

Free, evidence-based guide launched to support music educators working with autistic young people

Live Music Now and University of South Wales have published a free guide for music educators, school staff and others working with autistic children and young people in Autism Resource Bases (ARBs) – dedicated classes within mainstream schools.

The guide is the culmination of four years' work by Live Music Now, with this final year of formal participatory action research in collaboration with the University of South Wales and funded by the AHRC Hub for Public Engagement with Music Research at the University of Southampton. It brings together evidence from a scoping review of existing research, a national survey of over 100 ARB settings across all four UK nations, collaboration with autistic musicians and professional stakeholders, and participatory action research delivered through musician-in-residence projects in Wales and Northern Ireland.

The number of ARBs in mainstream schools has grown rapidly across the UK in recent years. Research indicates that music builds confidence and wellbeing and can be both a tool for communication and a means of building communication skills for autistic young people. Yet one of the project's most striking findings was that fewer than a third of settings surveyed had any contact with their local music education hub or music service, with staff citing resources, budget and expertise as barriers.

The guide addresses each of these directly. It provides practical guidance on how to set up a project, adapt to different settings and pupil needs, and navigate curricula and national music education plans across England, Wales, Northern Ireland and Scotland. It also signposts music education hubs, music services and other forms of support. It is designed for use by musicians, music educators, music hub staff, peripatetic tutors and non-specialist teachers alike.

The guide is neurodiversity-affirming, grounded in the social model of disability, and advocates for a strength-based understanding of autism. It is designed to be adaptable to a wide range of settings, budgets and levels of musical expertise.

It was developed collaboratively with autistic musician, community musician and music therapist Alex Lupo, who led the musician-in-residence projects, and a steering group of autistic musicians with diverse lived experience.

Karen Irwin, Strategic Director for Music in Education at Live Music Now, said: *"Music has real potential to support communication, wellbeing and learning for autistic young people – but too many children in ARBs are missing out. This guide gives practitioners a practical, evidence- and values-based framework to change that, whatever their musical background or budget."*

Dr Beth Pickard, Senior Lecturer in Music Therapy at the University of South Wales and the project's academic lead, said: *"Our scoping review found a striking absence of UK research on music in ARBs. This project has sought to address that gap – and to centre the voices of autistic people throughout. The guide reflects what we have learned from autistic musicians, from children and young people, and from staff working in these settings every day."*

Alex Lupo said: *"This guide has been built around what autistic young people tell us through their engagement with music – what they find meaningful, what helps them feel safe, and what opens things up for them."*

The guide is available for free download at the Live Music Now website, [Autism Resource Bases page](#), alongside a companion film documenting the project, and briefings for policymakers, developed with policy associates at the University of Southampton.

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For a copy of the guide, images, or to arrange interviews with Karen Irwin, Dr Beth Pickard or Alex Lupo: Ilia Rogatchevski at Live Music Now – email: ilia.rogatchevski@livemusicnow.org.uk or telephone: 020 7759 1803

Notes to editors

About Live Music Now:

Live Music Now is a national charity that uses music to create social impact and promote inclusion. It enables people of all ages to connect through high-quality live music and creative music-making, while developing professional musicians' skills in inclusive and socially engaged practice. www.livemusicnow.org.uk

About the University of South Wales:

The University of South Wales is a modern, professionally-focused university offering a wide range of courses and research opportunities. www.southwales.ac.uk

About music education and autistic pupils:

Music education is a curriculum entitlement for every child, including autistic young people, across all four nations of the UK. Music is also important beyond curriculum entitlement.

"For autistic pupils, music-making can support communication, regulation, social connection and self-expression, while also recognising musical strengths and the potential for exceptional musical ability in some children." (Ockelford, 2015; Shaughnessy et al., 2024).

About ARBs:

Autism Resource Bases are dedicated classes within mainstream schools, providing targeted support for autistic pupils while enabling access to the wider school community. The number of ARBs has grown significantly across the UK in recent years.

In its [schools white paper](#), the UK government has set an expectation that in time, every secondary school in England will have an inclusion base, with the same number of places available in primary schools. An inclusion base is a dedicated space in a mainstream school that can offer specialist teaching or targeted support for children and young people with additional needs. The recent publication of government guidance for inclusion bases in England further reflects this growing national focus on inclusive provision.

About the research:

This latest phase of participatory action research was funded by the AHRC Hub for Public Engagement with Music Research at the University of Southampton. It involved a scoping review, national online survey, public engagement activities, and two musician-in-residence projects. Prior to this, Live Music Now had delivered 24 projects reaching 320 pupils in ARBs across England as part of a Youth Music-funded programme of work.

Full details: www.livemusicnow.org.uk/ahrc-funded-spoke-project/