Positive Choices programme:

Final evaluation report

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**Project Overview**

Positive Choices was a youth Music funded project led by Coventry Music within a broad ranging partnership that sought initially with a range of 240 at risk young people in the 11 to 16 age ranges. The project identified intended outcomes in the young people’s musical skills, and their engagement with their community, music hub and wider networks of support. A third intended outcome was "To develop over time a workforce that reflects both the makeup of the region more closely and that also has the skills necessary to engage all the children of the region"[[1]](#footnote-2). In addition, there were a number of other intended outcomes including “diversionary activity which may keep these children away from gangs/exploitation/criminality by providing focus/obligation to trusted adults/positive affirmations for music created”. Several of the project’s partners such as the West Midlands Police and Coventry Education Entitlement (Violence Reduction Team) are professionally concerned with violence reduction amongst young people and supported this project as a part of their agenda to divert young people from negative pathways.

It was intended that all the work for the project would be in group sessions with increasing ownership and steering from the young people themselves.

The project was initially to be located in four schools: Cardinal Wiseman Catholic School, and also Foxford, Barr’s Hill and Westwood Academies. All the schools were identified by partners as being located in areas prone to gang violence. After a considerable period of liaising with the schools, the programme went ahead in Foxford and Westwood but did not start in Barr’s Hill or Cardinal Wiseman.

*In the other two recommended schools we had post covid issues regarding communication. Those schools didn’t see it as an essential – Barr’s Hill + Cardinal Wiseman. We had the meetings and met the kids, and it would come down to clashing of times; kids who would have been ideal were more invested in after school football etc. We wasted quite a few months on those schools. We did a meet and greet with those kids and lots of meetings with the senior leadership team – then there was no comeback from the schools on that. Manager.*

Two other schools were eventually found that were in areas linked to gang violence, Sydney Stringer Academy and Grace Academy. These schools were in the same areas as those who dropped out.

*In those areas you have gang related violence on the doorstep – one gang called CV2, and one called RB6. Partners identified there was anti-social behaviour between 3 and 5 o’clock from these areas. Manager.*

As the project developed the team realised that the young people it was most targeted at (those at risk of involvement in or exploitation from gang activity) were either not turning up or not sustaining engagement in the programme, with some exceptions. It was decided, with school and partner agreement, to change the aims of the programme and engage with a broader range of children, including those with special educational needs and disabilities (SEND), those with social, emotional, and mental health difficulties (SEMHD) and those at risk of exclusion.

With all the changes, sessions frequently had lower numbers than anticipated, quite often being one - to – one. Numbers did build over time and a good number of those young people who engaged found the project exciting and inspiring, particularly in relation to performance, recording and video outputs. Total participants numbers (attending more than 2 sessions) were 96 from an original intended total of 240; this was reviewed and due to Covid restrictions reduced to 120 as the programme could only run in 4 schools. This breaks down as follows:

|  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| School | Boys | Girls | Non-Binary | Total |
| Westwood Academy | 14 | 1 | 0 | 15 |
| Foxford Academy | 19 | 16 | 0 | 35 |
| Grace Academy | 11 | 9 | 0 | 20 |
| Sydney Stringer | 15 | 11 | 0 | 26 |
| Total | 59 | 37 |  | 96 |

As well as positive creative and learning sessions, Positive Choices provided each cohort in each school with a number of outputs, including video and studio recording, live performances and invitations to engage with partner organisations. 10 students began regularly attending partner organisation sessions.

**Context**

**Coventry**

The population of Coventry has increased by 8.9%, from around 317,000 in 2011 to 345,300 in 2021[[2]](#footnote-3). This is higher than the overall increase for England (6.6%). Coventry is the 18th largest local authority in England, according to the 2021 ONS Mid-Year Population estimate.

It has a population under 24 of approximately 135,000. Coventry’s median age of residents is 32 years old. As compared to the UK, where the median age of a resident is 40 years and 3 months, Coventry is relatively young (Coventry City Council Headline Statistics February 2022)

Coventry is home to a diverse population, with 33.4% of residents classified as non-white British compared to 20.2% in England, based on 2011 Census data.

Over 66% of the population is White British. Of the remaining residents, 7.2% are White (non-British), 5.5% are black, and over 16% are Asian, which exceeds the national average.

In 2019 Coventry was ranked 81st most deprived out of 317 local authorities. 14.4% of Coventry’s neighbourhoods were amongst the 10% most deprived in the country. 22% of secondary school students in the 2020/21 academic year are in receipt of free school meals.

Life expectancy at birth in Coventry is slightly lower than in England as a whole—for males it is 78.0 years (vs. 79.6 years in England), while for females it is 82.0 years (vs. 83.1). However, what is more worrying is the wide inequality gap. A man from the  
most deprived area is likely to die 10 years earlier than one from the least deprived area. The difference for a woman is 8 years (Coventry City Council Headline Statistics February 2022).

