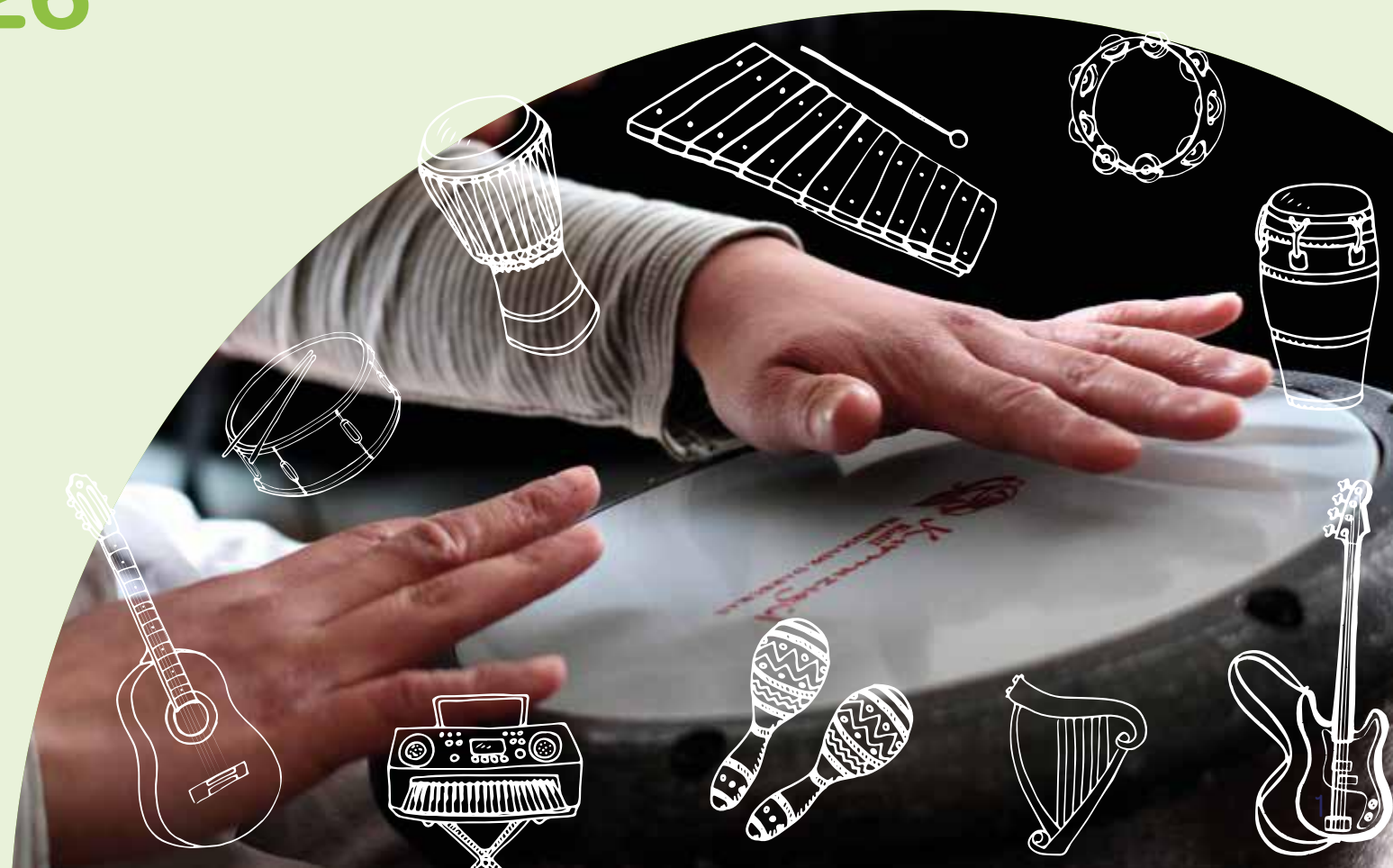
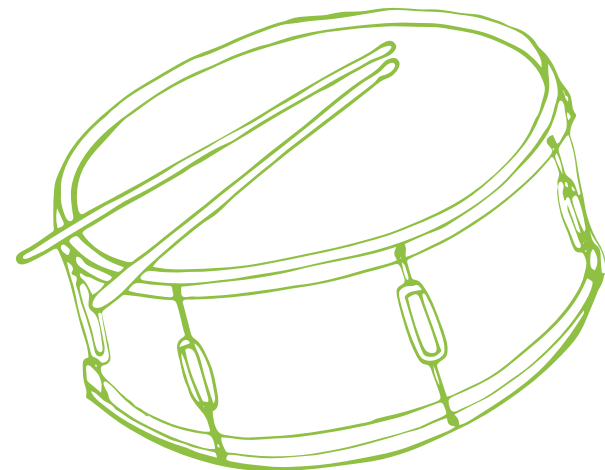


Legacy impact report 2002 - 2026



Contents

Executive summary	3
Foreword	4
Our journey	6
The need	8
Music therapy and mental health	9
The Soundwell approach	11
Our service model	12
Soundwell in numbers	13
Participant feedback	15
Progression beyond Soundwell	17
Our singing groups	18
Our unpaid carer groups	20
Evaluation	21
Partnership perspectives	22
Participant response to closure	24
Daniel's story	25
Funding and support	26
Music therapist training	27
Our conclusion	29
References	30
Trustees	32



Executive summary

Soundwell Music Therapy has been the only music therapy charity in the UK specialising in adult mental health support. We have supported approximately **2,500** people across the South West since 2002, offering a range of music therapy services.

We have worked with adults with mental health needs and unpaid carers, and have seen much evidence of:

- Personal positive change
- Improved social connection
- Enhanced inner resource and resilience
- People achieving their own personally set therapeutic goal

These improvements and shifts, even when seemingly small, can be life-changing for participants. Progress can also mean that someone has the confidence to begin other community groups, start volunteering, return to work, or that they are able to maintain their health well enough to stay in, for example, employment.

Our services have evolved over the years, from long-term weekly groups to a service model with 20-week music psychotherapy groups, monthly open groups, and fortnightly singing for wellbeing sessions. We have also run outreaches and pilot projects with other organisations and offered individual sessions. Service development has been informed by participant feedback, to support people's individual recovery journeys, allowing choice and different ways to take part.

The closure of Soundwell will leave a significant gap in community music therapy provision across the South West and will be sorely missed by those we support. The benefits of music therapy for mental health support are well documented, particularly for people experiencing psychosis, depression and anxiety. Music therapy fits naturally into a trauma-informed approach, the recovery model of mental health, and at Soundwell, is underpinned by psychodynamic thinking. Music therapy can help prevent mental health deterioration, having a huge impact on an individual's quality of life.

We would like to thank everyone who has been involved since the beginning of our journey – we have done some incredible work together!

'I'm incredibly socially anxious, have no self-confidence, and am becoming more mentally unwell, but these sessions give me hope.'

Participant feedback

"However I am feeling, I always feel better when I've been to Soundwell. I enjoy the camaraderie and playing together. It is very special."

Participant feedback

"There has been a joy to being able to use any musical instrument available. It's been so permissive, supporting and allowing. I know that it's been helping me work through and heal complex childhood trauma. I am very grateful for the experience. Thank you."

