

Creative Scotland, Youth Music Initiative

Case Study – Coco Music in Polmont



**“Changing lives for
young men in
custody through
music”**



About this case study

This case study was developed as part of Creative Scotland’s evaluation of the Youth Music Initiative in 2014/15. The Youth Music Initiative is a national programme which is in its 12th year of operation. These case studies demonstrate the approaches used by organisations funded by the Youth Music Initiative, and highlight the impacts of this work.

This case study is about the Coco Music project, which is run in Her Majesty’s Young Offenders Institution Polmont by Impact Arts. The programme offers music provision to young men in custody through group work, individual sessions and master classes. The participants are encouraged to build a repertoire of music and to work towards a finale performance to friends and family.

Impact Arts is a national organisation that works to help people and communities change their lives through the arts. It works in partnership with a number of organisations. Within the music project, Impact Arts liaise with Barnardo’s, a children’s charity that provides Youth work support in the prison.

This case study was informed by discussions with twelve young people within Polmont, a music tutor, a Barnardo’s youth worker and three people involved in planning the project – from Impact Arts and Barnardo’s.

The approach

The Coco Music Project began at the request of the young men at Polmont Young Offenders Institution. The young men had previously received a music intervention project, which had been successful. Many interventions in the prison are short term, so this project set out to be longer and provide a more sustained and consistent experience. The project was piloted in late 2014, and then rolled out further in 2015.

The Coco Music Project aims to give young people in prison the opportunity to make music, to develop skills and open their minds to the options of a future in the creative industries. The intended outcomes for the project are around:

- communication skills;

- confidence;
- sense of purpose;
- creative skills and
- recognition of talent.

The programme is designed to fit in to the Scottish Prison Service young people's strategy, which is closely tied to Curriculum for Excellence. The new Scottish Prison Service strategy recognises that 'formal' education is not necessarily for everyone and encourages a focus on creative learning, which is in line with the ethos of Impact Arts. It also links with Getting It Right for Every Child (GIFEC) values and principles.

Creative Scotland has provided £40,000 towards this programme, over two years. A further £30,000 is provided by Inspiring Scotland.

Activities

Participants self refer into the programme. It is promoted by fliers and through youth workers, who play an important role in recruiting participants.

Young people taking part have 15 weeks of support, receiving one three hour session each week with time built in for relaxation and socialising. Of these sessions, twelve are led by a tutor selected by Impact Arts, and three are led by the Barnardo's youth worker.

Activities are chosen by the participants as they sign up, giving Impact Arts sufficient time to find a suitable tutor for the chosen instrument or activity. There are currently four separate groups running in tandem, led by two tutors. Two groups are learning to DJ, whilst the other two are working on band development, rapping and MC'ing. One of the band development groups is for young men who are separated from the main prison population for their own protection.

Tutors help to teach and guide but the participants are encouraged to steer the direction of the programme and take ownership wherever possible. The programme is designed to be led by the young men.

"I'll guide them but they should be playing and writing songs that they want to do."

"Ultimately it's all about the participants, we listen to their needs and respond accordingly through the delivery of the workshops. We want to give them an opportunity to be creative and learn."

Participants can, if they wish, work towards a performance to friends, family and fellow inmates. All participants have the opportunity to record their work and can take away a recorded CD of the music they have created and played.

Participants have the opportunity to work towards a Trinity College accredited Arts Award at a level most suited to them. The Arts Award is flexible, and there are no entry requirements or time limits set to achieve an award. Both tutors are trained to deliver for the award and one tutor can act as an assessor.

Support and training

The music tutors have been chosen for this programme specifically because of their knowledge, experience and suitability to working with potentially challenging young people. Both are well known to Impact Arts and have, over a number of years, received extensive training in relevant topics including at risk youth and child protection. However the environment is unusual and unmatched by anything in the community.

“Every day is so different; I don’t think there is an awful lot that can prepare you for in here.”

Part of the programme also involves building wider skills. During the programme, three ‘master classes’ take place with industry professionals. These are aimed at the youth workers and Scottish Prison Service staff to develop basic skills that will allow them to set up a music session.

Impact Arts is currently working towards implementing a peer mentoring scheme for the young people, which would involve training and support for mentors from the music tutors.

Working with others

The programme is delivered in partnership between Impact Arts and Barnardo’s. This partnership was felt to be particularly important. The Barnardo’s youth worker is based within Polmont Young Offenders Institution, and has regular contact with the young men. This makes her well placed to disseminate information on the project, identify young people that are interested, and maintain contact throughout and after the programme.

“There’s no way we could deliver a successful project without the support of everyone involved in the care of the young people.”

The youth worker is also present during the sessions, providing a familiar and trusted face at the music sessions. This is particularly important at first, before the music tutor has build up a trusting relationship.

“It wouldn’t be possible with just me because [youth worker] has good rapport with the guys. It takes me four or five weeks just to get to know them and gain their respect.”