3,000 young people in Coventry are considered to be at risk of criminal exploitation, with vulnerable members of the community being the most exposed (Coventry Joint Strategic Needs Assessment 2019).

The rate of youth convictions for Violence Against the Person offences increased by 124% in 5 years, and the number of children sentenced to custody is 133% above the national average (Coventry Joint Strategic Needs Assessment 2019).

**Methodology**

As there was a different team in each location and as the teams did not have a unified pedagogy, a large part of my methodology was workshop observation. I observed 7 sessions over the course of the project, 6 of them workshops and one a recording session. Much of this was to see if my recommendations in the first visits about structure and pedagogical approach were followed through. The structural suggestions were to a good extent followed through and the project improved in focus and music leader communication because of this. The pedagogical style was perhaps too hard to significantly shift although a number of the team made significant progress in being more student led and being open to suggestions as the project went on. Some of the team only changed their approach slightly and retained much control over content and the tone of the sessions.

I did a number of interviews – several with the project lead, Joe Cook and his line manager, Mark Patton, 4 with teachers or members of school staff and three interviews with music leaders and informal interviews (onsite) with 4 more music leaders. I also ran 4 focus groups of young people with the attendance of a school staff member (3 online- 1 face to face). I felt this gave me information from a number of perspectives and it was positive to revisit both Joe and Mark in the later stages of the project to discuss how it had changed. I also attended several online meetings of the partnership team in the early stages of the project and interviewed two of the partners.

I also designed a questionnaire for the young people to fill in at the start and end of the programme indicating areas of musical, personal, and social development. These questions came from The Positive Youth Development Inventory Full Version (2012). Unfortunately, the difference in cohort rendered the end questionnaires comparisons meaningless as they were different children who filled them in.

In addition, I adopted a role as a critical friend to the project, offering mentoring to Joe Cook over several months and also liaising with Mark Patton on how best for Coventry Music to look at project management and development for projects outside schools’ hours with young people facing barriers to education. This was with the intention of raising the abilities of the team both to improve this project and to run higher quality projects in the future.

**Target group and location of schools**

As noted above the original target group for the project, although broad ranging, included and prioritised young people at risk of joining and of exploitation by gangs. During my observations I saw several young people who, from my experience and from information shared by the team, seemed to belong to this target group. They were very much in the minority in the sessions. Several factors may have contributed to their non-attendance:

* It is perhaps unlikely that children on the edge of gang life would have attended any project on school premises after school hours, no matter how much it was geared to their interest.
* it is also possible that the most vulnerable may be excluded from school. 6 young people attending Positive Choices were excluded from school during the period of the programme.
* Targeting seemed overall to be quite loose within some of the schools – some staff said they did not know anything about criteria for selecting the children. In one school I was told one tutor decided all the children to be invited on the tutor’s own criteria
* Locating the vast bulk of the project within schools rather than PRUs
* Agencies such as the Youth Justice Service could have helped identify and refer the right children but were not part of the partnership.
* Targeting could have focused on care experienced children but did not. In Coventry 25% of young people involved with the Youth Offending service are care experienced.[[3]](#footnote-4)

This being said, a number of the young people attending were susceptible to bullying and one young woman was identified as being highly susceptible to exploitation by gangs.

The schools, including the late additions were located in areas identified as challenging postcode areas for gangs.

*I say to people we work with schools identified by police not that we are working with identified gang members. Grace Academy is part of CV2 territory; a lot of kids I work with in the PRU have been excluded from Grace. Henley Green and Wood End are hotbeds for this type of activity (one of main gangs is C2 – most drill videos are coming from C2). Manager.*

Targeting the people that the project is aimed at and ensuring their attendance and continued engagement is a major part of any project. It is somewhat surprising that, with such a good range of partners, the project placed the majority of its resources in school located work, something that would be seen as unlikely to work by most experienced practitioners in this area.

When they did recognise the need to change, the project leaders maintained the school-based work with the agreement of the partners and did, to a reasonable extent, engage with young people who had significant barriers with music education. This revised project was successful with the children who appreciated the opportunities given. The questions could be asked as to which would have been better – to work with the schools that came on board to deliver good music to those who were motivated or to return to developing outreach to those originally intended for the work?

*I don’t think it has engaged kids at risk of gang of violence, but I do think it has engaged good kids living in tough communities. They don’t hang around with kids involved in gangs, but they are living in challenging areas. We had a lot at risk of exploitation– not necessarily recruited for county lines. All were those who would be bullied. Manager*

**Project Management**

There were two main issues in project management: firstly, as already discussed, the project did not engage with the intended target group in sufficient numbers. In selection of partners and choice of pedagogy including the leadership of Joe Cook the hub did everything it could to attract the intended target group. It is possible that the hub was more used to school based programmes and did not have the knowledge of how difficult it can be to get large numbers of highly at-risk youth on board for the length of such a project.

