

Musical Connections

Nurturing Musical Cultures in Autism Resource Bases across the UK through Participatory Action Research

England Policy Showcase Event (Online) in partnership with Music Mark

Monday 22nd June 2026
15:45 - 17:00



SUPPORTING
CONNECTING
INFLUENCING



Arts and
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Supported by University of Southampton's Centre for Music Education and Social Justice

Introduction

- Welcome and introductions,
- The AHRC funded research collaboration,
- Why is music important?
- The Pilot work,
- Our steering group,
- Core Values and Session Arc,
- Phase 3: Two 10-week musician-in-residence projects,
- Next steps: Toolkit resource and policy briefings.



Participatory, strength-based philosophy, centring autistic experience throughout

Phase 1: Current Landscape

Literature Review & Online Survey

Phase 2: Shared Agenda

Public engagement, focus groups, arts-based research

Phase 3: Musicians in Residence

10-week residencies in South Wales and Northern Ireland

Phase 4: Affecting Change

Disseminating resources, publications, film, policy briefing, impacting practice

Podcast series accompanying project: 'Shared Notes: Autism and Music Education Research', available on Spotify, Amazon etc.

Why is music important for **all** children?

Research shows that music can benefit all children's:

- Personal and social skills,
- Health and psychological wellbeing,
- Quality of life,
- Intellectual development,
- Reading and language skills,
- Physical development,
- Creativity.

(Susan Hallam, 2016, [*The Power of Music*](#))

Music engagement is an important part of children and young people's **social and cultural identity** (McFerran, 2020).

Why is music important for **autistic** children?

- As many as **1 in 20 autistic pupils** may have **perfect/absolute pitch**, compared with 1 in 10,000 in the general population. Some autistic children may experience and process music and sound in specific and advanced ways (Heaton, 2003, 2009; Ockelford, 2013).
- Music can be an area of **strength, success and passion** for many autistic people (Bakan, 2021).
- **Communicative musicality** / proto-musicality is a born potential present across the spectrum of neurodiversity (Thompson *et al.*, 2022).
- Music making can foster **social connection** and promote a sense of inclusion and belonging (Thompson *et al.*, 2022).

Autistic Musicking (Fessenden, 2019)

- Autistic musicality as integral to a person's being (Headlam, 2006),
- Celebration of pattern for its own sake, mirroring modernist musical aesthetics.
- Autistic form of listening (Straus, 2010).
- “No musicking without us!” (Dell’Antonio and Grace, 2016).

Autistic Play (O’Keeffe and McNally, 2025)

- Creative and imaginative,
- Seeking social connections in play,
- Intrinsic drive to play and enduring sense of fun and pleasure.

Pilot Project Overview

- 3 year project, working in Somerset, Liverpool and Harrow,
- Close relationship with the Music Education Hubs in each region,
- Working in 24 ARBs, involving over 340 pupils,
- Working with Live Music Now musicians and MEH practitioners,
- A focus on:
 - Staff development,
 - Resource creation,
 - Sustainability.

Our steering group: 3 autistic musicians with diverse cultural, gender and musical experiences



Our Core Values

- Safety
- Acceptance
- Pupil-led
- Interest Driven
- Co-created
- Balance
- Playful
- Holistic

Arc

Safety

A calm, predictable routine that helps each young person transition into the space, feel safe, and prepare to take part.

Prioritise familiarity, consistency, and acceptance of different ways of arriving, creating the conditions for safety, curiosity, and creative engagement.

Connection

Acknowledge and give value to each individuals contribution and identity within the group.

Value every voice in the room. This doesn't have to be performance focused, but should be affirming and validating.

Exploration

The core creative part of the session.

Prioritise collective music making that encourages curiosity, interaction, and shared attention.

Ending well

Predictable ending, with space for pupil reflection /voice.

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- Safety
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10 Week Musician-in-Residence Projects

South Wales

- 2 Classes
- 20 pupils
- 20 sessions in total delivered
- 3 Musicians plus one researcher

Northern Ireland

- 2 classes
- 20 pupils
- 20 sessions in total delivered
- 3 Musicians plus one researcher

Practice

- Each setting is distinct: the work had to be genuinely flexible and responsive.
- The arc of a session (Safety, Connection, Exploration, Ending Well) gave structure without prescribing outcomes.
- Absorbing interests were a clear way in.
- Holding space, resisting the urge to fill silence or increase the pace.
- Pupil-led practice challenged musicians to let go of their own agenda.
- The values were a lens that we were able to return to in order to reflect on the work and to make decisions.
- Musicians, researchers, teachers, and pupils were all informing each other's learning.