Participant feedback

"Soundwell has been a lifeline for so many, a meaningful and safe space where individuals working with complex needs have been able to find connection, expression, healing, and growth. Its impact has been immeasurable."

Natalia Higginson, Complex Psychological Interventions, Avon and Wiltshire Mental Health Partnership NHS Trust (AWP)

Foreword

Soundwell Music Therapy Trust is a small charity that has provided free music therapy to support mental health recovery for people with complex, severe and enduring mental health needs across Wiltshire, Bath and North East Somerset, Weston-super-Mare and Bristol. Throughout its history, it has been the UK's only specialist music therapy charity dedicated specifically to mental health.

Over the years, Soundwell has supported hundreds of people in developing self-esteem, strengthening identity, coming to terms with previous hospitalisations, preventing future crises from escalating and, above all, building confidence in relationships. This has led to an increase in community activity, volunteering and employment for our participants, all achieved through the powerful yet often understated act of making music together – through creative instrumental play, singing, and therapeutic songwriting, most often in groups with others who share similar life experiences.

The challenges faced by those attending our groups have included addiction, loneliness, homelessness, relationship breakdown, psychosis, debilitating obsessions, and deeply low self-esteem. In a non-judgemental space, away from institutional or hospital settings, groups met weekly, fortnightly or monthly and were usually facilitated by two experienced music therapists. Together, they created emotionally safe environments where painful experiences could be explored gently and without pressure.

The preventative impact of this work is difficult to quantify, but when someone's mental health improves or stabilises, the significance for that individual – and for the people around them – can be profound. Over the years, we have provided groups for carers, multi-faith women, men, neurodiverse people, and many others with diverse experiences and needs. It is therefore important that this impact report both captures and celebrates the outstanding work of the organisation.

I would first like to acknowledge the exceptional core therapy team and highly skilled freelance therapists, all of whom were selected through a careful and rigorous process. The quality of their work has been continually strengthened through the support of experienced therapy supervisors. It is also important to recognise the contributions of the development leaders of our service hubs, most recently



Kim Roberts and Chloe Buttery, alongside our service user consultants, whose insight has shaped the ongoing development of services and strengthened funding opportunities. Our therapy services have also been supported by committed and dedicated colleagues across finance, fundraising, and administration.

Soundwell has benefited from strong leadership and clear vision throughout its history – beginning with founders Lisa Otter-Barry and Sarah Fielding, followed by subsequent CEOs, and most recently Director Emma Weatherup. Through each chapter, the organisation has remained grounded in its core principles: diversity and inclusion, therapy free at the point of delivery, a psychodynamic therapeutic model, an emphasis on small group work, and placing our participants at the heart of everything we do.

The survival of a reduced service during the pandemic, under the leadership of Glyn Berwick, also deserves special recognition. Later, when Trustees recognised that there was no viable long-term funding stream within the current climate, the organisation's standards and values remained undiminished throughout the difficult process of closure. The care shown towards participants who will ultimately lose this service has been exemplary.

There are currently nine Trustees on the Board, including individuals with lived experience as participants, alongside those who bring expertise in law, finance, fundraising, communications, voluntary sector leadership, psychotherapy, art therapy and music therapy. Trustees give their time and expertise voluntarily while fulfilling the responsibilities required by the Charity Commission. To all Trustees, past and present, I offer my deepest thanks for guiding this small charity that has consistently punched above its weight. I would especially like to recognise Richard Ellis, Jo Clay, Caro Bailey and Jenny Wildblood: each of whom has given more than 20 years of dedicated service.

I first became involved with Soundwell as a Trustee, later worked as a music therapist within one of the groups for 11 years, and now serve as Chair of Trustees. It is an organisation I am immensely proud to have been part of. That Soundwell has endured for so long, despite the ongoing scarcity of funding for community-based therapy initiatives, is a testament to the quality, integrity, and impact of the service it has provided.

I believe the vision, values, and good practice developed over the years will continue to inspire and inform future community music therapy services for many years to come.

Dr Catherine Warner, Chair of Trustees

"The sessions have made me more confident... helped me overcome my fears of going out... I don't know what I would have done without this service."

"Helped provide structure and lift my mood enabling me to return to work and live independently."

"I have had the confidence to join a couple of new groups where I don't know anyone. Since joining music therapy I have self-harmed less."

"A safe space to talk about my more difficult and distressing feelings and thoughts. A place to try new instruments and help release feeling through the music. A place to connect with others who also struggle with difficult thoughts and feelings. A place to share music in an inclusive way."

"It's the best therapy I have had."

Participant feedback



Our journey



1999

Co-founders and music therapists Lisa Otter Barry and Sarah Fielding spoke at an Arts in Mental Health conference in Devizes, and in response to interest, set up the first **weekly music therapy group** at the Wiltshire Music Centre, Bradford on Avon, **Wiltshire**.



2000

Soundwell Music Therapy was established as an unincorporated association by its co-founders, with a board of six Trustees. Three of the original Trustees remained involved for the majority of Soundwell's lifespan.



2002

We achieved charitable status, with early support from key funders including Wiltshire NHS, the National Lottery Awards for All programme, and the Wiltshire Community Foundation.

The first **one-to-one music therapy sessions** and **outreach workshops** were set up across Wiltshire.



2004

We launched our first weekly music therapy group in **Bath**.



2005

Our services were commissioned across Bath and **North East Somerset (B&NES)**.

Our first pilot **music support group for unpaid carers** was launched in Bath, marking the beginning of Soundwell's support for carers.



2014

First pilot group in **Weston-super-Mare** followed by various groups and outreaches in the area.



2012

The first **participant consultant group** was formed to ensure that lived experience directly informed the development of our services.



2010

A music therapy group was established in **Midsomer Norton** as part of the expansion of community-based provision.

Outreach workshops were expanded to promote **inclusion and diversity**, reaching groups across B&NES and Wiltshire, including BEMSCA and Mosaic.