*I knew …. the target group would never come; they would never come in those numbers. I have never had group bigger than 4. They feel they have to act up in larger groups.*

*With this we are going in cold, with no relationships built up.*

*We were probably losing kids from the get-go. A lad who came along to Sydney session, very at risk, flirts with the lifestyle, from the Romany community, he enjoyed it but just wanted a one-to-one studio. He bailed out of the programme although we tried to keep him on board In production you are trying to get one individual’s sound. - Manager.*

The hub certainly tried their best to build relationships and adapt the programme as they went along. However, it needs to be recognised that building up work with the original targeted group may take years with frustrations along the way. A number of 240 is very large for a project building from almost nothing. Perhaps if there had been more outreach in the school day then more people would have attended – this may require non restricted funding.

*It might have been better to start in the school day for building relationships. It’s hard to build a relationship if they don’t know you and you say come to after school, hard to get them to come. There should be a term in class time then move to after school. Manager.*

The second project management issue was around the structure of the early sessions. My first observations indicated there was no thought through structure to speak of. Following my recommendations this improved strongly over time, particularly with briefings at the start of most sessions and debriefs at the end, giving everybody involved a better sense of what was going on and why.

*Tutors are very good at what they do; Joe makes it clear where we are and what we are trying to do. Teaching assistant.*

While debriefs happened regularly, not all students were welcomed as they arrived or even addressed in the sessions I observed and some, girls in particular, were waiting round for long periods at a time with no music leader interaction. This was not true of most of the sessions, but it is the type of session management detail that can make a difference to somebody’s continuation especially if they already feel marginalised.

In the early stages there were logistic issues, again with young people having to wait around to take turns on drum kits and other instruments but once they were noticed they were quickly dealt with.

*The first week there wasn’t enough guitars; some acoustic guitars didn’t have strings etc. After that I brought some guitars and headphone with me; the biggest thing that causes chaos is the multiple sounds. Being able to put headphones on helped a lot. (Two participants) were at odds with each other and there was tension between them so when I brought the headphones I could separate then sonically. Music leader.*

Most noticeable was that Joe was rarely able to go round the other leaders’ sessions and monitor what was going on. On my sessions I was able to do that and bring issues of pedagogy and management to his attention, which he dealt with efficiently and quickly, but he should have regularly had that capacity at all the schools involved.

**The music**

From my observations I would say the music reflected the interests of the young people to a large degree. This included rapping, beat making, production, guitar, drums and vocal as well as ensemble work. While much of the work was taught lessons, particularly on drums, guitar and vocals, there was also a large amount of creative work, with a good number of self-written tracks recorded by the young people. From my observations it was clear there was a spectrum from student led to tutor led activity with the production and beat-making etc. being clearly more student led than guitar, drums, or vocals but as I saw each group a maximum of two times this does not mean there were no opportunities for creativity in those sessions also.

*Luke lost his main guitar student and was at a bit of a loose end. He worked with a group and captured sounds to produce rhythms (found sounds) which they have uploaded and mapped and used as beat. Manager*

Music leaders sometimes took the opportunity of a participant’s creative impulse to change the directions of the group.

*Towards end of the summer term one kid wrote a piece on piano and started them working as a band. We recorded that one at the university and have continued that group. Music leader*

Some Music leaders have their own structure that is different to how others work:

*I have done a mixture of activities – mostly they have brought a prewritten song to sing well after warmups. I will talk about performance and build confidence and safety and also a lot about not copying anyone else’s voice. It’s always one to one; 20 minutes each. When they sing in the band, they sing by themselves. Music leader*

All young people who attended regularly progressed in their area or instrument. Those involved in electronic music all gained valuable support with their creativity.

**The Team**

In the early stages of the project, it was difficult to recruit a diverse, experienced, and skilled team to deliver afternoon sessions. This meant there were skill and other imbalances during the first half of the project. To their credit Coventry music continued to look for appropriate team members. The use of music leaders from partner organisations did help balance things out in terms of skills and somewhat in terms of cultural diversity. However, a number of the team were very unused to working outside one-to-one situations and had, at least at the start, difficulty with confident communication in groups.

*I don’t have a formal teaching background; mostly I work with proficient musicians. These kids are just giving it a go. The guitar classes with several kids at once is a new challenge – lots of challenges. It’s a new experience but it’s been really enjoyable. I was a little bit unprepared the very first week. It was a bit chaotic the first session. I planned a lot better after that. Music Leader*

The team members I did meet were all positive and personable people and were all skilled musicians. Some were engaging educators, some seemed somewhat inexperienced, and I wondered how much what they brought to the session would have a transformative effect on the young people.

*Team were really good, really engaging. One week they talked with our A level cohort. They were really good on careers, good on pathways and the delivery was fantastic. They were good role models for music careers. School Music Teacher*

Joe Cook (project leader) was clearly different from the others in three notable ways. Joe used a fast paced but engaging approach that was constantly underwritten with humour. I sensed that sessions with Joe would always be memorable, and that young people would want to return. Secondly Joe had very good music tech skills and a vivid knowledge of Drill and other contemporary genres. Finally, Joe had a very different approach to pedagogy (in some ways he used an approach close to Andragogy) than the others. They all (with the exception of those from Studio X) essentially taught a class, either instrumentally or vocally, and although perhaps containing material quite relevant to the needs of the young people, it still closely resembled the school day. As the project was set in schools, it is possible there may have been young people who wanted a complete break from that approach. While some of the team were good communicators and taught well, only Joe provided a really refreshing and empowering approach to the pedagogy.