Impact on young people

The pilot programme (late 2014) engaged with 22 young men, and the second phase (early 2015) has involved 24. Demand for the programme has been high. Feedback and evaluation is an important part of the programme, involving:

- weekly reports from the tutor to Impact Arts – which incorporate informal feedback provided by participants;
- three visits to the each group in the project by a senior staff member within Impact Arts; and
- individual interviews with each participant – at the beginning, middle and end of the block.

One of the key immediate impacts for young people was having something to do, and a chance to get out of their cells. Participants all stated that going to music sessions provided a much needed diversion to their week, where some days they may be in their rooms for up to 23 hours. For young men segregated for their own protection, the programme was even more valuable – as the opportunities this group of young men receive is often very limited. Young men felt that having something to do was helping with their health and wellbeing.

**“It’s created an extra distraction for me...
it helps me and my mental health.”**

“It makes me forget I’m in prison.”

The programme was also stimulating a real interest in music. Impact Arts has provided some young men with guitars so that they can practise in their cells outwith sessions. More have been ordered to ensure there are enough for participants to use whilst they are on the programme. The participants talked of how they would like to develop their musical interest further. All stated that they would like to continue making music, in the future.

“When I leave, I’m going straight out to buy a guitar.”

“In the long term, it’s aspirational. They’re working with real artists so they can see that it’s a viable career, something they can do when they leave prison.”

Young men, and those supporting them, felt that the programme also provided the opportunity to express themselves, share personal experiences, recognise their own behaviours and take responsibility for their actions.

“Song writing usually works well. It opens them up to talking about things they wouldn’t normally talk about and you see a totally different side to people.”

“It’s helping them to deal with their environment emotionally.”

“Immediately for some, it’s a release, an outlet. A way to communicate how they feel in a safe environment.”

Many young men commented on how their wider social skills, such as confidence, communication and teamwork, had developed.

“I think it’s helped my patience.”

Attendance at the programme has also been excellent, which is used as an indicator of effectiveness of engagement. Overall, the programme was felt to be helping with:

- creative development – including musical skills and song writing;
- social development – including teamwork, relationships and compromise; and
- raising self esteem, confidence and pride.

Impact on deliverers and the youth music sector

Tutors felt that the Coco programme developed their skills through providing experience of working in a different environment. This helped them to learn how to be highly flexible and adaptable, particularly when managing behaviour and calming any situations. Tutors also felt that the work was very rewarding. It had also changed how some involved in the project felt about working in the prison environment.

“To begin with I was apprehensive. It’s been a steep learning curve but a really good experience.”

“Changing my mindset to working in the prison environment.”

It is hoped that the project will eventually have an impact on the youth music sector as these young people learn that having a career in music or performing arts is a viable option once they leave Polmont.

Successes

Key successes of this programme include:

- providing for protected prisoners that have limited opportunities;
- the relationship between the music tutors, Barnardo’s youth workers and Prison staff;
- the ability of the music tutors to respond to need;
- consistency of the tutors and ability to build trusting relationships;
- increasing confidence and inspiring young people; and
- overachieving on targets for involvement, as there is a high demand.

Those involved in the project agreed that the best thing about the programme is that it has made a considerable difference to the young people. It has given young people something to focus on and built a sense of achievement.

“Seeing the boys so proudly walking to the session

with their guitars held high on the their backs.”

Lessons learned

Working in the young offenders institution is a challenge. The tutors have worked to ensure that they can deliver the best possible programme of music within the restrictions and regulations of a custodial environment. This includes:

- very limited access to electrical goods and technical equipment;
- challenges achieving all of the elements required to gain an Arts Award – such as recording and providing evidence of activity;
- supporting those who are protected within the prison to take part safely;
- timing the sessions, which sit within a strictly regulated prison timetable;
- supporting young men with very different levels of existing music experience within the one group; and
- sound levels and music causing disturbance for others working nearby.

“You can’t just google a song or download the tabs instantly if they want to try something. So I have to make notes and I try to bring as much as possible with me on paper.”

The tutors and youth workers have had to work carefully to manage dynamics and conflict within the group. It has also been challenging to support young men to perform without embarrassment in front of peers and family members.

Impact Arts and Barnardo’s are working on approaches to reduce these challenges in the future. The partners are also discussing how they balance the music and youth work elements of the programme effectively, as the young people are keen to spend as much time as possible with the music tutor. Overall, the partners involved would advise that similar projects are led as much as possible by young people.

“Young people expect the music tutor and they feel as though they’re missing out.”

What’s next

A new performing arts space is being developed within Polmont Young Offenders Institution. This will provide scope to hold a larger celebration event at the end of the programme. There are also plans to:

- build a peer mentoring scheme;
- develop an in-house radio station and a record label run by the young men;
- re-consider the youth work sessions and how they fit with the programme; and
- try the approach in other prisons, particularly with young women.