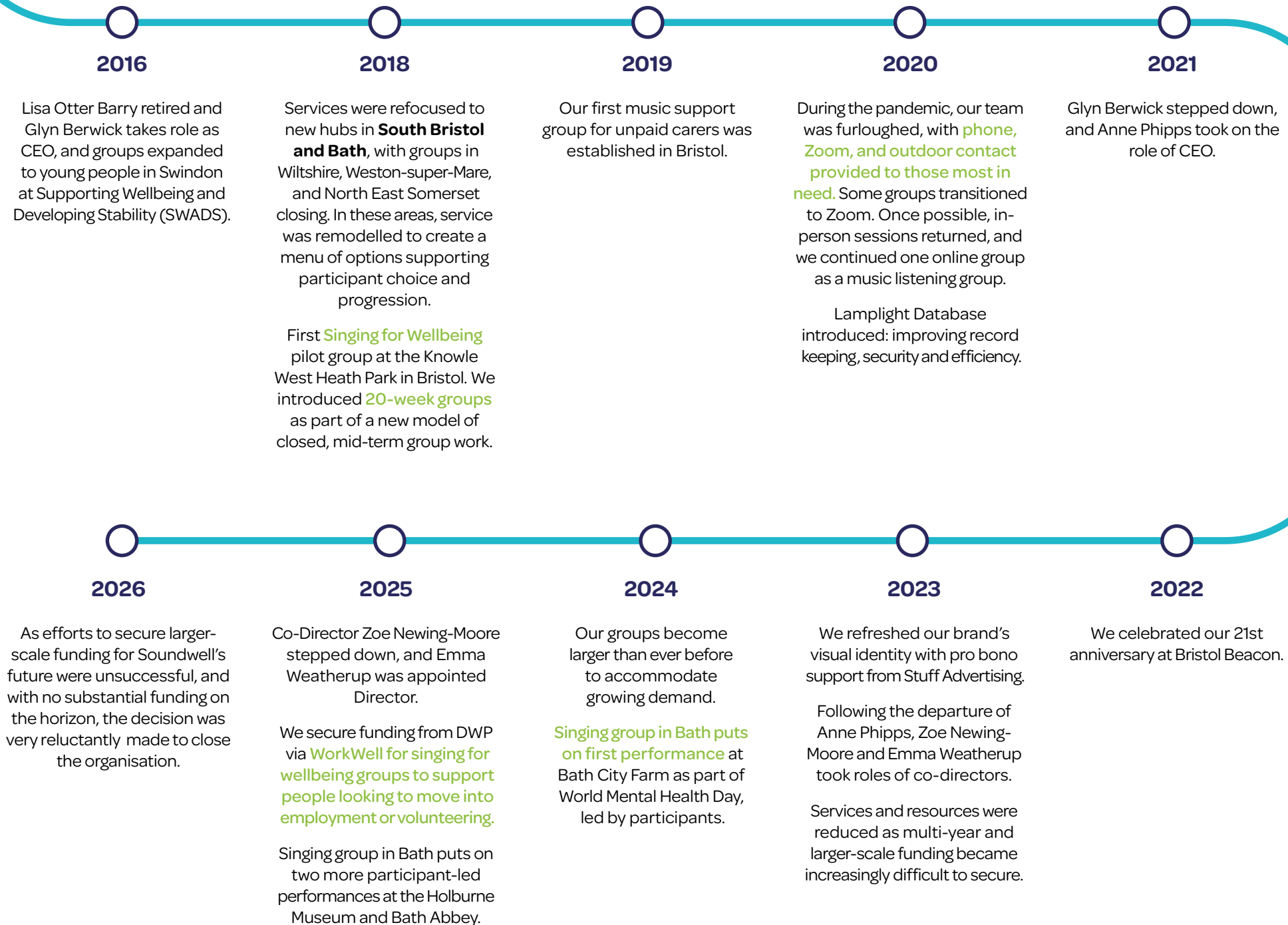
2006-2008

Music therapy as part of an arts psychotherapies programme for women with borderline personality disorder, in **Yeovil** at Somerset NHS Foundation Trust.



2005-2006

First **older adults mental health pilot**, Bath.



The need

Mental health need is still growing in the UK. Since 2016, mental wellbeing in the UK has been gradually declining, and in 2025 it was reported that one in five adults were living with a common mental health need [1].

In England, adults in the most deprived areas have higher rates of mental health need (26.2%) than those in the least deprived areas (16.0%) [1]. Those who are in the most need of high-quality mental health support, are therefore less likely to be able to afford it. Whilst NHS support is an option, the wait to access therapeutic services can be long.

Importance of non-verbal interventions

Arts therapies, in particular music therapy, can offer a more accessible type of psychological intervention, because of the non-verbal opportunities. Whilst talking can be used within sessions, there is no requirement for this, meaning anyone can take part, regardless of their verbal abilities. For those who have experienced trauma, it may be too difficult to find the words. Music offers a different way in, to explore and reflect at a pace that suits each individual. Participants can choose to connect, express and explore feelings through music alone, or may choose to simply listen.

Gap in services

A report carried out by Healthwatch in 2022 stated that mental health services were 'insufficient in meeting the needs of the populations of B&NES, Swindon and Wiltshire', highlighting, amongst other things, that those living with trauma and/or PTSD were getting limited support. The most positive feedback was given to voluntary and community organisations, showcasing the importance of third-sector organisations being supported [2].

Over the past few years, however, we have sadly witnessed many other third-sector organisations closing their doors, due to a lack of funding and statutory support. Without these options, the NHS is only becoming more stretched, and the number of individuals waiting to access mental health support grows. There is also a noticeable lack of affordable arts therapies available in the South West, which could discriminate against those who require a non-verbal therapeutic approach.



Without our services, there will now be no community music therapy for mental health support available in Bristol and very limited provision in Bath (through AWP).

Music therapy and mental health

Music therapy is a well-recognised and recommended therapy to support mental health. It is included as one of the psychological therapies listed and recommended in the various NICE guidelines.

Psychosis and schizophrenia

The latest NICE guidelines states:

‘Consider offering arts therapies to all people with psychosis or schizophrenia, particularly for the alleviation of negative symptoms... Arts therapies should combine psychotherapeutic techniques with activity aimed at promoting creative expression, which is often unstructured and led by the service user’ [3^{1,4}].

The latest Cochrane review of music therapy for people with schizophrenia found a reduction in negative symptoms and increased social functioning and quality of life, when a sufficient number of sessions were provided by a trained music therapist. [4]

Soundwell’s therapeutic practice aligns closely with this approach. We place a strong emphasis on free musical improvisation, creating a space in which individuals can express themselves creatively in ways that feel authentic and meaningful to them. There is no right or wrong way to explore music, making this a highly accessible form of therapy, including for those who do not consider themselves to be musically skilled.

Depression

A rigorous randomised control trial (RCT) assessed the effectiveness of individual music therapy for 20 sessions, in addition to standard care versus standard care alone on working-age adults with depression [5]. This found medium to large positive effects for music therapy on depressive symptoms, anxiety, and global functioning at three-month follow up, post-intervention. This study provided robust evidence for the effectiveness of an intensive programme of music therapy in the treatment of mild to severe depression in adults.

A Cochrane review in 2017 also concluded that music therapy can reduce depressive symptoms and anxiety and help to improve functioning such as maintaining involvement in jobs, activities and relationships [6].

At Soundwell we have seen how being part of a joint musical experience can at times boost mood even within just one session.



Trauma

Verbal therapy is not always the most effective approach for those living with trauma. Experiences can sometimes be too difficult to verbalise, or can become trapped in the body [7]. Music therapy offers an alternative medium for safe processing of traumatic material, accessing different parts of the brain and nervous system compared to words. Soundwell's work can be linked to the key principles of trauma-informed care: safety, trustworthiness, choice, collaboration, empowerment, and cultural consideration [8].

"There has been a joy to being able to use any musical instrument available. It's been so permissive, supporting and allowing. I know that it's been helping me work through and heal complex childhood trauma. I am very grateful for the experience - Thank you."

Participant feedback

Looking at research around music therapy and trauma, Bensimon, Amir and Wolf report a case study with a group of nine combat veterans suffering from severe Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) [9]. After 16 weekly sessions, all participants reported a positive influence on their lives. This included reduced feelings of shame, loneliness and depression, and increased feelings of belonging, acceptance, openness, togetherness, closeness, connectedness, intimacy, hope and optimism. In addition, there was an overall improvement in general wellbeing, and especially increased concentration and reduced trauma-related hallucinations.

The recovery model

Soundwell's work draws upon the recovery model. This is an approach to mental health care which regards recovery as a personal journey rather than a set outcome, and may focus on things such as developing hope, identity, supportive relations, empowerment and meaning [10, 11]. Central to this approach is co-production, with participants being actively involved in the planning, development and delivery of services.