Another imbalance in the team was gender, with only two female music leaders throughout the course of the project. Both were utilised as vocal teachers. While this may have been appropriate in terms of these leaders, it fed a stereotype that girls are singers rather than instrumentalists or producers. This stereotype was largely (but not completely) reproduced in the sessions I saw where, although I did see young women instrumentalists as well as singers, they were not playing drums or guitar or indeed beat making, rapping, or producing,

In summary, the Positive Choices had difficulty recruiting a balanced team but did provide relevant instrumental, production and vocal support for the young people. The original team did not reflect the cultural make-up of Coventry, or the schools chosen but this improved somewhat during the programme. There was a gender imbalance throughout the programme that may have acted as a hidden excluder.

**Support for the team**

After my first observations I was clear that the team members were very different in their confidence and experience and need various levels of support and suggested this in my interim evaluation report. As part of my role, I offered regular mentoring to Joe Cook over a couple of months to go through all the issues arising during the programme. I was particularly concerned that the structure of the sessions included some form of briefing and debriefing and that the team became a team, i.e., understood shared values and pedagogical method, at least where it was appropriate.

Following this some changes were made, notably the introduction of weekly debriefs.

*Because of the debriefs there was always the support I needed really. My suggestions were listened to, e.g., getting recordings shared on Soundcloud. This was implemented straight away. Music Leader*

Making the team more of a team was somewhat less successful partly as they rarely met or had training together, although the two training sessions were seen to be useful:

*2 full project meetings where we met the other tutors. It was definitely quite interesting to get perspectives from other schools and their approach. They all had different projects to work on. Other tutors’ perspective was enlightening. Workshopping it with the wider team was very helpful; we talked about what we thought positive elements and challenges were. Music leader*

Another change (actually an original intention in the project) was that Joe as leader would be able to visit, observe and support the other music leaders. This, especially, was intended to underline the student-centred nature of the project and move the music leaders away from a more teacher/classroom-based type of approach. This type of teaching to rather than working with approach was still in evidence in the latter stages of the project although by no means by all of the team. Joe was unable to regularly observe and support the others, being tied up with delivery.

In summary it took time to create a good enough team, who were somewhat hampered by gender and other imbalances. They would have benefitted substantially from more time spent working together in training and from Joe Cook being able to observe and support the team more closely.

**Values**

The values and ethos of the project was communicated well to the music leader team before the project, and this was reinforced on occasion. I use the word values rather than aims as with the change of cohorts it is hard to identify what the aims of the project in the latter half were, except to provide high quality music opportunities for young people to whom they would otherwise not be available. In the early stages the anti-gang message was made clear to the team.

*We talked a lot about what we were working toward; essentially keeping them off the streets when they could be in gangs and giving them an opportunity when a lot of stuff can happen. Music leader*

The student-centred approach in terms of values was understood by a number of the team and was valuable in them developing what might be called ‘unconditional positive regard’[[4]](#footnote-5).

*Whole ethos of project was communicated before it started – keeping it student led – helping them to realise the goals and ambitions they want to and not forcing things on the kid. This project is a form of music therapy[[5]](#footnote-6) or catharsis for the kids – it’s keeping that frame of mind when they are pushing the boundaries socially of what they can get away with. Music leader.*

Not all music leaders felt they were in the loop in terms of aims or values.

*Nobody has talked about intentions of the programme or pedagogy. Joe explained the project was similar to Soundlab. I know what is happening in the term. I don’t know what the long-term goals are; what the aims are for the project. Music leader*

**Skills and Roles**

From both teacher reports and my observations, I felt that the musical skills the leaders had were generally a fit with the needs of the children who attended.

*The specialisms of the team (especially beatboxing) were things this different group of students were interested in. The team were keen on supporting students that were vulnerable in a different way and wouldn’t have access otherwise. School music teacher*

Some of the team were quite challenged by working with groups rather than one to ones.

*Working in groups was hard to plan for; you never knew who was going to turn up. Some weeks it would be 6 kids who never played before, all wanting to do something different, some weeks 2 kids. Music leader*

They found the challenges to be interesting and useful for their practice.

*I learned about the approach of keeping it student led, keeping the ethos in mind and also specifics of how to deal with noisy kids in the same place and commanding that practically, using solutions like having headphones. I had to find ways to get them to listen to each other and not just play over each other. It requires them having respect for one another as much as wanting to get their own point across. Music Leader*

*This is about doing what suits them, being completely flexible on the spot to say we will do that. It’s my preferred way of teaching; being led by their style of music and, within that channel, technique and knowledge is passed on. Music Leader*

Some of the team stayed quite within their everyday roles as instrumental teachers.