Are there any questions,
reflections or observations
at this stage?

Methodology: Data Collection

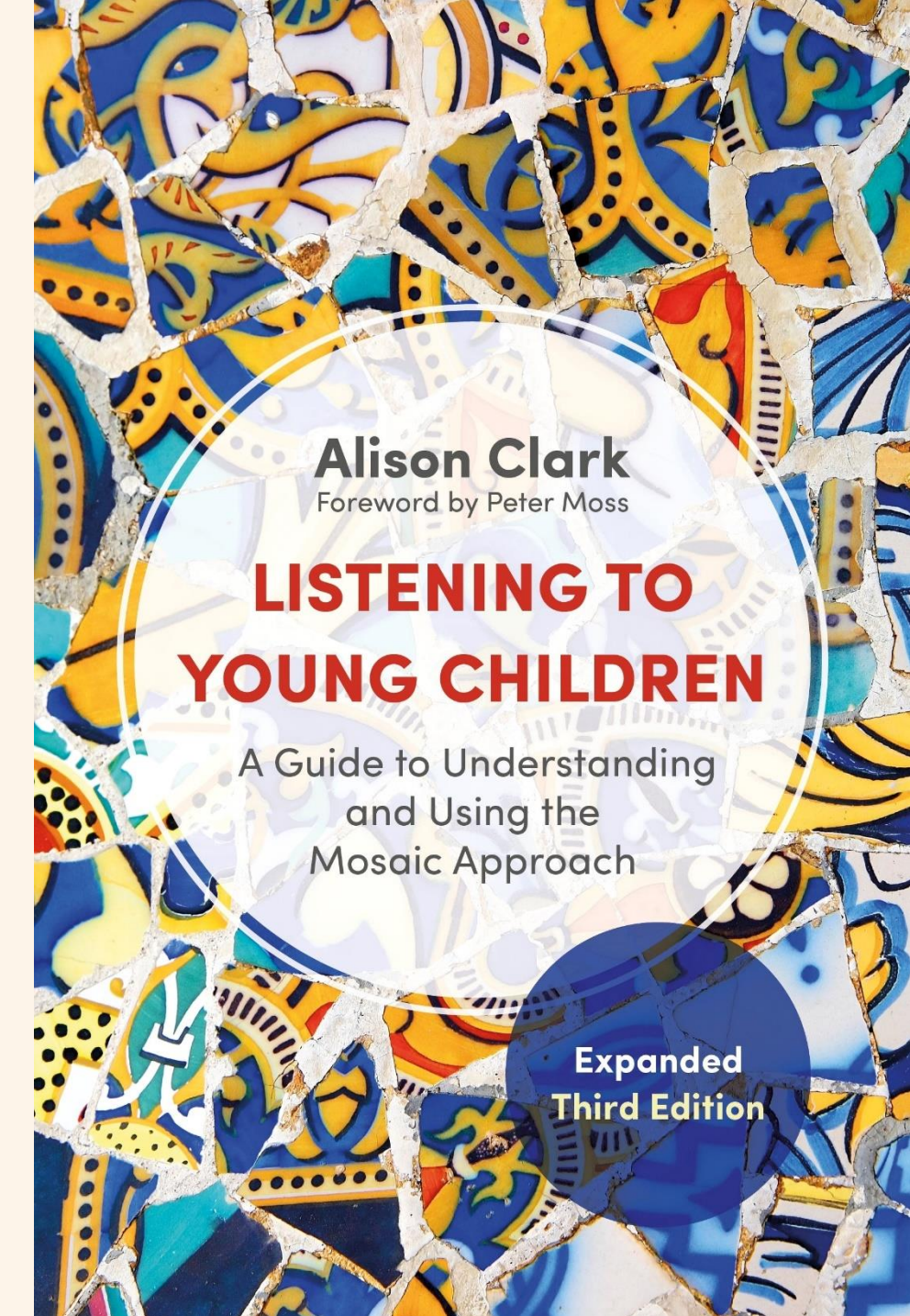
Aware of the problems when using measures designed for non-autistic people: example, Leuven Involvement Scale – repetition as low involvement.