Group music therapy and mental health

The majority of Soundwell's work has taken place in groups. Music therapy in groups can offer a different way to explore relationships and to experience mutual support from others who understand. This can in turn, reduce isolation and lead to greater self-understanding, improved communication, and a sense of belonging.

"Very good, built my confidence, and became better interacting with people with different experiences. Always felt happier after a session, and helped me to find a way forward in my life."

Participant feedback



The Soundwell approach

Over the years, a general team approach has evolved. Individual music therapists will have their own ways of working and would approach a wellbeing group differently from a one-to-one session; however these common threads apply across the board (as documented in our 2015-2020 service evaluation report, informed from analysis of participant feedback and stakeholder interviews).

The Soundwell approach is grounded in the deep understanding of the power of music to be a non-verbal means of expression and connection. Other key principles include:

- The use of a psychodynamic approach in music therapy
- Creating a safe and inclusive environment through room design, carefully thought through service provision, excellent governance and collaboration with community mental health service providers
- Providing a broad range of good-quality instruments: communicating a sense of value to the participant and options for how they choose to express themselves
- Not placing any expectation or demands on participants and allowing them to go at their own pace
- Compassionate and caring therapists who care deeply about enabling participants to express themselves
- The ability to collaborate with community mental health teams and other organisations to reach client groups that are marginalised or out of contact [12]

It has been noted and appreciated by many that the Soundwell team take great care in all that we do, from the first point of contact with participants and referrers, to supporting individual needs in sessions and being conscientious about how we communicate. This is rooted in a deep understanding of the challenges people with significant mental health needs face and the benefits of Soundwell being a trusted, personal and reliable service. We are particularly proud to respond to those facing multiple inequalities and have worked tirelessly to remove barriers to the service. This attention has allowed strong, long-term and beneficial therapeutic relationships to develop.

The Soundwell team are supported to work in a reflective way, through factoring in preparation and debrief time around sessions, plus regular joint supervision with both therapists. Our external clinical supervisors have contributed extensive experience helping to deliver the highest quality service for our participants.

A typical Soundwell session might include a verbal check-in, followed by a number of improvisations with reflection. Sometimes the music is left completely free, sometimes group members or therapists might make suggestions for themes or instrumentation. Some sessions have included songwriting. Each session is co-created by participants present. Different structures can be brought in by the therapists as needed.

Soundwell coordinators have offered support to individuals via signposting and referring on to other community activity, or with accessing support for volunteering or employment as and when required. This support and encouragement within the carefully built, trusting relationship has been immensely powerful and effective.



Our service model

In 2018, in consultation with ex-participants and colleagues, a model was developed to support individual mental health recovery journeys, offering a spectrum of groups to support different needs and allow people to engage at different levels, depending on the support required. For example, if someone wanted the space and privacy of one-to-one sessions to process specific issues before moving into a group, this could be accommodated. Equally, someone might prefer to engage in a monthly group to begin with, and then progress to a weekly, 20-week group for deeper exploration of issues, and then potentially back to a monthly group for a stepped-down level of support before moving out of the service and into for example, volunteering, employment or other community activities.

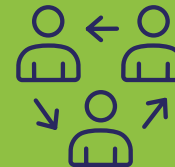
Feedback from participants told us that a service was wanted where people can:

- Select the type of session they want, to obtain their therapeutic goal
- Move between types of session as their recovery journey and goals change, including depth of therapy
- Be in control of leaving or ending sessions
- Have mental illness recognised as a lifelong condition, best managed through access to services offering choice, consistency and hope
- When leaving our services, there is scope to join an ex-participant consultant panel (one ex-participant consultant progressed to the Trustee board)

Soundwell services

Enquiry-referral-assessment

Potential to join any session, moving between them as needs change



Singing for wellbeing group

1-1 music psychotherapy

Open music therapy group

20-week music psychotherapy group

Online music listening

Onward progression

Signposting externally. Option to be a on the ex-participant consultant panel.



Two ex-participant positions on trustee board

"Soundwell always endeavours to offer alternative programs...the benefits of having further sessions are brilliant!... This has enabled me to take back control of my life"

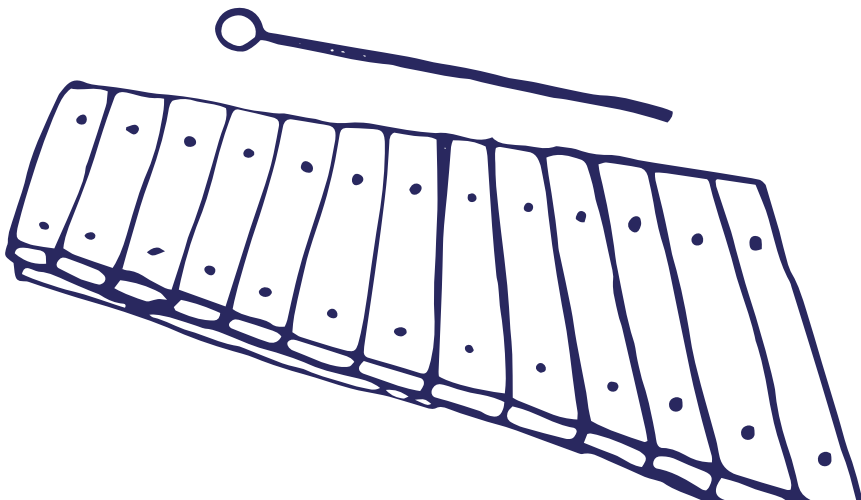
(Participant feedback)

Benefits of model, identified by an ex-participant

- Can try different sessions
- Empowering to choose
- Skills development
- Tapping into and sharing expertise
- Sense of self-worth
- Altruism can be empowering
- Support continued in evolving ways
- Developing relationship with organisation

Inclusive involvement-conclusion

At a time when mental health need is increasing nationally⁽¹³⁾, and resources are much in demand; choice and ownership seem increasingly important for personal agency and vital to recovery. There has long been a call for inclusive involvement⁽¹⁴⁾ which has links to the recovery model⁽¹⁵⁾⁽¹⁶⁾.



Soundwell in numbers

Soundwell Music Therapy has worked with approximately **2,500** people across Wiltshire, Bath and North East Somerset, Bristol and Weston-super-Mare since 2002.

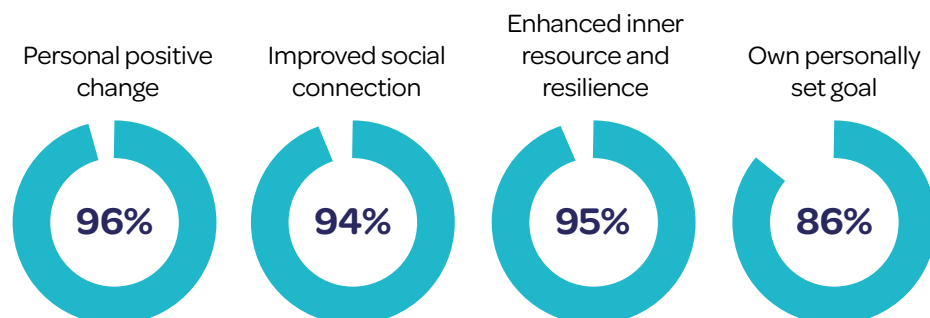
Over the last two years...

