

Music, community and recovery: Good practice in UK community music projects supporting recovery from addiction

Kathy Ellwand

PYE Global

Molly Mathieson and Dan Blomfield

New Note Orchestra, UK

Sophie Wilsdon, Nell Hubbard and Isolde Freeth-Hale

Rising Voices Choir UK

This article presents two examples of successful community music projects from the UK that support people in recovery. We explore what makes these projects work, in the hope that this will be a useful resource that will inspire other people going through recovery and those supporting them as facilitators, music therapists and community music leaders. We also share practical ideas and resources for facilitating safe spaces for building community and supporting recovery through music and creativity. Based on testimony from members of these projects, we examine the broader question of how music and belonging to a community can support recovery from addiction.

Partners for Youth Empowerment (PYE) Global is an international charity with a mission to unleash the creative potential of young people. They provide training to individuals, schools and organisations in a learning method called the Creative Empowerment Model. The Model combines best practice from experiential learning, group facilitation and the arts to create empowering, safe spaces for groups. PYE was invited to be a partner on the Erasmus Plus MUS.I.C.D.A.RE (Music in Creative Detoxification and Rehabilitation) strategic partnership from 2016 – 2018. This project brought together people from the UK, Greece, France and worldwide to explore music and recovery from addiction. PYE was responsible

for coordinating activities in the UK, and involving UK participants in the project. Through this relationship, we met many inspiring individuals and programmes who were supporting people in recovery through music. Rising Voices Choir based in Bristol and New Note Orchestra based in Brighton, two UK cities with a history and high incidence of drug dependence, were two outstanding examples of good practice in this field. Both organisations have in common: a strong supportive community; passionate facilitators and music leaders; and opportunities for their members to perform and most importantly, enjoy making music together.

This article is written in collaboration between PYE Global, New Note Orchestra and Rising Voices choir, and based on interviews with New Note and Rising Voices Members.

Firstly, we will present the two case studies describing the work and structure of New Note Orchestra and Rising Voices Choir. Secondly, we will share some practical tips and resources for facilitating successful music projects supporting recovery from addiction. Finally, we will explore how music and community help people in their recovery from drug or alcohol addiction.

CASE STUDIES

Case study 1: New Note Orchestra, Brighton, UK

By Molly Mathieson,
Founder and Chief Executive
and Dan Blomfield,
Trustee and Orchestra Member
<https://www.newnote.co.uk/>



New Note Orchestra (NNO), based in Brighton, is an orchestra made up of people in recovery from drug and alcohol addiction. It was created by Molly Mathieson who is a TV documentary maker. She created a TV show called *Addicts Symphony* for channel 4 and was so moved by the transformational aspect of music that she launched the New Note Orchestra in 2015. It is the first and only recovery orchestra in the world.

NNO has two aims:

- To help people in recovery from drugs and alcohol addiction to stay sober by meeting regularly to compose and play music,
- To reduce the stigmas around alcoholism and addiction in our communities by putting on public performances.

NNO brings a punk ethos to the classical world, not in musical style but in attitude. It believes that with a bit of encouragement anyone can pick up an instrument and write great music. All the musicians in the orchestra improvise together to create truly beautiful and eclectic soundscapes

that take you on a musical journey. It has an open-door policy and that has encouraged an offbeat mix of instrumentalists and a very innovative approach to music.

Many of the musicians have complex needs, primarily around addiction but they also have mental and physical health needs. Some of the musicians have been socially excluded for long periods of their lives. Over 75% have experienced homelessness.

Brighton and Hove is a seaside town in the UK with a significant problem with drugs and alcohol. Alcohol abuse causes two deaths a week and on average, every year there are 34 drug related deaths. Last year Brighton saw the highest increase of homelessness than anywhere else in the country.¹

Alcoholism and addiction affects us all. Along with the cost, it damages communities, wrecks families and destroys lives. Finding creative solutions to help people stay sober benefits us all. Maintaining 'recovery' is a complex process and a challenge for anyone with addiction issues. Loneliness and isolation are well known triggers for relapse. Finding new friends away from drugs and alcohol and encouraging peer to peer support reduces this risk enormously. New Note Orchestra creates a community where our clients actively support and help each other. Composing music gives our clients new skills and repairs their confidence. Regular concerts provide a shared experience, clear goals and a rewarding sense of achievement.