Pursuing qualitative, **Mosaic Approach**.

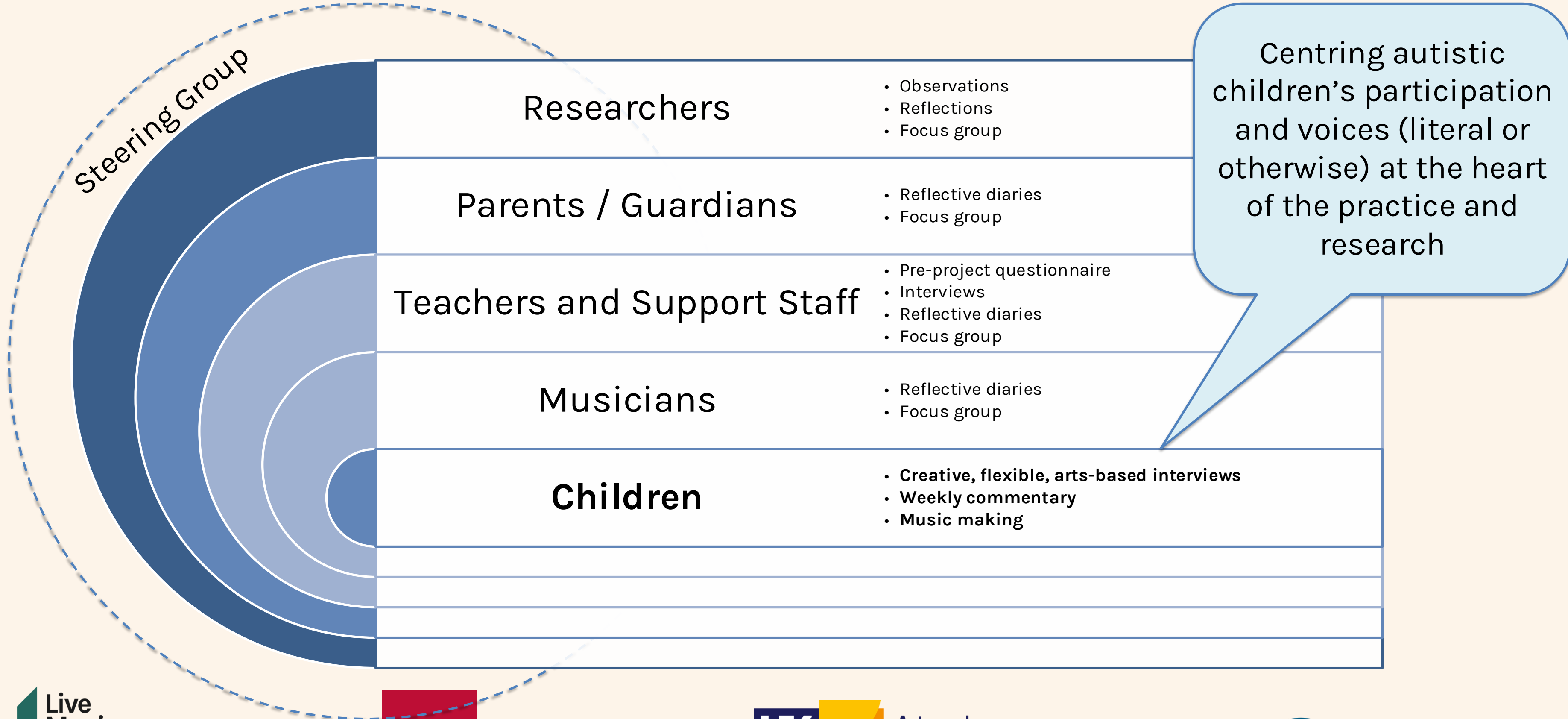
Alison Clark suggests this methodology values:

- ~ Pupils as **experts** in their own lives.
- ~ Pupils as **skillful communicators**.
- ~ Pupils as **rights holders**.
- ~ Pupils as **meaning makers**.

Relevant to autistic pupils who are often not listened to in a similar vein to young children.