- 266** people attended 23 outreaches
- 123** people attended regular groups, including monthly music listening online, 2 x fortnightly singing for wellbeing, 4 x 20-week music therapy, 2 x monthly open music therapy
- 13** unpaid carers attended a regular monthly carers music support group
- 5** people attended one-to-one music therapy sessions

Outcomes

The vast majority of people have reported positive outcomes. These recent outcomes were developed by our team of music therapists and ex-participant consultants, in consultation with external researchers.

Regular, weekly, fortnightly or monthly support for mental health recovery

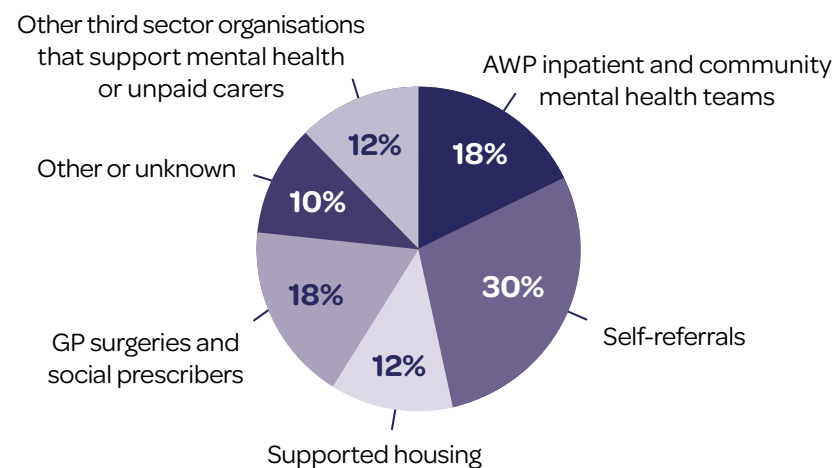


Regular support to unpaid carers



Referrals

60 new people have been referred into Soundwell's services in the last two years from the following places:



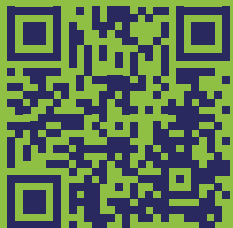
Over the last five years...

One-off and short series of outreaches with a host organisation

- Bath Carers Centre
- Bath City Farm
- Bath Mind
- Borderlands
- Bristol Wellbeing College
- Carers Support Bristol and South Gloucestershire
- Changes
- Creativity Works
- Developing Health & Independence
- Knowle West Health Park women's group
- Off The Record
- Party in the City
- Radstock Wellbeing Group
- Redcatch Community Garden wellbeing group
- Rethink Mental Illness
- ReMind UK
- St Mungos
- VOICES
- Wellbeing Courses, B&NES

Thursday – a song by the Knowle West Health Park women's group

Thank you to the Knowle West Health Park women's group for allowing this song to be shared, which they wrote with their Soundwell therapists in their outreach sessions. Please scan the QR code below or click [here](#) to listen



Our team over the years

29	freelance therapists	16	supervisors
20	employees	19	trustees
5	ex-participant consultants	7	trainee music therapists

A breakdown of participant numbers and outcomes per funding period or financial year can be found in some evaluations linked on page 22.

Participant feedback

Over the years, we've gathered thousands of pieces of feedback from participants. Their voices help shape and improve our services, deepen understanding of the work we do, and support reporting to funders and future funding applications. We are hugely grateful for the honesty, insight, and generosity people have shared with us.

You can explore historic feedback in our evaluations and impact reports, available on page 21. Please see a sample selection on the right received between 2024-2026.



Open, singing and online music listening groups

"It has increased my confidence. It has made me feel safe and accepted. It has allowed me to express myself. It's ignited my creativity and reignited my love of music. It has been healing. It was lovely to be a part of it."

"Always positive, as I have felt supported through recent physical and mental problems. There's always space to express how we feel, and encouragement to take the next piece in whatever direction we wish."

"Really good, I'm incredibly socially anxious, have no self-confidence, and am becoming more mentally unwell, but these sessions give me hope."

"I am always extremely grateful and expectant when the sessions are about to happen. I look forward tremendously to meeting the other members... It helps me a great deal, knowing it will take place."

"I have a wonderful time at the singing group. I feel included and wanted which is a lovely feeling. Everyone sings really well which is lovely for my ear drums. I wish it was more often as it is one of my favourite times in the week. It makes me feel happy."

"I have only started fairly recently but the welcome I got from the group was very warm and kind..."

"I gain a sense of accomplishment in coming!"

"Soundwell have really made a difference to how I view my time ahead. I look forward to each meeting knowing I will have 1 hour of calm, mindful music making that takes me to another 'place' within my consciousness. It is so refreshing to be in an environment where no expectations are made, or given and each musical 'piece' is unique. I like meeting with the other members of the group and the relationship I have with the therapists leave me feeling worthy and valued."

"I love listening to music with other people. It's a great way to connect with others."

"The sessions were great with helping my confidence. I was really nervous to meet and sing along with other people. But the fear subsided after attending a couple of sessions and I began to look forward to the session. The impact was a greater experience than I expected. I loved singing with the group and I felt welcome and comfortable. I always found I was really elated after singing and I felt quite emotional sometimes. It's good to help deal with emotions."



Carers groups

"It's really wonderful for getting me motivated. I value it so much and my husband who is recovering well now from his two strokes can really see an improvement in my creativeness and happy mood."

"I feel happier and in a good space, been so important for my mental health."

"I just love the music and always leave with a smile on my face. It's fab. I didn't think I was musical but turns out I am."

"...makes me feel alive and free and inspires imagination."

"I say music therapy is the highlight of my month and it really is. I really didn't know what to expect when I started but it's brilliant."

"I just looked forward to our monthly sessions. I feel it helps a great deal. I have always enjoyed music and not being a musician but to join in and make some very harmonious sounds at times is wonderful. Meeting up with other carers is useful too with their similar experience. Thank you."

"However I am feeling, I always feel better when I've been to Soundwell. I enjoy the camaraderie and playing together. It is very special."

"It was better and easier than I anticipated. I was a bit anxious about meeting people but everyone was very welcoming. I felt connected with the music I created and how it combined with all the other music as a whole. A very positive and beneficial experience, thank you."

Progression beyond Soundwell

Participant feedback and outcome data presented in this report demonstrate increasing confidence and resilience among the majority of Soundwell participants. Mental ill-health can have a profound impact on an individual's sense of self-worth and identity; however, participation in Soundwell sessions has been associated with improvements in self-esteem, the development of skills and confidence in forming relationships with others, and a strengthening of personal resilience and inner resources.

For many participants, this growth through attending Soundwell sessions has resulted in wider community access, for example:

- Joining new community groups
- Volunteering
- Returning to employment in various fields and professions
- Being able to maintain employment

This is because of a stabilisation in mental health, which many have attributed in part at least, to accessing Soundwell's services. It is not always a straightforward path. It can take time and has often been best facilitated through a multi-team, supported approach.

To the right is a blended and unidentifiable case study that represents partnership work Soundwell undertook via a short-term Singing for Wellbeing group with Workwell West, NHS Bristol, North Somerset and South Gloucestershire ICB. This group was open to adults struggling with their mental health, who wanted support in their journey back to work or volunteering.