*Mostly I have been drum teacher. I take 2 or 3 to do drums independently in a breakout, then take them back into the room to collaborate with other musicians and bring it all together. I show them fundamentals in breakout rooms. Music leader*

*I was running guitar classes; that was my role. Music leader*

From a pedagogical perspective it may have been better for sustaining and deepening engagement if the music leaders had been given training in more creative approaches and allowed the young people to take more ownership and creative control with team members acting in a more facilitatory role. This did happen regularly with some of the team, e.g., Joe and Studio X, and all the team were aware of this intended approach but not all had the skills to fully take on more flexible roles.

**Pedagogy**

As there was limited training and most of the group were not experienced in this area of group work there were substantial variations in the pedagogical approaches ranging from student centred and empowering to quite traditional and taught approaches. Almost all of the team modified their approaches to be more student centred over time. Some members of the team maintained a pedagogy that emphasised control, i.e., leading from the front, in terms of content, tone and body language. This was raised with Joe Cook who spoke with the team members, but the approach was still in evidence, albeit less so, at the end of the project.

Most of the team worked from the students interests in very respectful ways, listening to and affirming their ideas and giving frequent and appropriate praise.

*For me it is a lot about building a safe relationship. I tend to come in on their level. Music leader.*

With the exception of Joe Cook, I did not see (NB I saw most but not all the music leaders) evidence of a sophisticated approach to inclusive pedagogy. Joe, for example, really understood the importance of developing musical, personal, and social outcomes at the same time and was adept in doing this. He also enabled the students to have their own voice by checking carefully that the tracks they recorded were exactly as they wanted them.

*I have seen Joe work a lot because I asked to. I had a lot I could learn. I like the way Joe works. Joe would find something they would participate in. It’s not forcing them; it’s finding what they can do*. *Music Leader.*

Other music leaders certainly made their work young people centred and some got much better at it as the project progressed.

*We tried to run it so it was more led by them on a week-to-week basis. I found that challenging at times but not necessarily in a bad way. In terms of getting stuff out of them, often they really don’t know what they want so you take them down a couple of avenues, so they have a choice. It’s about giving them choices rather than just saying what is next. I tried to allow them to be a little bit creative without telling them exactly what to do all the time. In terms of drumkit playing I was giving them concepts and ideas and then allowing them to improvise and be more expressive and also getting them to feedback to each other. Music leader.*

Overall, the team would have benefitted from a more united and inclusive pedagogy through training. However, despite some issues with a small number of music leaders, most of the group either had or developed a young person centred pedagogy during the project.

**Partnerships**

The range of local partners was impressive, and I attended several partner forum sessions where it was clear there was a strong commitment to the project, noticeably from the police.

Both my observations and discussions with the delivery team led me to think that partnerships with schools could be much stronger, particularly around encouraging the right children to come to the project in sufficient numbers. Schools have had an enormous amount to cope with over the last few years and the pressure on staff is unending. They may have wondered what is in the project for them. More focus on whole class or whole school events, a teachers’ forum on working with vulnerable children through music or the production of teacher resources based on the project might have had a positive effect on relationships and commitment. That said, in the latter stages of the project individual staff members showed keen interest in the work and some went the extra mile in logistical support and enthusiasm.

Varied local music organisations were partners with Coventry music in the project. The use of their tutors helped the team both in terms of its skills base and in representing the diversity of Coventry. 10 of the students (just over 10%) went on to regularly attend events on partners’ premises. This may have been higher if visits to partners’ premises had been built into the project itself. This is a higher take up than most of Coventry Music’s ensemble offer.

A challenge for the hub going forward is how best to utilise partner tutors and how to establish baselines for professionalism. Some were good music leaders with the ability to engage young people and work professionally, others less so. In half of my observations team members were late arriving and /or setting up and this led to young people being kept waiting.

**Outputs, opportunities, and progression**

All the schools had a range of outside or development opportunities for the young people. These were varied and of good quality and an important part of the success of the project. Outputs included 5 video projects and 2 albums.

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| School | Opportunities, outputs, and outcomes |
| **The West Wood Academy** | * Video * Live Recording * One Year 11 going on to study music at college. * One Year 10 who has autism mentioned that he ‘didn’t work with other people’ but played guitar for live recording in a band with other musicians. * Video shared at various school events / social medias. * Video shared online by Councillor Dr Kindy Sandhu * Studio recording |
| **Foxford** | * Two live video records * One studio track recorded. * Five students joined Soundlab-COV which lead to other recording and performance opportunities. * 4/5 young people given access to Charanga VIP to use online music production software at home. * *‘Our students were encouraged to take a lead role in decision making in terms of content. This made them own their own learning and enabled them to become more independent. This type of bespoken intervention supported our students and built their self-esteem. Having this intervention improved music grades in both key stage 3 and KS4.* * Alison Gallagher, Headteacher |
| **Grace Academy** | * Three recorded tracks * Collaborations between different schools * One music video |
| **Sydney Stringer** | * Trip to Coventry University for recording in studios * Flyer put together by school about trip. * Animated Lyric Video * Collaboration between other schools * Collaboration with more established artists in Coventry * Engagement with Romany community which school mentioned they have difficulty engaging with. * Shadowing opportunities within session for older students to take more of a lead role in session. * Young person who struggles in group being a young leader on the day taking a lead on the vocal recording and guiding and supporting other vocals through it. |

Giving young people opportunities outside the school was important for their personal development. Helping them see and make music in new, sometimes daunting spaces was helpful in building confidence.