The Research Process: Methodology



Extracts from Data Collection

Parent

“I've never, ever in my wildest dreams thought that music could be used in that way before, you know, so it's great to see it being that it extends far beyond, you know, exams, A-levels and classrooms and, you know, whenever you're able to take that into to change behaviour, it can have a very positive effect on the lives of families, which you probably, I don't know if you actually realise how much of a difference that makes in the life of a family who have had difficulty doing things like, simple things like queuing for something in the supermarket.”

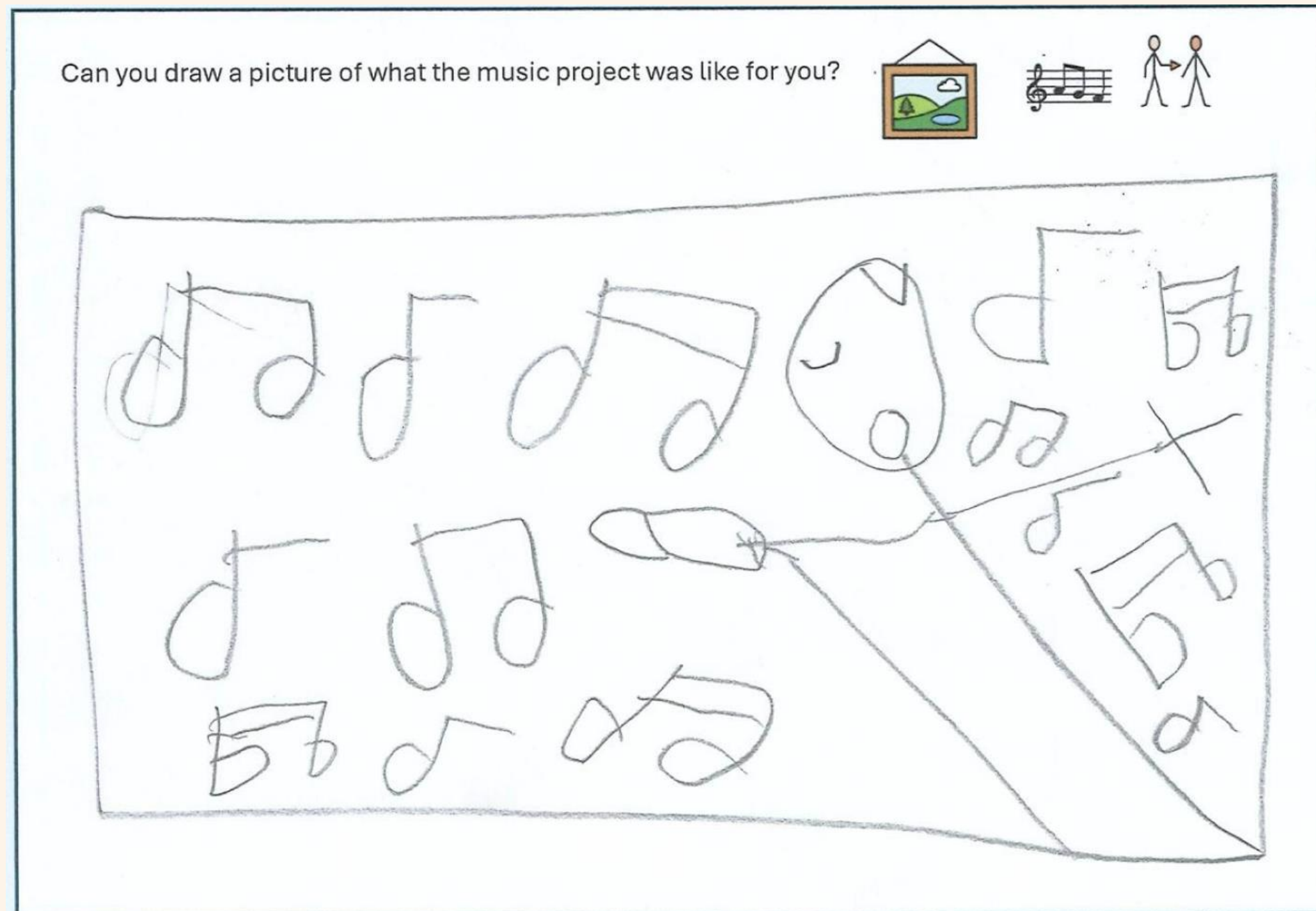
Teacher

It just really showed us what we've been missing for the last couple of years... It's just the music itself and just the freedom to express themselves with the instruments.”