Dan, one of New Note's founding members and a trustee of the Orchestra, describes it as "a free, open place to connect to people from your local area from all walks of life and backgrounds with a particular focus on recovery from drugs and mental health. The glue that binds the air is recovery, but the sound and music is created through connecting to others."

Reducing loneliness along with increasing self-esteem and learning new skills are essential ingredients to staying sober. The most powerful thing about being in the orchestra is the re-framing of identities from being an addict/alcoholic into becoming a musician. Our members take great pride in being in the New Note Orchestra. They have very positive experiences and this helps to repair fractured relationships with friends

1 Department for Communities and Local Government (DCLG) 2017

and family. Having ‘good news’ is a vital link for our members to build bridges and form deeper bonds with their wider networks.

Dan says “now it is the keystone to my recovery and one of the only ‘recovery’ type groups I still go to. It keeps me connected to myself and grounded as I head further away from my old addictive behaviour. I also believe that given our collective story and reasons for joining the orchestra there is an unprecedented and almost indescribable power that shows itself in our music when we perform live.”

Case study 2: Rising Voices Choir, Bristol UK

By Sophie Wilsdon: *Volunteer and Trainee Manager/Rising Voices Manager and support facilitator – Bristol Drugs Project;*
Nell Hubbard: *Assessment Engagement Worker / Rising Voices support facilitator – Bristol Drugs Project;*
Isolde Freeth – Hale: *Rising Voices Choir Leader and Rising Voices members.*

www.risingvoiceschoir.co.uk www.facebook.com/RisingVoicesUK/



Rising Voices is a weekly singing group based in Bristol for people with problematic drug or alcohol use, and those in recovery from it. We also welcome families and carers of drug and alcohol users, and staff and volunteers from treatment services.

We are funded by Bristol Drugs Project (BDP), which is part of the wider treatment system in Bristol, ROADS (Recovery Orientated Alcohol and Drugs Service). BDP is 32 years old as of 10th March 2018, and follows a harm reduction philosophy.

Rising Voices was formed in late 2014, by Sophie Wilsdon and local choir leader, Isolde Freeth-Hale. Sophie had been delivering structured treatment programmes at BDP since 2008, mainly consisting of group work and one to one sessions. Being a musician herself, in an organisation which seemed to attract musicians and supported creative thinkers, she also ran the occasional music workshop with colleagues. She increasingly saw a gap in BDP's services for a therapeutic group where people could express their feelings without having to find the words. Having been a member of one of Isolde's choirs, an idea became to form. BDP's management gave full support (including financial) from the beginning, and the choir was launched on November 27th 2014.

Since forming, we have created a unique and transformative space for people to come together to sing, build positive connections and support networks, strengthen their recovery, make friends, and to be uplifted by the power of song. Our lead facilitator is Isolde Freeth - Hale, with additional facilitation and management by Sophie Wilsdon and Nell Hubbard (both of BDP). We have been privileged to receive donations from private donors in Bristol which have enabled us to make a short film in 2017, and to travel to gigs and conferences. Rising voices is a safe place people can come to sing together. Recovery is not talked about unless people would like to talk about it. A choir member explained, "I turn up to choir feeling whatever I'm feeling...I can feel really dreadful, and as soon as you coming in and you make eye contact with other people...and it's not about conversationit's about being with other human beings, connecting but without talking". This is an important aspect of the space that is created and gives an alternative to other treatment services. As one of our members said, "it's open to anybody regardless of their experience, and their connection with the organisers of the choir, so you may be a family member, you may be a volunteer, you may be going through a period of

recovery yourself. It didn't really matter. We don't know anyone's story, we are bound by the fact that we are attracted to exploring music, so that's a lovely thing"

The choir is open to anyone who wants to come – no previous singing or choir experience is necessary. We learn everything by ear and repetition. And it's completely free to members.

We have sung at events in Bristol, Birmingham and Brighton, including the Bristol Recovery Festival, Rolls Royce Christmas Fair, Drink and Drugs News Conference, St. Stephen's Church, one25, AWP Mental Health Festival, local festivals and the Bereavement Through Addiction Celebration of Life service.

