



MUSIC AS MEASUREMENT

SUMMARY AND FINDINGS FROM NORTH LANARKSHIRE

June 2026



This report is a summary of a peer-reviewed journal article titled [Transcending Measurement: What Matters When Making-with-Music for Equitable Wellbeing in Health and Social Care Systems.](#)

Why Music Matters for Wellbeing

Research has long shown that music can support people's health and wellbeing. However, less is known about how the everyday structures and small actions surrounding music-making—such as the habits we hold, music materials, and ways of engaging together—can also positively affect health. In addition, the value of music for wellbeing is often measured in short-term outcomes and isolated events, rather than as part of a continuous process.

Looking Beyond Short-Term Measures

We wanted to explore the value of music beyond immediate results. The benefits of music aren't just in the sounds we make, but in the "making-with": the shared spaces, routines, and relationships that help people feel part of something bigger.

Honing in on North Lanarkshire

We, as researchers at the University of Edinburgh, worked alongside North Lanarkshire Council's Arts Development Team members to study several community music projects in North Lanarkshire, Scotland.

The Projects We Studied

Projects included All Ability Music, North Lanarkshire Community Choir, Ah Cannae Sing, and Sensory Storytelling. More detailed information about each project can be found in the table on Page 4.

What We Found: Shared Connections and Experiences

Though varied in form, all the projects shared a focus on forming meaningful connections and collective experiences. We found that group activities and routines help build relationships, stability, and a sense of belonging among members across all the music groups we studied.

Project Title	Sites	Set Up	Timing	Context
<i>Ah Cannae Sing</i>	Community setting within in North Lanarkshire	Several community events including Gaelic edition: Hormones and Harmony; Power of the Female Voice	60–90 min workshops across the year	Workshops facilitated by professional musicians, usually by expert vocalists; developing materiality of voice, singing, body
<i>All Ability Music</i>	Cultural and community centres × 3	Weekly participation of 70 people (including support workers who also participate)	Sessions of 60 min	Combining percussion with songs in groups led by a professional musician
<i>North Lanarkshire Community Choir</i>	Cultural and community centres × 3	Weekly participation across three groups of 50 people	Sessions are 90 min	A non-auditioned choir led by professional musicians, open to anyone regardless of level or ability
<i>Sensory Storytelling</i>	Additional Support Needs (ASN) schools across North Lanarkshire And Mavisbank Schools	9 teachers and approximately 40 pupils	Blocks of 6–8 weeks in addition to one-off theatre events through Theatre in Schools Sessions last for 30 min	Sessions are facilitated by professional artists from drama and music sector with experience of delivering in ASN schools during the school timetable

The table above gives further details on each of the community music projects in North Lanarkshire that we looked at to generate data and findings for this report.

The How:

The study treated the music groups as part of connected system where people, materials, and practices constantly interact. We used pre-gathered data collected by Deborah McArthur and Aaron Hawthorne of the [North Lanarkshire Arts Development Team](#) to identify themes and findings. These had been collected already as part of feedback forms, interviews, reports, and audio-visuals from the community groups.

All together, we analysed the available data, shared interpretations and perspectives.

Findings:

- Making music was not just an activity, but a way to understand how participants felt and what their experiences were like.
- Sessions were flexible and changed to meet people's needs. When helpful, group leads used props or sensory materials* to engage with group members. This allowed everyone to take part in their own way, whether that meant moving, quietly exploring, or interacting with objects.
- Changes in rhythm, speed, and energy helped keep sessions engaging. The physical space also mattered — things like small rooms or soft furniture affected how sound and movement were felt. Together, these elements helped people feel comfortable, settled, and included.
- Participants described the music groups as places where they could connect with others, make friends, and feel supported. Everyday items like chairs, instruments, and props helped people interact and spend time together.
- Having regular routines, familiar spaces, and the same leaders each week helped people feel safe and confident. These small but consistent details made it easier for participants to relax, take part, and feel good overall.

****A sensory material is any object or resource that people can touch, see, hear, or move to explore their senses and engage in a hands-on way. They're often used in creative, therapeutic, or educational setting.***

In Focus: Sensory Storytelling

In the Sensory Storytelling programme, young people with complex support needs connected deeply through repeated musical and sensory cues. Familiar routines—songs, objects, and weekly structures—created comfort and recognition.

Stories such as The Snail and the Whale became immersive through touch, sound, and movement, allowing participants to engage emotionally and physically rather than through words alone. Teachers observed new gestures, sounds, words, and emotional associations emerging over time. These rituals demonstrated how sensory-rich musical experiences supported communication and wellbeing in ways that fall outside traditional measures.



Conclusion

From Individuals to a Collective

Across the projects, people arrived as individuals and became part of a collective. Wellbeing emerged through relationships and shared experiences rather than through isolated outcomes.

Noticing the Benefits

Participants often felt changes in mood, confidence, and energy, with some noticing improvements in day-to-day wellbeing.

Responsive and Flexible Sessions

Facilitators and musicians worked responsively, adjusting to participants' needs and co-creating sessions in real time. These flexible, people-focused experiences helped participants feel part of something larger than themselves.

Valuing Connection Over Targets

The music groups were valued for the connections they created and the act of taking part, rather than for measurable targets.

Rethinking How We Measure Music's Impact

The value of music for wellbeing should not be seen only in short-term outcomes or isolated events. Instead, it should be understood as part of a continuous process that shapes how people live, connect, and care for one another.

By taking a broader view, we look beyond statistics, surveys, and other standard measures that are often used to judge music's impact on wellbeing. We focus more on people's lived experiences and everyday changes, recognising that music can support connection, confidence, and inclusion in ways that numbers alone don't always capture — and that this matters for reducing health inequalities.

Contact

If you have any questions or comments about the research paper and/or the music groups mentioned within this report, please feel free to contact:

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