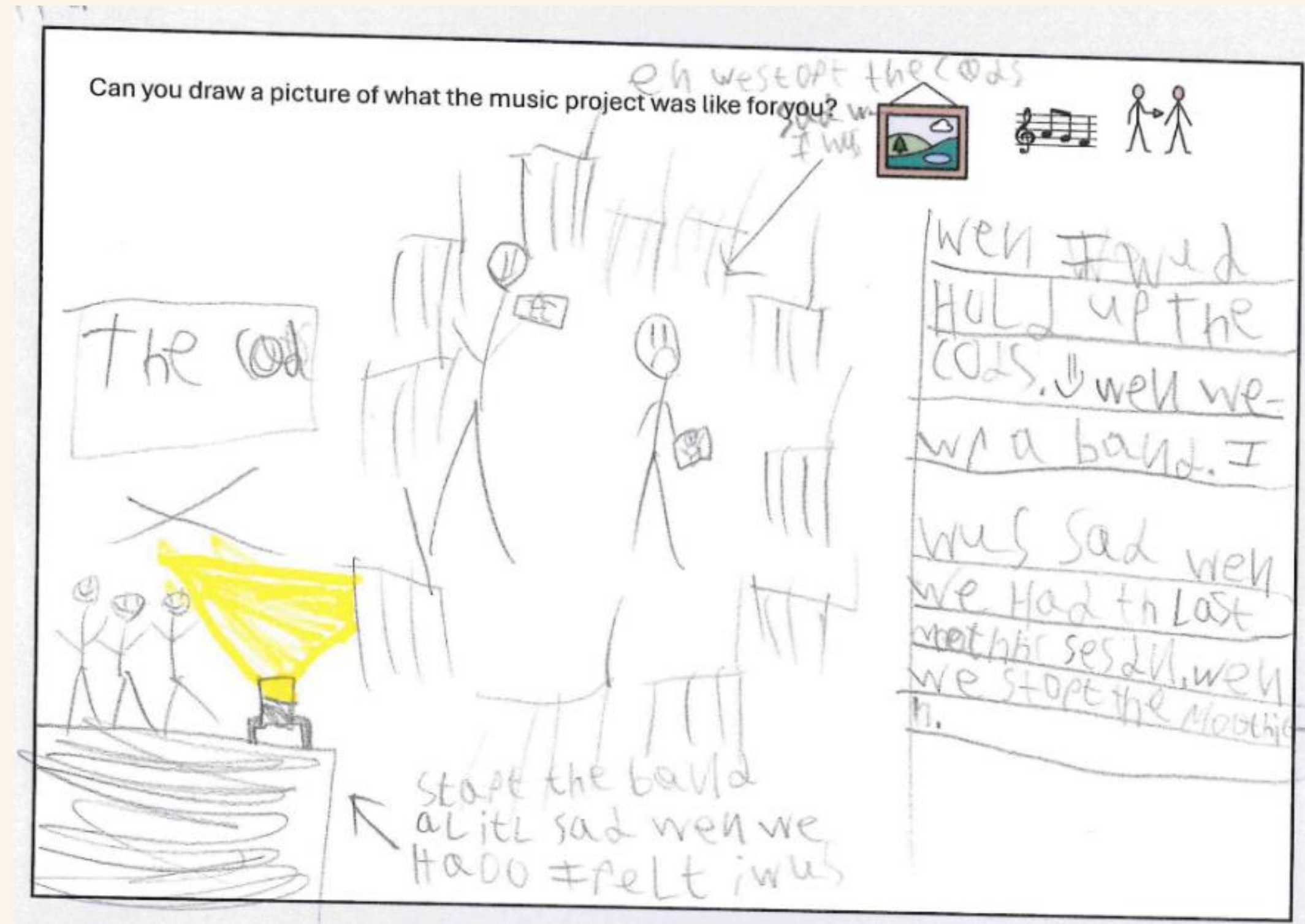
Researcher: Did you learn anything new?

Pupil: To be a musician.

Extracts from Data Collection



Extracts from Data Collection



Extracts from Data Collection



Themes collected from the data

Collaboratively analysing data with our steering group of autistic musicians.