*The day we had in the recording studio was a real highlight – it was nice seeing the kids outside the school environment. Music leader.*

*Taking Sydney Stringer kids to studios and rehearsal room at Coventry University arts Faculty was a really good day in general. The plan was to record everything we are going to use for positive choices album, 3 pieces. Sidney’s contribution to album is those 3 plus 1 reggae track.*

*Nature of kids at Sydney, they probably haven’t experienced a higher education environment before. It was great to see 1 girl with severe social anxiety - she asked if there was going to be lots of people. She was scared but ended up being really good at helping the other vocalists and helping them get over their terror. Manager.*

There was progression across the three areas of musical, personal, and social development.

**Musical:**

*Some had literally never played so they came on quite a long way. I gave them some djembe skills. I got them playing djembe with the kit. One had keyboard skills, so I got him playing a chord progression with the kit which helped them develop timekeeping. Music leader.*

*It started with a lot of independent work and moved on to whole group composition. We have seen long term progression and finishing work which is really cool. Teacher.*

**Personal development**

*The confidence of my students and how they interact with other people and us has gotten way better. Their singing has also improved but that is not the big thing I notice. Music leader.*

*One student was a rapper who was very keen to reflect on social issues. So, he wrote about knife crime. He was keen to talk about this issue, so we were able to share this with the whole community. Music leader.*

**Social development**

*The big thing has been the emphasis on social music making. One student with autism and ADHD who only played in their bedroom engaged with the rest of the group including students in different year groups. I wouldn’t have expected it to work, and it did. Teacher.*

*Made an immeasurable difference. I can easily see the impact on the students that we have. It helped a wide variety of our students come together.*

*The sanctions are seeming to drop. They are more socially apt. They can be in a group setting. The engagement is better.*

*It has helped them to rein in any frustration and channel their energy into a positive product. Teacher.*

**What the young people said**

I conducted four focus groups with a total number of approximately 30 young people. Most had been in the project for a minimum of eight months, some for a year and a half, so clearly once a stable and suitable group was found for the project, they were inclined to commit for a long time.

*Have been coming a year and a half. Looking back its just wow. Young Person*

All the young people were overwhelmingly positive about their experience of the project and although asked for criticism there were only two criticisms. One was that it was (for one school) at a bad time (Friday). The other was about possible continuation.

*I probably won’t do music after the project. No links with music service or anything outside.*

The next section is essentially made up of quotes from the young people. These quotes are categorised under the main types of response they gave. These responses do tend to read like what a young person’s music project should be about so clearly the project had significant positive impact on the young people who attended.

Young people enjoyed it because it was **fun**:

*It’s been a really fun experience; makes you want to come back next week.*

*Not everything is serious. We like to chill out here and have a good time.*

They were very positive about **the support they received and the nature of the team:**

*The recording was good, the setup was good, staff were good, and the teaching was great.*

*All of team are very friendly and welcoming. They accept us. Even if we were bad at music, they would help us.*

*I appreciate the effort the tutors make, and they always try to get all kids involved. I like the way they make things happen.*

*Tutors are polite and welcoming.*

*They are really good at teaching me. Now I know how to operate logic on a computer. Josh’s communication is really good.*

*The music leaders are really nice people. I wouldn’t have learned so much just by myself.*

*Really nice people relate to them have some common interests.*

The project was **original and creative:**

*Similar to music we do in school but more original – more grooves more styles more variation.*

They **felt free and they felt respected**:

*Think after school clubs were enclosed. This is more free we have a lot more choice in what we do.*

*It’s more creative than rehearsed. Usually, we get told what to play in other circumstances. We are kind of the teachers. We are creating it for us, not just getting told what to do.*

*When we are getting told what to do in school we get told off if we make a mistake but if we make a mistake here these guys build on it in a positive way.*

They really **appreciated the opportunities made available**:

*I joined Soundlab in town in the Caribbean centre.*

*There were opportunities beyond the project. They invited us to Soundlab where we go every week.*

*In school there isn’t a lot of people to have good conversations about music with but in Soundlab there are lots of talented musicians so it’s easy to talk*

*I did another video last year – my first ever.*

*I do get experience outside school now with Josh and Studio X.*

*The opportunities I have been given have been amazing. I am just grateful for the opportunities. It has opened my eyes to more things we can actually do.*

*I can do similar stuff at home but it’s different. I have started doing it at home because of these sessions.*