Case study

Sarah is a 45-year-old woman who experiences depression and anxiety. She receives support from the South Gloucestershire mental health recovery team and struggles to attend support groups in the community due to feeling very anxious with new people. She aims to return to work and loves to sing at home so was referred to the Soundwell Singing for Wellbeing group for a supportive space to explore this and build confidence.

Soundwell took time to build a relationship with Sarah through phone calls prior to the group starting and she managed the first session well, which was a big step. Sarah was initially quiet and reserved in the group, yet managed to attend regularly and really connected with the singing, starting to sing louder and take more risks as the sessions went on, e.g. trying a round in a smaller group or trying a harmony part rather than just singing the tune. By the end of the group she even sang a solo verse in a song and was rightfully very proud of herself for doing so. The group became cohesive and supportive. This seemed to help Sarah to thrive, hearing from others that they experienced similar anxieties, so she felt less alone with this.

The group was incredibly joyful. Sarah said her mood was lifted by the sessions and this lasted for some time afterwards. Sarah also accessed the work and health coach through WorkWell and this helped her identify steps towards volunteering, which she was able to discuss in the group as well and receive encouragement. By the end of the group, Sarah shared that the group had helped to build her confidence and self-esteem, and she had started attending some other community groups, with plans in place to start volunteering soon.



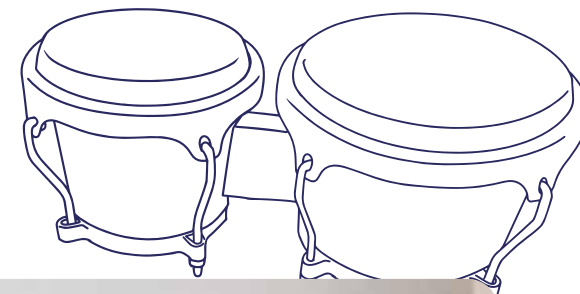
Our singing groups

Our fortnightly singing for wellbeing groups were created as a hybrid between a therapy group and community singing group, following consultation and a pilot project at Knowle West Health Park in 2018. There is a wealth of evidence on how singing supports mental health, with benefits including:

- Relief from stress and tension
- Boosted confidence and self-esteem
- Improved sense of community and social inclusion
- Improved social bonding and social cohesion
- A safe way to express emotions

Singing stimulates the vagus nerve: a key part of the parasympathetic nervous system [17]. The act of singing can therefore be incredibly calming and regulating for anxiety and arousal levels. It has proven to be a powerful experience to sing together, greatly enhancing positive connections with self (body and voice). This is particularly important where people are cut off from their body because of, for example, traumatic experiences. It also supports connections with others because of the synchronicity that singing together, including in harmony with others, brings [18].

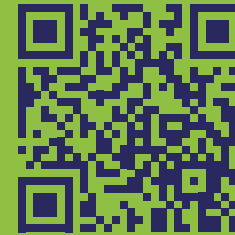
Our singing for wellbeing groups are run by two music therapists, who follow the usual Soundwell approach: with no pressure or expectation to participate in a particular way. Group members are supported before, during and after their time in the group and can stay in the group as long as it is needed. Facilitators are aware of any mental health or support needs, and link in with GPs and key workers where needed, which offers an extra level of support. Song choices are taken from group members and carefully considered by therapists around content and mood, thinking about which subject matter may be relevant to group members, or what could potentially be triggering. Sometimes the songs or lyrics can express or represent something for the person or group that brings a different level of processing and useful conversation.



These factors allow the group to be more accessible to those with mental or physical health needs compared to a conventional choir, and informal feedback from participants has shown that this approach is highly valued. Group members have requested a community singing group where there is facilitator support and a mutual understanding of mental health struggles from participants, without pressure to go into depth in the group. Value has been placed on the ongoing nature of the groups, with individuals commenting that short-term therapy is not always helpful when they are living with trauma that impacts them in an ongoing way.

Across 2024 and 2025, our Bath singing group expressed an interest in performing, and from this performed across three different venues: Bath City Farm, The Holburne Museum, and Bath Abbey. This was something new for Soundwell and offered extended opportunities for group connection – increasing confidence and morale.

Thank you to the Bath singing group for allowing this recording from the Holburne Museum performance to be shared. Please scan the QR code or click [here](#) to listen.



Bath Abbey performance 2025



Our unpaid carer groups

Soundwell Music Therapy has facilitated a long-term monthly music support group for unpaid carers in B&NES, in addition to fixed-term carers support groups and outreach carers groups (instrumental and singing) in Wiltshire and Bristol over a number of years. The groups have been incredibly well used, with the music offering a unique opportunity for carers to connect with and express their emotions in a supportive space.

Carers attending the regular music support group provide regular feedback on the sessions, from which three main themes have emerged.

1. Respite

The group offers a space for carers away from their caring responsibilities. It's a chance to try something new, be playful and nurture creativity, perhaps exploring a new side of themselves.

"Soundwell is a real oasis of me-time, which I really value and appreciate."

"Music is an escape, you feel you are in a different world. I really look forward to the group every month, my life would become more empty without it."

2. Peer Support

An important part of the group is the chance to connect with other carers, sharing experiences with people who understand and receiving support from other participants and therapists.

"Everyone is very supportive. You do go away feeling that you are not the only one having a difficult time - and sharing your own problems seems to make the burden lighter."

"There is a sense of community and shared purpose which is quite unique."

3. Wellbeing

We've found that sessions can improve mood, reduce stress and help carers feel recharged, ready to step back into their caring role. Improvising music together allows carers to express, whatever emotions they are feeling and can help people to feel both relaxed and energised.

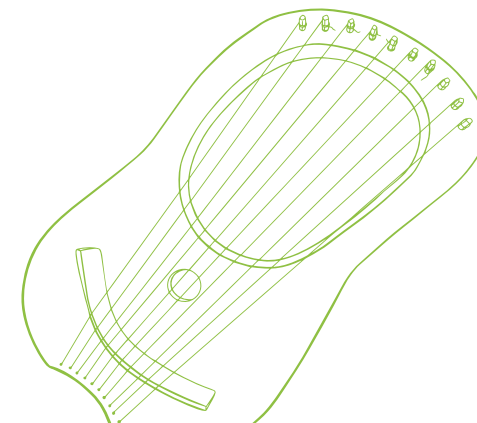
"It helps release emotions, still my mind and give peace in me in the way that only music making can. And I'm not a musician. Anyone can do it."

"I find the sounds we make together are really special – both calming and stimulating. I went away from the last session feeling more able to cope with what life is demanding of me right now."

Recommendations

Many music therapists work with carers alongside the cared-for person, but we advocate for an increase in provision of music therapy for just the carers, as we have demonstrated it can offer significant and much needed emotional support, as we know the strain on carers is well documented [19, 20].

Thank you to our carers group for allowing a recording of some of their improvised music to be shared. Please scan the QR code or click [here](#) to listen.



Evaluation

At Soundwell Music Therapy we have long recognised the importance of external evaluation in helping to examine, develop and communicate the impact of our work. Methods of evaluation have included quantitative and qualitative with various approaches and validated tools being used over the years, including:

- Client adaptation of Warick-Edinburgh Mental Wellbeing Scale (WEMWBS)
- Measure Yourself Concerns and Wellbeing (MYCaW)
- The NHS Friends and Family Test (FFT)

Alongside this, many thousands of verbal and written feedback have been gathered. These have typically been collected directly after sessions and then collated and analysed each quarter or year to inform our service development. You can find examples of these highly illustrative and moving pieces of feedback on page 21.