We were featured on Songs of Praise in February 2017 and on Points West news in December 2016. We are also very proud to have participated and performed at the MUS.I.C.D.A.RE conference in 2017.

We have between 15 and 20 regular members of mixed gender, age and abilities/experiences. We learn everything by ear and singing unaccompanied (acapella).

Session structure:

5pm – Meet, greet and eat! Food and refreshments is a real incentive for people who may have limited financial resources. Also, our members report that the social parts of the choir are a big part of why they keep coming back.

5.30 – Check in and any notices. Depending on the week and who's there, we'll have some sort of name game, perhaps say your name and the best thing that's happened to you today, what you like about Spring etc.

5.40 – Warm up. A physical and vocal warm up.

5.50 – Singing songs by ear – all acapella. Sometimes with song sheets, sometimes by memory.

6.20 – Cake break! Essential!

6.30 to 7pm: More singing and then a warm down.

One of the Rising Voices members describes a typical session: "We'll arrive and settle in, then we'll have a warm up session. The great thing about the warm up session is we don't necessarily start with the voice. We'll

start with movement so we'll engage our bodies. Then we go into making sounds, not necessarily singing but making sounds, so we're warming up our faces, and our lips and everything else. So then we'll do some kind of scales, slowly starting to warm up the voice. And then very cleverly we actually then go into singing a round or something like that. So it's very smoothly tailored into the actual singing. After we've done a round that we know, we'll then go into learning a song or going back through the repertoire. The lovely thing about it is we re-learn it each time, which means that if you're new to the group it doesn't mean 'oh I don't know this so I can't join in' - there's always the opportunity to learn it, and especially if you are a little bit rusty it's a reminder as well."

Being part of Rising Voices supports our members in many different ways with their lives and with their recovery. One member shared, "I stopped drinking 9 months ago... and one of the things that came up was this huge emotional void. The thing that's helped me fill that is going to this choir."

This short film gives a taste of Rising Voices in action and explains the story of the choir: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=uiOAgHS42R0>

Tips and tools for facilitating successful music projects supporting recovery from addiction

Rising Voices and New Note Orchestra members have identified several factors that are key to creating a successful and sustainable community music project to help people in recovery from addiction:

1. Good facilitation, structure to the sessions and musical leadership

Rising Voices members felt it was important to have a facilitator and music leader to give the group structure. One member commented, "I like the structure of it - we go into it and you don't realise that you're already your warming up but you ARE warming up, and then you start making some noises and before you know it you're actually singing a song, before you know it you've actually learnt a song, it sort of creeps up on you! It's very clever! It's been structured very well. There are other aspects of it, but I think the tailoring of it is very cleverly done."

PYE Global's Creative Empowerment Model of facilitation also recom-

mends warming the group up slowly by increasing the creative risk incrementally during a session, which helps your group take supported steps out of their comfort zone.

Giving a set structure to each session provides a pattern that repeats and becomes familiar to the group, which helps create a safe space. Things like a 'check-in' where people go round a circle and share names and feelings, or a making a group agreement where people can set their own ground rules are all helpful tools to create safety and trust. A Rising Voices member described the start of a session, "We all start off together sat together, get to know names and go around and have a feeling check, invite new people, welcome back people who haven't been for a while. Generally come to an agreement. Its welcoming and inclusive, flexible and you don't have to take part, you can do as little or as much as you want. Sometimes it's just about being in that space with people and just listening and being listened to."

Nell from Bristol Drugs Project who helps to run the Rising Voices choir talked about the importance of how you begin a session, and repeating exercises to create a pattern each week, "For me the warm up is really significant as it helps people arrive in the space. It is structured in a way that gradually builds up; warming up the body first then moving onto the face and jaw and eventually onto the voice. The members copy the facilitator and each week it follows the same format, sometimes with the addition of new exercises placed around the usual ones. It is playful and silly and a way of inviting the imagination. The repetition of the same exercises each week creates a feeling of ritual plus bonding activities such as tapping each other on the back. The facilitator joins in and is not made to feel like an expert. We have the exercises typed up and on occasion members of the choir have lead parts of the warm up."