A number of them noticed an improvement in their **personal confidence**:

*Definitely boosted my confidence. This time last year I couldn’t do that.*

*I have increased my confidence by trying new things and being open to learn new things. They have helped me a lot to find new sounds and be more experimental with my sounds.*

*Confidence boost yeah.*

*As a person, it shows you if you want to do something you can put your mind to it. It gives you confidence that in the future you can do other things if you take the opportunity.*

*I feel like when I first did it, I felt a bit nervous every time I wrote something. As it went on the workers helped me boost my confidence a lot.*

*I wasn’t confident but now I have played guitar for my class and soon for assembly.*

There was a positive effect on **friendships:**

*Friendships have deepened.*

*I think I have gotten closer to people here than I was before – I have definitely made friends with everyone that is in Positive Choices.*

*I think it is really exciting. All my friends are doing vocals. We get a better bond and expand our friendship.*

It helped them **develop skills**:

*I learned how to put samples and sound together. I learned how to properly use a drumkit over samples and different loops.*

*Because I have never been on the mike before – good experience.*

*We were coached on projection, where to speak, how loud to speak etc.*

*I feel like they also helped understand how it works and we can also make our own music and it doesn’t always have to be professional.*

*It’s really nice because I have guitar lessons; it helps me to do more and learn more.*

*Biggest learning. I learned how to produce music on a laptop without an instrument or a studio.*

*I can now play drums. I couldn’t do.*

*I couldn’t write songs at all, but I can now.*

It also gave them positive ideas for their **future development:**

*I am quite interested in developing it further. I feel like I will do as much music as I can.*

*Musically I am a lot more focussed on production. I am trying to focus my future career on music; before it was a hobby, but people now say I am good at it.*

*As for me I would take it seriously – I was thinking of having a musical career.*

**Conclusions**

Positive Choices was a useful and engaging project for the young people who did engage with it. All those interviewed felt they had, and from my observations they did have, good development in their musical skills and in many cases their musical creativity, their ability to work well musically in an ensemble and their ability to record. The musical input from the leaders was high quality and appropriate to young people’s preferred genres. Although much of the work was young person centred, some could have been more so and youth ownership and youth voice was not consistent across the project.

There were a number of outside opportunities for engagement across the project. Ten of the young people have engaged with partner organisations beyond the project and that engagement seems to be continuing for most. This is a positive achievement. However, given the resources available and the length of the project, a higher percentage than 10% continuation/ progression would be expected. Were it not for Covid visits to partner organisations would have been factored in during the project and some partners could perhaps have made more of a mark in terms of facilitation and professionalism.

The project brought together a music leader team from disparate organisations, some with little experience of running group sessions, rather than one to ones. Most of the team developed well through the project with some, although challenged, really rising to the occasion. This was not fully true in all cases and the goal of “developing over time a workforce that reflects both the makeup of the region more closely and that also has the skills necessary to engage all the children of the region”, while partially achieved, has still some distance to go. Training in facilitation and inclusive leading will help as well as greater clarity about the aims and values of future projects.

The other aim of providing “diversionary activity which may keep these children away from gangs/exploitation/criminality by providing focus/obligation to trusted adults/positive affirmations for music created” was not realised as the project failed to connect and sustain in sufficient numbers with the intended cohort. When the project switched to a different cohort, it was successful for them.

Overall, this was a good project with problems in set-up (targeting) and some less significant issues in delivery style.

**Recommendations**

I recommend that, following from this programme, Coventry Music take on the following recommendations:

* Use new ways to re-engage young people at risk of criminal activity or exploitation. This could include partnership with the Youth Justice Service and the Virtual School and utilizing Joe Cook’s knowledge and contacts within and beyond PRUs.
* Where possible, continue to develop after school programmes with children facing barriers to participation, such as the most of this cohort. The project worked well for those who did engage and produced good musical, personal, and social outcomes.
* Develop new and detailed protocols within the hub in terms of project management and development with young people facing barriers. This should include, but not be limited to, targeting and relationship building.
* Develop an inclusive values document, distribute it to partners and encourage them to sign up to it, so that all partners have a good understanding of the whys and hows of inclusive practice.
* Continue to expand the music leader team, combining a good level of professionalism with a diversity of genres and cultural backgrounds.
* Upskill the team in facilitation and inclusive practice as well as working with groups and session management.

**Appendix 1 - Project management for inclusion – areas to consider.**

**Structural**

Communication with schools – get in time.

Time of sessions - suitable for intended group / clashes with religious or other events / is the length right for focus etc.?

Signposting – to youth club nights

Location – safe / accessible / are group going to feel at home there? / are they likely to travel there? / transport connections / cost to get there / have they a culture of going to this venue? / does it have other connotations?

School may not be the best space for them to be in

Would they do online?

**Resources**

Is equipment appropriate to the group?

Is it genre appropriate?

Is there enough of it?

Is it secure?

Is it safe?

Will there be issues around who gets what?