Films featuring client interviews, focus groups, impact reports, and internally produced evaluations and journal publications have also proved to be valuable and effective ways of summarising need, outlining approaches and delivery, and demonstrating both effectiveness and reach.

The list below highlights our impact reports, films and evaluations. We have embedded QR codes for further viewing and reference.

Impact report 2023/4. Stuff Creative Studio [21]. Please scan the QR code or click [here](#) to view.



Ex-participants film 2022. Wilbee Films [22]. Please scan the QR code or click [here](#) to view.



Evaluation of services 2015-2020. Dr Helen Seers and Dr Marie Polley [12]. Please scan the QR code or click [here](#) to view.



Ex-participant film 2015. Mark Bishop [23]. Please scan the QR code or click [here](#) to view.



Evaluation and publication in the British Journal of Music Therapy 2013. Ruth Melhuish. Group Music Therapy on a dementia assessment ward: an approach to evaluation [24]. Please scan the QR code or click [here](#) to view.



A qualitative study exploring the perceived impact of a community-based music therapy service. 2009. Dr Sarah Wall [25]

This evaluation used a triangulated approach to participant experience, incorporating focus groups with participants, therapists, and mental health professionals/referrers. This small scale study clearly demonstrate that the service had “a positive effect on social functioning and isolation, experiences of anxiety and frustration; self esteem, confidence and motivation; feelings of freedom, relaxation and creativity; and the communication of difficulties without the need for words” These effects were witnessed by participants, therapists and mental health care professionals to be sustained beyond the therapeutic environment.

Partnership perspectives

Soundwell Music Therapy has worked closely with a wide range of professionals, including voluntary organisations, NHS services, and specialist therapists, to deliver the person-centred care our participants need. Through these relationships, a number of partnership projects have also been developed, enabling Soundwell to deliver outreach work alongside external organisations and reach individuals who may not otherwise have accessed our services. Here is some feedback from professionals we worked with following the closure.



"Your work has reached and literally saved so many people over the years...good work has been done! I know that by the evaluation work I did for you.. and saw the richness and special nature of your work. Soundwell is wonderful and I'm proud to have worked for you in a small way."

Dr Helen Seers, Co-Director and Co-Founder, Meaningful Measures

"The charity has done so much for our service users and carers and for mental health awareness."

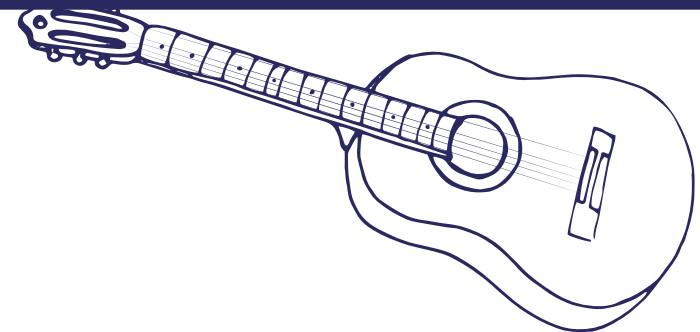
Jo Woodsford, Service User and Carer Coordinator for B&NES, AWP

"What Soundwell created and provided was of unique care and depth and I have no doubt of that this will continue to live on in clients' and colleagues' lives."

Annette Schwalbe, Clinical Supervisor for Soundwell.

"Soundwell Music has been a lifeline for so many, a meaningful and safe space where individuals working with complex needs have been able to find connection, expression, healing, and growth. Its impact has been immeasurable."

Natalia Higginson, Complex Psychological Interventions, AWP



"Your work has made a real difference to so many carers in our community. We are particularly grateful for the music therapy sessions you delivered at our events – they offered carers a unique space to pause, participate and feel supported in a way that very few other services can provide. Those moments meant a great deal to the people who attended."

Adrian Robson, Carers Support Bristol and South Gloucestershire

"Soundwell has been so valuable for clients who have no other therapeutic interventions, because they maybe don't meet the threshold for secondary mental health care, or because they can't afford to pay for therapy themselves through a private practitioner. It's the third sector that provide so much of this valuable work when statutory services are themselves overwhelmed too."

Catherine Layfield, St Mungos

"Really sad to hear about the closure of your service. A number of the attendees at our Wellbeing Café sessions got so much out of the sessions you provided and I know they contributed a lot to their recovery journey. Many thanks to everyone who has taken part in helping run your service, it will be very much missed."

Ben Lilford, Bristol Wellbeing College

"It is an incredibly difficult time for small charities like ourselves, particularly in the field of mental health. You have provided exceptional services over the years and I am sure the loss will be felt acutely across our community."

Alessandra Gava, Changes Bristol

"Your organisation has provided such valuable support through music therapy and we know the impact of your work has meant a great deal to many individuals and families."

Sarah Dixon, The Carers' Centre

"Thank you for everything, Soundwell Team. What a wonderful difference you make, and will make even after your service comes to an end, in the lives of those connected with your work."

Rachel Dawson, Social Prescribing Link Worker, Minerva Care Primary Care Network



Participant response to closure

It is difficult to convey the personal impact of the loss of this service for individuals. Many have expressed deep sadness and anger about their groups ending. A singing group member offered this feedback for the report to highlight what the loss means for their mental wellbeing.



"I wanted to write from a service user point of view how devastating it is that Soundwell is having to close down due to lack of funding. Soundwell has been a lifesaver for me at times, the only punctuation in my week when I get to do something in a nonjudgemental safe environment.

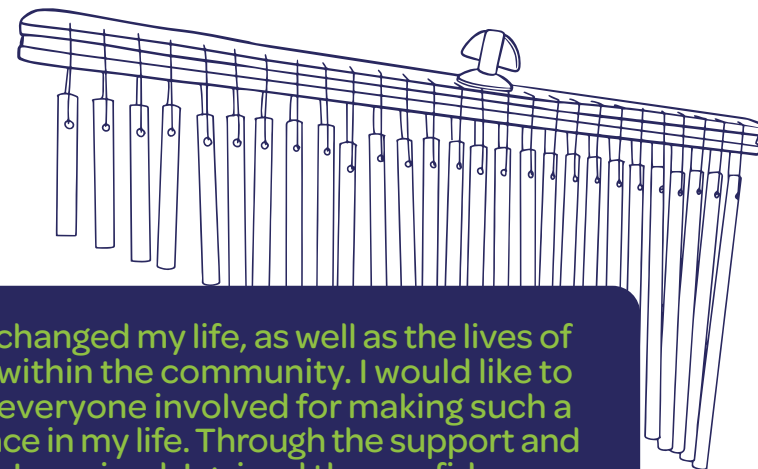
Being able to be in a space where you can sing and enjoy music has an enormous impact on how my week goes. I know that the weeks that Soundwell is not on may be a week that I don't have the courage, or reason to leave my house and it's much more of a struggle. The week with Soundwell in is so valuable and uplifting to me I'm not sure how I will fill that void.

Singing, gives you an opportunity to not think about anything else that's going on in your life or any stresses or traumas that you might have, it's a much anticipated haven of an hour in the fortnight where you can almost step out of your life and get lost in the Music, there is a feeling of safety along with the friendliness of the group and the expertise of the facilitators.

