he was not confident enough to take public transport.

His referral form reported listening to music was the one thing that was really important to Jack – he spent a lot of time in his bedroom, listening to pop music, and the lyrics really meant something to him.

His key worker felt he would benefit from Music Matters, and particularly from a male role model or mentor to increase his confidence, and encourage him to get involved with other services and with peer groups. But he lacked even basic music skills and had very little involvement in the music education on offer in school.

Meeting Alex

Jack was polite and engaged in his first session with music leader Alex Lupo, but it was clear that he wasn't looking after himself, and had very low self-esteem: as Alex says, *"he was holding on to a very fragile sense of self"*.

They discussed what Jack wanted to get out of the sessions, and Jack said that he wanted to sing and record one of the songs that he had been singing along to in his room. His main goal was to have **a recording of himself that he could share on social networks**. They had just four weeks of two hour sessions – and it wasn't going to be easy.

Alex continues: *"There was a big discrepancy between his expectations, and the reality of what he was capable of. It became clear to me that my work was to support him through that understanding of where he really was."*

"He found it difficult to pitch, to work out rhythmic phrasing, count beats in bars, or know where to breathe. It seemed strange that he'd put himself forward for singing given his lack of confidence. I wondered, was he doing this to set himself up to fail, to reinforce his poor self-perception?"

Rather than simply offering to work on and then record his

voice, Alex decided to **help Jack with this 'reality gap' – and in doing so, also build his musical understanding and skills**. He suggested that first, they build up the backing track for the recording using computer software. This would develop Jack's understanding of the nuts and bolts of music and how music is put together – and give him a sense of achievement, control, and self-efficacy.

"It was important that I let him know that this was his space, where he could do what he wished, at a pace that suited him. I let him know anything was OK, I wasn't going to judge him, it was a safe space for him and I was going to value his ideas."

Gaining a sense of reality – and achievement

Jack was happy to do what Alex suggested, but after agreeing to record his voice at the next session, Jack arrived complaining of a sore throat, and saying he was unable to sing.

"This was clearly a defensive strategy, he was obviously very anxious about that session – so we sang the piece through together, but Jack mouthed the song. It was an achievement that he at least turned up, and that he took part."

Jack and Alex spent the rest of the session making final changes to the backing track, and examining the structure of the piece, and the way the original had been recorded. *"I wanted to help him realise that there was auto-tuning and other devices that we could use to subtly change his voice – and that the sound of a group recorded in an expensive studio was bound to sound different to one person in a youth centre!"*

Jack was late for the third session, but eventually did turn up. It was clear he was nervous and not completely prepared, so Alex decided to focus on the song's chorus. Jack knew the chorus well, and because it occurred a number of times in the piece, they could use one take and replicate it - and Jack would feel he'd got a long way through the recording of the piece.

It was during this process that Jack first displayed his first signs of aggression – when Alex fed back to him that he wasn't getting the right pitch. But it didn't escalate, and it didn't cause him to give up on the work.

In building Jack's confidence, it was important that Alex was realistic, but also identified positives and gave clear, specific feedback: *"For example, Jack played a piano part, and made good choices about transitions in the music so I told him that ... and at one point after he listened to the recording of his voice, he was very dismissive and self-deprecating – so I spent time focusing on the fact that he'd got the timing and lyrics right."*

“I praised him where appropriate, and I was genuine with him, trying to model that approach so he would be genuine and honest with himself... We needed to get to the point where he could listen and reflect on a recording of himself.”

Achieving his goal – his own way

Jack did complete the four sessions and did indeed, sing and record the song all the way through – but not as either of them had expected. **His growing confidence in his relationship with Alex, and awareness that he wouldn’t sound as he’d hoped to, meant that he had an other ideas for the final session.** After a few failed attempts to record the song, Jack insisted on singing along to the original track while listening to it through his headphones – despite Alex explaining that the original had a different tempo and key. Alex says: *“He showed more determination about this than he had done about anything else, and he sang the whole piece through from start to finish.”*

Jack found it hard to listen to the finished track, but Alex spent the final part of the session ‘scaffolding’ the experience, helping him to reflect and find the positives.

“It felt clear to me that beyond the idea of getting it musically correct, it was important for him to have been through the process of using his voice expressively, with someone in the room” says Alex. *“He used his genuine voice, and was with someone who was attentive to it, and didn’t reject it.”*

Jack had shown he was capable of creating music, leading his own learning, and seeing something through. But the really significant change was yet to come.