Another Rising Voices member highlighted the important of having an experienced music leader to support the group to make a good sound, "I think Isolde plays a big part in our choir, because I don't have any sort of musical knowledge, something about the songs we sing and the harmonies that we sing...you need to have some musical knowledge in the mix. I think if we were left to our own devices it wouldn't sound all that nice."

New Note Orchestra also has strong musical leadership and involves experienced artistic directors such as Conall Gleeson who supports the group in composing their own scores using innovative workshop tech-

niques. In this way both projects are inclusive of people who are making music for the first time and experienced musicians while enabling a diverse group to make beautiful sounds.

2. Creating a safe space, where there is a culture of welcome, inclusivity, non-judgement

At Rising Voices the choir leader and facilitators have successfully created a nurturing and friendly atmosphere. One of the choir members explained that, “the choir and the organisers of the choir have created a culture of welcome, and a feeling of ease around it”. Many Rising Voices members described having high levels of anxiety in joining a new group for the first time, so having a warm welcome is key in supporting people to get past this barrier and keep coming back.

Dan from New Note Orchestra also described how their founder Molly has similarly set up a caring and respectful atmosphere so that the members now take responsibility to extend this welcome to new comers. Dan says, “[Molly’s] nurturing of New Note from the start has come from the right place and for the right reasons and people can feel and respect this. Following that, the rest of the members help and look after each other and the atmosphere is self-perpetuating.”

Inclusivity is key ingredient of a successful music for recovery project. As a Rising Voices member said, “I like the fact that there’s no audition, that all levels are welcome, you don’t have to gig if you don’t want to. We learn to celebrate our mistakes we don’t beat ourselves up for them. It’s an accepting atmosphere. There’s no hierarchy there It’s not a competition there. We’re all one voice and all levels are welcome I think that’s really important”. Several Rising Voices members also said they liked the fact that the choir was non-religious, as this would have been a barrier to them enjoying being part of a choir. At New Note Orchestra, it is very musically inclusive and everyone is welcomed regardless of previous musical experience, and there is opportunity to challenge yourself and play new instruments with support.

Good music facilitation is key to supporting new musicians to participate, for example learning by ear and call and response is more inclusive than using a score, which is the way that Rising Voices choir leader Isolde Freeth-Hale teaches new material. Rising Voices members confirmed that

they appreciate this way of learning to reduce barriers to participation, “the fact that it’s not score based we don’t use musical scripts so the barrier of ‘oh I’m not experienced enough’ or ‘I can’t read music’ is eliminated because it’s that repetition learning.”

3. Flexibility

Rising Voices is open access so there is no requirement to attend each week, people can dip in and out as they please “its open...and it means that if you’ve got a lot on your plate you can step away but know that actually you are welcome to go back at anytime. And that’s a lovely thing because often apprehension about that could be a barrier. You’re not going to be judged if you don’t turn up, you’re always welcome. So again if you don’t go you can’t talk yourself out of it and say ‘well I haven’t been for ages so I can’t possibly turn up’ - it’s always very welcoming”.

During the session people can join in as much as they like or sit out of numbers. They always have chairs available so if people feel they need to sit down whilst singing they can. One of the Rising Voices members says, “if you’re not feeling up for it or great, you can sit out for a minute...there’s none of this ‘everyone has to participate all the time’ if you need to take a moment or sit out ... there are no barriers due to that.”

4. Make it free

Providing free opportunities to make music is key to engaging a diverse group of people. A Rising Voices member advised that a free project helps people in “overcoming those hurdles, those reasons that people use not to engage – it’s free so if I’m strapped for cash you can’t say ‘I can’t go because I can’t afford it’... It’s a great leveller regardless of your economic background”

5. Having fun

When Partners for Youth Empowerment presents the goals of a workshop, whether it’s for young people or adults, ‘having fun’ is always one of the most important goals.

‘Having fun’ was one of the main reasons people highlighted that they kept coming back to both Rising Voices and New Note Orchestra. Mem-

bers of Rising Voices felt that fun should be at the centre of the project. One of the Rising Voices members commented, “It’s about having fun, and it not being ‘X- Factor’. As long as everyone is willing and they keep coming back then it will grow and grow and grow and get better and better, and everyone improves and keeps coming back - it’s self-perpetuating.”