**Referrals**

Should the team be narrower and only focus on electronic music?

**Team**

Numbers / ratio

Have team appropriate musical skills?

Do they use inclusive pedagogy?

Gender balance?

Cultural background?

Leadership and roles?

CPD

Do they have appropriate authority in the space?

Can they manage behaviour?

**Additional (in house) staff**

Are they briefed on the project?

Are roles clear?

Are reporting and line management procedures clear?

Do they work inclusively?

What are the relationships and how will they be managed?

**Group**

Numbers

Ratio

Age range

Gender

Cultural background

Specific needs

Likely behaviours

Levels of engagement

Need to know.

Interests

Experience

**The session**

Briefing and debriefing

Group combinations

Shared ownership

Accepting what they bring

Musical, personal, and social development

Creativity/learning balance

Self-determination theory

Group and solo care

Team communication and decision making

**Appendix 2 – Baseline questionnaires for participants:**

We would like to gather some information about how this programme might affect your learning and development. Your responses are completely anonymous (meaning no one will know it is you who completed this form) and voluntary (meaning you don’t have to complete this form if you do not want to). You can leave any question blank, and you can also choose not to complete the questions once you begin. Nor will any answers you provide be singled out; we will look at everyone’s answers together.

Questionnaire 1 – start of project.

|  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
|  | Strongly disagree | Disagree | Agree | Strongly Agree |
| I am a creative person |  | Xxx | Xxx xxxx x | Xxxx xxxx |
| I have the skills to do what I want musically |  | Xxxx | Xxxxxxxxxxx | xx |
| I know what I want to do with my music and how to take things further | x | XXxxx | xxxxxxx | xxxx |
| It is important for me to do my best |  |  | xxxxxxx | XXxxxxxxxx |
| I feel comfortable in social situations | Xxx | Xxx | xxxxxxxxxx | x |
| I like to learn about new things |  |  | Xxxxxxxxxxx | Xxxxxxx |
| I enjoy having my music heard by others – including when I perform (If appropriate) |  | xx | xxxxxxxxx | xxx |
| I have people in my life who are interested in me |  |  | xxxxxxxxxx | xxxxxxxx |
| I have things I can offer to others |  | xx | Xxxxxx xxxxx | xxxxx |
| I like to work with others creatively |  | x | xxxxxxx | xxxxxxxx |
| It is important for me to try to make a difference in the world | xx | x | xxxxxxxx | xxxxxxx |
| I have close friend ships |  | x | xxxxxxx | xxxxxxxxxx |
| I can be counted on to help if someone needs me |  | xxx | xxxxxx | xxxxxxxxx |
| It is easy for me to consider the feelings of others | xx | x | xxxxxxxx | xxxxxxx |
| I have a style of my own musically | x | xxxxxx | xxxxx | xxxxxx |

Questionnaire 2 – End of project

|  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
|  | Strongly disagree | Disgree | Agree | Strongly Agree |
| I am a creative person | x | xxx | xxxxxxxxxx | xxxxxxxxx |
| I have the skills to do what I want musically | xx | xxxx | xxxxxxxxxxxxx | xxx |
| I know what I want to do with my music and how to take things further | xx | xx | xxxxxxxxxxxxx | xxxx |
| It is important for me to do my best | x | xx | xxxxxxxx | xxxxxxxxxxx |
| I feel comfortable in social situations | xxx | xxxxx | xxxxxxxxx | xxxxx |
| I like to learn about new things |  | xx | xxxxxxxx | Xxxxxxxxxxx |
| I enjoy having my music heard by others – including when I perform (If appropriate) | xxxxx | xxxx | Xxxx xxx | Xxx xxx |
| I have people in my life who are interested in me | x | xxxxxx | xxxxxxxxxxx | xxxx |
| I have things I can offer to others | xx | xxxxx | xxxxxxxxxxxx | xxx |
| I like to work with others creatively | x | xxxx | xxxxxxxxxxx | xxxxxx |
| It is important for me to try to make a difference in the world | xxx | xxxx | xxxxxxxxxxxx | xxx |
| I have close friend ships | x | xx | xxxxxxxx | xxxxxxxxxxx |
| I can be counted on to help if someone needs me | x | xx | xxxxxxxxxxxxx | xxxxxx |
| It is easy for me to consider the feelings of others | xxx | xxxx | xxxxxxx | xxxxxxxx |
| I have a style of my own musically | xx | xxxx | xxxxxxx | xxxxxxxx |

All questions from The Positive Youth Development Inventory Full Version (2012)

1. CMEH inclusion Strategy [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
2. https://www.ons.gov.uk/visualisations/censuspopulationchange/E08000026/ [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
3. Coventry City Council’s  
   Youth Justice Strategy and Plan - 2021-23 [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
4. Rogers, C. R. (1957). The Necessary and Sufficient Conditions of Therapeutic Personality Change. Journal of Consulting Psychology, 21, 95-103. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
5. Music leader’s words – not endorsed by this researcher. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)