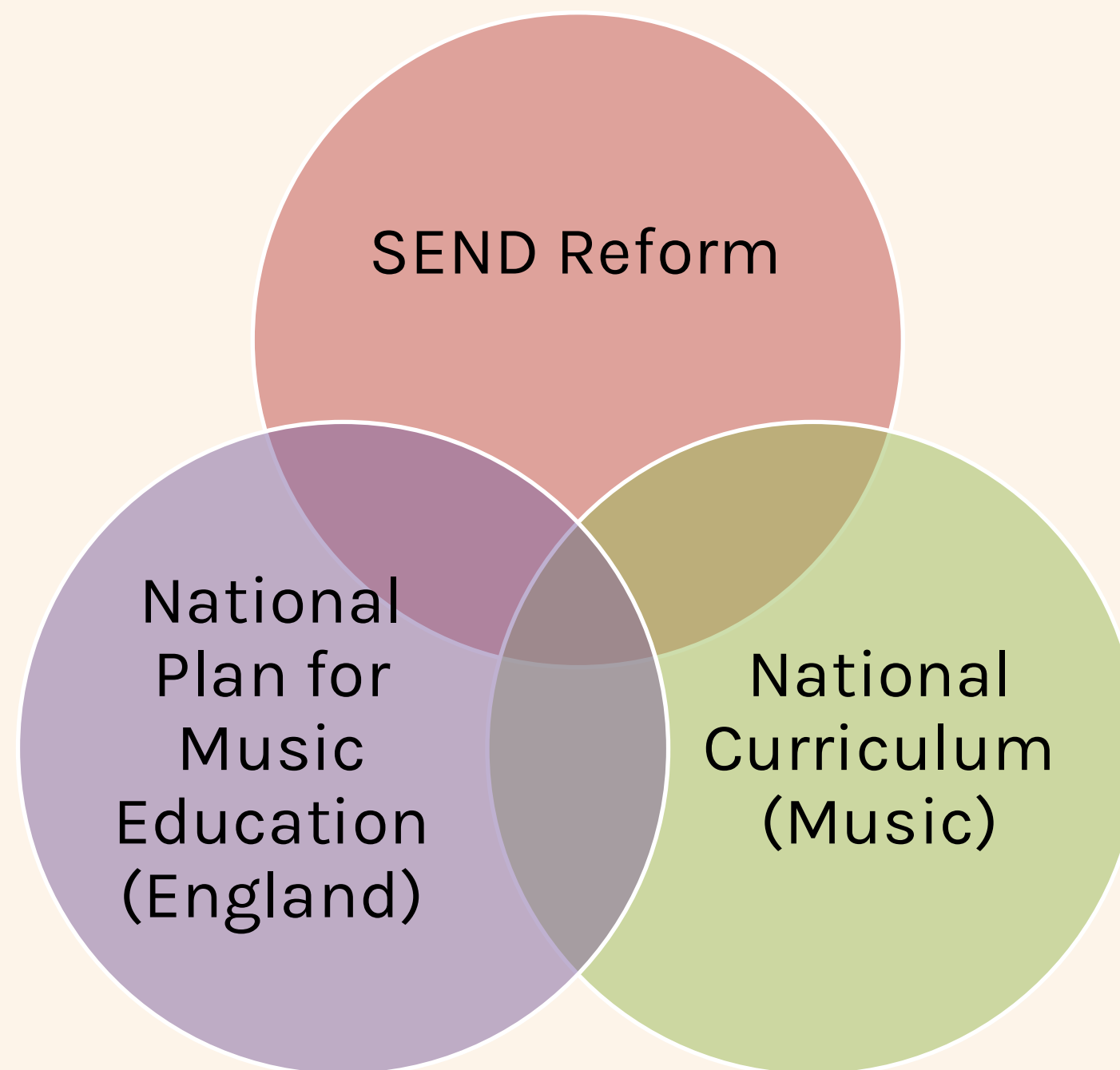
Themes identified in initial data collection:

1. **“Defying expectations”,**
2. **“Patterns across media”,**
3. **“Real music and not real music”,**
4. **“Connecting through music”,**
5. **“Impact on musical and non-musical outcomes”,**
6. **“Who’s power and agency to make decisions”.**

Next steps

1. Toolkit Resource
2. Policy Briefing

Next steps: Policy Briefing



Next steps: Policy Briefing



Policy recommendations for England

The call to action is national. England should use SEND reform, Music Hubs and curriculum policy together so that autistic pupils in ARBs are included in music education planning from the outset.