6. Have the right motivation and good leadership behind the project

Dan from New Note Orchestra underlined the importance of having genuine motives at the heart of this type of project, in order to create trust. “Who is the right person to run it? Is it you? Why? Your why has to be very important to you, personal and genuinely from the heart. If someone in recovery feels in any way that the person running it is not doing it for genuine reasons and passion, then they won’t trust that person and organisation. As a result, that venture will fail.” He also emphasised the value of having good leadership in having a sustainable project, “The orchestra’s strength is in its members and the stories and life tribulations they bring with them but this only comes to light from the nurturing and safe space Molly allows and brings with her relaxed yet passionate personality to rehearsals. However, we can all feel that this is then matched with her professional entrepreneurial skills in running, networking, funding and developing the orchestra in the rest of the week.”

Ideas and further resources for facilitating music for recovery

One of Rising Voices favourite songs is ‘Rushing’, because of the moving atmosphere it creates, “when we’ve sang rushing on occasion in a circle, when we’ve stopped nobody moved or said anything for about 30 seconds, but it felt like about 5 minutes, there was the emotion of it in that space it was amazing.”

You can hear Rising Voices singing ‘Rushing’ at 2:54 on this film about their project: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=uiOAgHS42R0>

Here are two other full recordings of ‘Rushing’/ ‘What am I rushing to’ if you would like to learn the parts to use with your group:

- Rushing - Mahasukha <https://mahasukha.bandcamp.com/track/rushing>

- Shakti Sings Choir performing ‘What am I rushing to’ by Wendy Luella Perkins <https://soundcloud.com/shakti-sings-choir/what-am-i-rushing-to-wendy-luella-perkins>

Partners for Youth Empowerment (PYE) specialises in facilitating empowering and safe spaces through creativity. PYE trains practitioners around the world in creative facilitation skills. PYE believes that music and all forms of creativity is our birthright as human beings, and any project with accessible and inclusive forms of creativity at heart is by nature empowering and creates a safe atmosphere for connection and self-expression. Have a look at this short film in which PYE facilitators and partners around the world discuss the power of music https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=t0rA_4ve180

Here are some of PYE’s favourite activities using harmony and rhythm for you to try out. These activities very quickly help a group to bond and create community through making music together. This song has proven very popular at summer camps based on PYE’s model of Creative Empowerment, it’s easy to teach and creates beautiful harmonies. ‘Helelemama’ harmony song <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=LGERrGLMyds>

PYE workshops often start with movement, to get into the body and connect everyone in the room without much talking. This simple body rhythm creates a good atmosphere from the beginning, and also gives people a chance to be creative together and get ‘in synch’ from the start. Here is one of PYE’s founders Charlie Murphy, teaching one of our favourite body percussion rhythms: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=H0ijU308gSc>

Here are some more free activities and music resources on PYE’s website that you can try out... <http://pyeglobal.org/the-pye-toolkit/>

How does making music as part of a group help people in their recovery from drug or alcohol addiction?

From the testimonies of New Note Orchestra and Rising Voices members, it was clear that participating in these projects had benefits to their recovery, both from having access to music making, and also from belonging to a community. Here are some of the main things that participants found helpful:

1. Having a focus that isn't to do with recovery

Dan from New Note says, "I went to the first meeting of the group in 2015 having come out of Addaction Chy rehab in Cornwall earlier that year. I was scared of relapsing again. I needed something recovery based but not just recovery focused to do and the Orchestra really fitted the bill."

Community music provides a space where people in recovery can come together with a common interest and purpose, that doesn't involve talking about recovery or having to share your story. This was something that Rising Voices members also highlighted, "We produce really nice sounding music. But over and above that It feels very safe. We're all there with our baggage, but it's never talked about unless you want to talk about it, so it's a very accepting group as well".

2. Finding new ways to get high

Several people talked about feeling a gap or a void after going into recovery, and how getting involved in music helped to lift their mood in a healthy way.