A turning point in confidence and motivation

Three weeks later, Jack surprised everyone by turning up at the annual week-long intensive open access Music Matters course in Trowbridge. *“Everyone, the team working with him and his Mum, were amazed he came,”* says Alex.

Around a dozen young people aged 12-18 from a wide variety of backgrounds were attending, but initially Jack just wanted to work with Alex, which he did, for the first two days. But **by the third day, he had started to work with other young people, and by the final day he had written and produced two recordings with them.** One featured Jack singing along with instruments recorded by other young people (with Jack’s direction); and the other featured another young person singing a song that he had produced.

More remarkably, **he performed in the final performance for parents and friends, and he got to the final few sessions on his own, by bus.** As Alex says *“It was a million miles away from the place he’d started from ... It was a really short term engagement, and the shifts were subtle - but important. It’s clear Jack’s now able to take a more*



objective view of himself and to be social with his peers. We gave him a chance to view himself in a different way.”

Jack’s support worker has reported recently that Jack is attending college regularly, taking part in other music and is *“desperate for more Music Matters- he talks about it a lot!”*

The cost – and saving

Jack received four sessions (at a cost of £35 per hour x two hours x four weeks), and a week-long intensive course (£150 per day x five days). This was subsidised in this case by around 12% from Youth Music. This can be all it takes for a young person to begin to change the way they feel and learn. Yet the potential cost-saving can be massive.

Where a young person is at risk of exclusion or offending, a recent report has suggested that a mentee who was fully helped might save society more than £51,000.¹

In the case of a young person avoiding residential care, the savings could be as much as £2,965 per week².

Calculating these costs is complex, potentially taking into account the cost of crime, health and social services as well as welfare benefits, loss of tax revenue from earning and spending, and of future earnings.

What is clear however, is that for a small investment, we can contribute significantly to helping a young person re-engage with learning and with life.

¹ See: **Move on Up – an evaluation of youth music mentoring** <http://network.youthmusic.org.uk/resources/research/move> and also <http://bit.ly/17bFaRB>

² See page 74 **Unit costs of health and social care**, University of Kent, 2011 <http://www.pssru.ac.uk/pdf/uc/uc2011/uc2011.pdf>. See also <http://bit.ly/1gMpJXu> for calculations of the costs of failing to provide support for 16-25 year olds

Further insights into the approach

Engaging young people in something they're interested in is a good starting point, but there is far more to the work than this.

It is part of a wider, highly skilled approach to music learning, 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, and [Youth Music](#), the national children's charity.

One-to-one music mentoring –the initial method used with Jack– has developed out of these approaches and has been the subject of recent funded programmes and research.

Music mentoring uses music as *"a common ground and shared interest to develop a relationship with a mentee in order to support them in making significant changes in knowledge, behaviour and thinking"*. The aim of our programme is to help participants to discover their musical potential, develop their confidence and begin to explore the difference that music can make in their lives – in their personal and musical development.

For more information see: **Move on Up – an evaluation of youth music mentoring**
<http://network.youthmusic.org.uk/resources/research/move>

More about Music Matters

"The dominant feature of Music Matters is the voice and influence of young people. It's an investment in their wellbeing and their future, an innovative way of carrying out early intervention.

"Because their voice is so central, it empowers them, and they naturally begin to peer-to-peer support - because they have a voice, and everyone's views are valid. There's also a route for people to become official peer mentors, then music leaders."

Carrie Creamer, Music Matters Project Manager

- **What's on offer** – open access sessions; 'Music Matters intensive' 1-1 or small group sessions; week long intensive programmes during school holidays. This means young people can move freely through early intervention to open access.

- **Locations** – various venues (educational buildings, youth centres, arts centres).
- **Young people** – drawn in through a formal referral process for Music Matters Intensive, and through general marketing, taster session workshops at youth centres or other organisations' events.
- **Timing** – 'Music Matters Intensive' weekly sessions last two and a half to three hours, and run for four to six weeks (in the case of referrals from Wiltshire College Resolve, this is part of a wider 12-week programme). Many participants then go on to take part in the week-long intensive programmes, open to people coming through both targeted and intensive routes.
- **What's involved** – activities are driven by young people's needs and interests, and have included music technology, drumming, guitar, effects pedals, singing, creating songs, composing and arranging tracks, writing lyrics, DJing, rapping and starting a band.
- **How referral works** – referral form, followed by meeting with parent/carer, referring worker, music mentor, project manager; individual learning plans then written in conjunction with young people at first session and shared with referring organisation; updated after each session.

Could we help the young people you work with to re-engage in learning and in life?



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