1. Make ARBs visible in Music Hub inclusion planning Music Hub <u>lead organisations</u> should be asked to show how Autism Resource Bases and equivalent specialist provision are represented in inclusion strategies, school engagement data and partnership planning.	2. Treat music as curriculum access, not enrichment Department for Education, schools, Music Hubs and local authorities should frame music for autistic pupils in ARBs as part of broad curriculum entitlement, cultural participation and SEND inclusion.
3. Build subject-specific SEND confidence in music Professional development should support teachers, support staff, musicians and Music Hub practitioners to deliver neuro-affirmative, pupil-led and sensory-considered music practice.	4. Plan music into specialist provision from the outset When ARBs or specialist provisions are established or expanded, music should be considered as part of staffing, environment, curriculum planning, budgets and partnership arrangements.
5. Fund scalable partnership models England needs evidence-informed models that connect ARBs, mainstream schools, Music Hubs, autistic musicians and specialist music <u>organisations</u>, with attention to cost, workforce time and sustainability.	National-level audiences Department for Education, Department for Culture, Media and Sport, Arts Council England, Music Hub <u>lead organisations</u>, local authorities, SEND and curriculum leads, school leaders, Ofsted and music education delivery partners.

Next steps: Toolkit



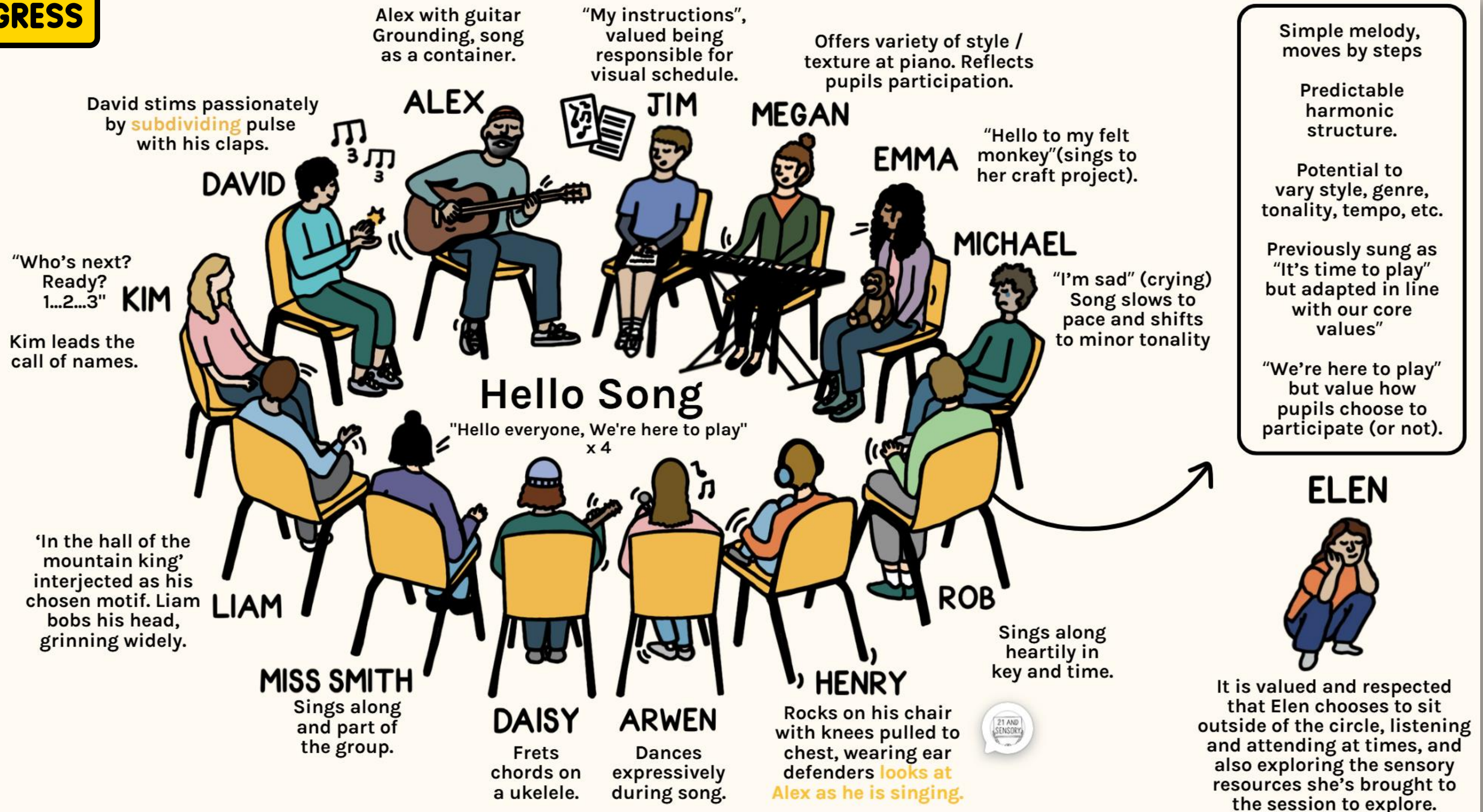
With credit and thanks to autistic illustrator Emily (21andSensory) and to Anita Holford for their collaboration on the development of this resource.