"For me, music is one of the few healthy, self-medicating, coping mechanisms/tools that I have, so I find that listening to music can really alter my mood. Sometimes if I'm feeling a bit down, if I listen to really down music, that will obviously make me feel down. It's a way of altering my mood, and singing, I find, makes me very emotional, it's a very powerful thing for me. I feel that it's a very good way to let stuff out, it's one of the few things I enjoy as much, in that moment, as using substances did. So singing and heroin are on par! It's indescribable, when you're singing with a group of people, you feel really connected to them." – Rising Voices member.

Another choir member explained how "in addiction you use a lot of dopamine and you get a lot of dopamine easily and quickly. I think in recovery you need to find new sources that provide you with that kind of good feeling. In that sense I think music can fill that void"

3. Peer support

Dan from New Note Orchestra says, "knowing that if I ever need to talk about addiction issues I'm having or a recovery problem I can easily talk

to people in the orchestra who get it straight away and can share good quality lived advice.” Both New Note Orchestra and Rising Voices specifically focus on music rather than on recovery, but in doing so they create safe spaces for those in recovery to come together and create networks of support that complement other recovery and therapeutic groups.

4. The power of making music to create connection

Being involved in a project that involves turning up regularly to make music together creates community, providing connection to others and opportunities to be social with new networks. For example, during a typical session at New Note Orchestra, Dan says “I smile a lot and properly relax into my own skin. I always arrive early to catch up with people”.

The power of harmony singing and playing music in a group to create connection has been well documented. As one of the Rising Voices members explained, “There’s something very exhilarating about not just singing with other people but when you’re creating harmonies... you’re working together as a group, and you’re creating something that you can’t actually create on your own because you can’t sing all the notes on your own so there’s something that really brings you together at that point.”

5. Learning a new skill or building on your existing musical skills

Rising Voices members appreciated the learning opportunities offered by the choir, “It’s an opportunity to learn new material and it’s an opportunity to learn how to learn again... It taught me to laugh at my own mistakes.”

Dan also valued how New Note Orchestra has supported him to take on new challenges and step outside his comfort zone, “each musical project has grown as I have and allowed me to push my limits in a safe yet nurturing way. As perfectly demonstrated in ‘Solace’ where I was interviewed for the short film and played a new instrument to me, the Cello.”

6. Belonging to a community

Belonging and community connection is something that naturally comes out of singing or making music together. As one of the Rising Voices members explained, “Belonging is very much part of that [coming to choir] Having connection with somebody or a group of people. Having a

common interest.”

Another Rising Voices member described how being part of a community was very important in recovery, “For me it’s useful to be part of a team. I think that’s useful as part of recovery: you don’t have to do all this on your own. It teaches you to be part of a team... For me it was important to be part of something that was bigger than myself to get out of myself, my own pity and my own problems. It’s important for me to be part of a team and the choir teaches us that – that we have to balance our voice so that it’s not softer than anyone else’s and it’s not louder than anyone else’s. So it teaches us literally to listen to everyone else’s voice so that all of our voices become one.”

7. Building confidence

Partners for Youth Empowerment (PYE)’s methodology of facilitation is based on the principle that being empowered to take creative risks that are witnessed and positively received by a supportive community, helps your confidence to grow. ‘Arts-rich learning communities provide opportunities for everyone to shine and be seen and appreciated by one another. When people take creative risks and are appreciated by peers and mentors, their confidence jumps. Through repeated opportunities to take creative risks, self-confidence develops quite naturally.’² This is the kind of environment created by the supportive, creative, communities of New Note Orchestra and Rising Voices Choir, where members are offered opportunities to perform and take other creative risks such as writing a song or learning a new instrument.

One of the Rising Voices members talked about a favourite memory, “We were going to do a performance and there were a couple of members of the choir who were getting quite agitated actually about ‘oh we’re going to do this’, and ‘I’m not sure if I can do this well’, but between us all we did our warm up and we delivered. And what I loved was the contrast between before and after the performance, and afterwards some of the people that were most apprehensive were so delighted and elated it was lovely to see the transformation over a couple of hours”

Another Rising Voices member talked about the choir helping him

2 ‘Catch the Fire’, Peggy Taylor and Charlie Murphy (2014), P18, New Society Publishers

gain confidence over some of his fears, “For me It’s a way of being able to get over myself, to get over my fears of people, fears of jamming with other people, fears of making mistakes, fears of performance. I used to need to have to get very loaded in order to perform anything. Later on after I kept coming back it gave me a quiet confidence over some of my fears and really it’s given me an opportunity to grow.”