Next Steps: Toolkit Resource

- Summary and articulation of our core values and arc (with examples),
- Considerations before commencing a project – what do find out to inform planning and delivery,
- Budget, resources and instruments,
- Tangible examples from practice,
- Curriculum mapping (across nations).

**WORK IN
PROGRESS**

Next Steps: Toolkit Resource



Next Steps: Toolkit Resource

English National Curriculum (Music) National curriculum in England: music programmes of study - GOV.UK	KS1: “listen with concentration and understanding to a range of high-quality live and recorded music” –	KS1: “use their voices expressively and creatively by singing songs and speaking chants and rhymes” –	KS2: ”improvise and compose music for a range of purposes using the interrelated dimensions of music” –	KS1: “experiment with, create, select and combine sounds using the interrelated dimensions of music” –
	How it looks The session opens with a familiar song on guitar. Jayden sits with his back to the musician, but his body is still and his head tilts towards the sound. The musician sustains the final chord and waits.	How it looks The musician begins a call-and-response song, leaving a clear gap for the group to fill. Jayden joins in with a single word, then a phrase, and moves in time with the music. The musician works Jayden’s interest in trains into the sung words.	How it looks Jayden opens an instrument app on the iPad and tries each sound before deciding. He settles on a low tone and loops it, then layers a higher repeating pattern on top. The teaching assistant adds a quiet sustained note on the keyboard underneath.	How it looks The Goodbye Song begins. Jayden picks up the woodblock he used earlier and taps the closing pulse alongside the guitar. As the final chord resolves, he places it back on the mat and says “same next time”. The musician confirms, “yes, same next time”.
	Why it’s important Listening is recognised even when a learner is not facing the music or joining in. Quiet, attentive engagement is valued as a starting point and supports a settled, safe opening.	Why it’s important Learners use their voices expressively within a shared structure. Call and response offers a clear, low pressure way to join in, and connecting to a learner’s interests and supports confidence and ownership.	Why it’s important Learners improvise and compose by selecting, layering and structuring sound. Music technology offers an accessible route into composing and supports clear, intentional creative choices.	Why it’s important Learners select and combine sounds to take part in a shared ending. A consistent close supports regulation and gives a predictable point to contribute and to mark what will happen next time.
	How we get there Practitioners open with familiar music, allow learners to listen in whatever position suits them, and leave space and silence rather than prompting a visible response.	How we get there Practitioners leave clear gaps for learners to fill and build their contributions and interests into the song, so each learner can take part at their own level.	How we get there Practitioners make instruments and music technology available and give time to audition and build sounds, then add support that fits the learner’s structure rather than changing it.	How we get there Practitioners keep the closing song familiar and consistent, invite learners to add to it with available instruments, and acknowledge what each learner says or plays.



With credit and thanks to Alan Thomas-Williams for their collaboration on the development of this resource.

How can we continue momentum and make further progress in advocating for wider access to music in ARB?

Are there any questions/reflections?

- Please continue to share your ideas and insights by engaging with Live Music Now social media or contacting Beth directly (beth.pickard@southwales.ac.uk).
- Listen to our podcast - 'Shared Notes: Autism and Music Education', available on Spotify, Apple podcasts, Amazon.

Thank you for your time and contributions
Diolch yn fawr iawn



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