8. Sense of achievement, doing something regular to give structure

Rising Voices and New Note members both talked about the benefits of having structure and a social space to get out of the house when you’re in recovery. A Rising Voices member described it as “taking positive action, so just turning up in itself creates a sense of achievement that you’ve taken time out again of everyday life to do something for yourself.”

9. Singing and making music creates emotional and physical wellbeing

There is an established body of evidence of the positive effect of music making and singing on wellbeing. New Note and Rising Voices members confirmed this:

- “when I’m feeling a little bit stressed that practice of engaging the voice and ones respiratory system and your diaphragm engages your deep breathing which is physiologically very good for you, so there’s a physiological thing, there’s also the connection with other people, there’s also the mental wellbeing of that, if you’re breathing more deeply, your mind is aware that you’re in a calmer state.”
- “Singing makes you feel good. It makes me feel good. It makes me feel physically good, mentally good and emotionally good, it helps me come out of my own isolation and builds a sense of achievement and sense of trust in others.”
- “Creating a state of wellbeing, being very much in the moment. So people talk about that sense of flow so you’re not caught up in that negative self-talk or ‘gosh there’s a lot going on and suddenly I’ve got loads of thoughts going round my head’. It’s a break from everyday life to take time out to just be in that moment of creating a harmonious sound.” R
- “It keeps my soul fit! It’s just really good for your soul. I can’t really

describe it any other way than that”

- “It’s part of my wellbeing and I know if I don’t keep going other parts of my life will be affected, I need that bit of space and time. And I want to try to look after myself.”

10. Music provides an outlet for self-expression and builds empathy

The fields of music therapy and community music have provided a body of evidence for the therapeutic effects of music, and the value of music in supporting people to express themselves. Dan describes the role of music in his journey, “throughout my life and recovery, music has helped me express myself when I can’t say or find the words. Its primal power and ability to activate my memory and create new ones never stops to amaze me. Through playing music with others in recovery I’ve found a new lasting level of connection to people recovering or suffering from addiction and mental health. Music can talk to me and remind me of where I was and have come from or where to go.”

One of the Rising Voices members also described how singing in the group connects them to others and allows emotions to flow, “I think it’s the singing and some of the moments we have, sometimes I’m in tears because I am so emotional, it’s almost like a drug I come to get that emotional fix. Sometimes we are singing at the same level and I feel connected to everyone, I get very emotional and nearly in tears but it depends what else I have going on.”

Witnessing emotions expressed through music helps to build empathy, and therefore creates a supportive community. According to PYE, ‘Neuroscientists have discovered that our brains have mirror neurons that fire off when we witness emotions in another. We drop into empathetic resonance when we hear others expressing authentic feelings through poetry, music and other arts’³

11. Performing as a musician reduces stigma and re-frames identity

Belonging to a group means that it’s more accessible to perform together,

3 ‘Catch the Fire’, Peggy Taylor and Charlie Murphy (2014), P18, New Society Publishers

rather than having to brave the stage alone. Dan from New Note told us, “People will listen to our music and story more as unit in an orchestra. There’s safety in numbers...Playing as a group takes the pressure off so you can enjoy the performances more. Playing solo the nerves are unbearable!”. He went on to describe how regular opportunities to perform with the Orchestra meant that the player’s friends and family members had a chance to show their support as audience members, and how it means a lot to witness this support. New Note Orchestra feels that the re-framing of identity from ‘people in recovery’ to ‘musicians’ is something that can help to repair relationships and reduces stigma. Dan says, “It gives families something to talk about around your recovery and checking its going ok without talking directly about your recovery. It’s not, ‘Are you keeping straight and clean.’ It’s more, ‘How’s the orchestra going?’”

To conclude, as the example of Rising Voices Choir and New Note Orchestra shows, the wellbeing-enhancing effects of singing and making music combined with belonging to a community of people provides beneficial conditions to support recovery from addiction. With thanks to the members of New Note Orchestra and Rising Voices Choir for sharing their knowledge, stories and experiences.