There is no other local provision for any kind of music therapy or singing for wellbeing. It is very daunting being in a mainstream choir and needing to use calming techniques or fiddle toys without feeling embarrassed or ashamed. When I first started Soundwell, I had to go with a Support worker because going to new places is a real challenge for me after a few sessions I felt able to go without a support worker which was massive for me. I could only achieve this because the therapists are so fantastic, approachable and very skilled at reading the room and picking up on any struggles that might be going on for people.

As a group we have achieved things such as performing publicly, this is due to the incredible facilitators believing in us and giving us the opportunities without pressure. Endings are very difficult for people who are struggling day to day or are neurodivergent, I cannot praise Soundwell enough for the way they have managed helping us through this incredibly difficult situation."

Daniel's story



"Soundwell has changed my life, as well as the lives of so many adults within the community. I would like to sincerely thank everyone involved for making such a positive difference in my life. Through the support and encouragement I received, I gained the confidence and self-esteem to pursue opportunities without fear.

Because of my experience as a participant, I decided to join Soundwell as a volunteer consultant, where it has been a privilege to help make a difference in the lives of others. I also applied to become a Trustee, helping to promote not only the important work of the charity, but also sharing my own perspective with prospective participants, professionals, and businesses.

I am deeply saddened that Soundwell now has to close as a charity, especially after transforming the lives of so many adults experiencing mental health challenges. At the same time, it is important that we all remember and celebrate the incredible work and achievements of the Soundwell team. Their dedication, compassion, and hard work made this service possible and had a lasting impact on so many people's lives.

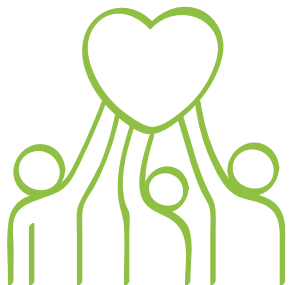
Although Soundwell may be closing, the importance of this work must still continue through other organisations. That mission is to keep continuing and supporting mental health and wellbeing of adults.

Thank you, Soundwell – you will truly be missed."

Funding and support

We have been exceptionally grateful to everyone who has funded, financially supported, or offered pro-bono services to Soundwell Music Therapy over the last 24 years. There are far too many to mention individually, but we would particularly like to acknowledge the following:

- Grant-giving organisations, trusts, and foundations
- Private donors
- Everyone who has taken part in sponsored races and fundraising events
- Musicians and organisers who have staged concerts or donated proceeds from performances
- NHS mental health commissioning teams in Wiltshire, Bath and North East Somerset, and Sirona; B&NES Council inequalities funding, Bristol City Council and DWP
- Organisations and individuals who have provided pro-bono support, including legal advice, filmmaking, website maintenance and SEO optimisation, impact report writing, re-brand, marketing support, and assistance during the closure process
- Providers of reduced or discounted room hire at our valued venues, particularly the Quaker Meeting Houses in Bristol, Bath, and Bradford on Avon, and Scout HQ in Bath. We also gratefully acknowledge the Wiltshire Music Centre and the former Central United Reformed Church in Bath for their earlier support
- Our group of former participant consultants, who have given invaluable advice and guidance in the development of the charity
- The Board of Trustees, who have generously given their time, expertise, and commitment to ensure the professional running and safe governance of the charity throughout the years



Bath Half Marathon fundraisers 2025

Music therapist training

Historically, Soundwell Music Therapy has been closely tied to the MA Music Therapy course at the University of the West of England (UWE), Bristol, by providing placements to music therapy students in their second year of training. This has allowed trainees to gain their first insights and experiences of group mental health work with adults in the local community. Many of Soundwell's therapists were UWE alumni, rooting shared therapeutic values and establishing a clear connection between teaching, practice and employment. The training relationship was especially precious to UWE because Soundwell placed music therapy at the very heart of the organisation's work – not always the case in other training placements. This regular training opportunity was a privilege and will be hugely missed by the UWE team.

In the last five years, Soundwell has offered almost 800 hours of clinical experience and supervision for UWE trainees, whose experiences have also been shared with and influenced their peers on the training. This demonstrates the scope and reach of the relationship. In the last five years alone, all students have gained employment within adult mental health settings in the NHS, private and charity sector, including Soundwell itself. Therefore, each placement has clearly shaped the futures of the therapists who have trained and learned from our team.



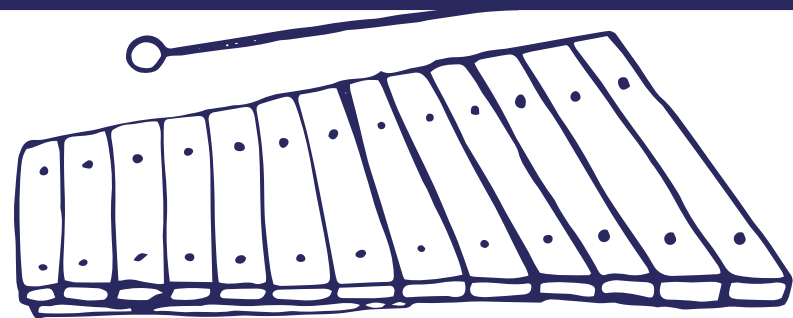
To illustrate the high quality of training experiences, here are some shared experiences from current trainees and recent graduates highlighting the impact of the learning process:

"My placement with Soundwell remains one of the most meaningful and formative experiences of my training as a music therapist. From the beginning, I was met with generosity, trust, and care by the experienced therapists I worked alongside. They created an environment that felt both nurturing and containing, where I could gradually develop confidence in my own instincts and presence as a therapist. So much of what I witnessed at Soundwell – the sensitivity, attunement, thoughtfulness, and humanity of the work – has stayed with me and continues to live within my current practice. The placement gave me a model of therapeutic work that felt deeply relational and compassionate, and it helped me begin to imagine the kind of therapist I wanted to become. Soundwell's impact extends far beyond the sessions it facilitated; it lives on in the practitioners it helped to shape, myself included."

"My second year placement was with Soundwell, working with a group and a 1:1 client. Alongside teaching me, Soundwell therapists supported and encouraged me in developing my own abilities as a music therapist, this being an important part of my development with a growing in my confidence and abilities to work with clients outside of the music. A psychodynamic approach with a deep unconditional positive regard and empathy for clients was at the core and intrinsic in the training. These values have remained substantial in my career as music therapist which I still apply in clinical settings today and in turn I have communicated to student on placement within my work environment."

"My second-year placement with Soundwell was invaluable for learning about the power of group therapy to support mental health. In particular, being a co-facilitator in a 20-week group alongside two experienced music therapists allowed me to really observe and take in different ways of working in this setting, which is a rare opportunity. I learnt so much about the ways we can use words and music alongside each other, and how to think about the work in relation to psychodynamic theories: all whilst being well-supported by the team and having time to learn at my own pace."

"My placement with Soundwell opened an unexpected door for me into a career in adult mental health for which I'll always be grateful for. It also introduced me to a love of group work, teaching me the power of peer support and how special shared music making can be, particularly for people who are incredibly isolated. I remember being struck by the care that all those at Soundwell took around their work and wanting to keep this ethos at the heart of my work going forwards, which I have been lucky to do."

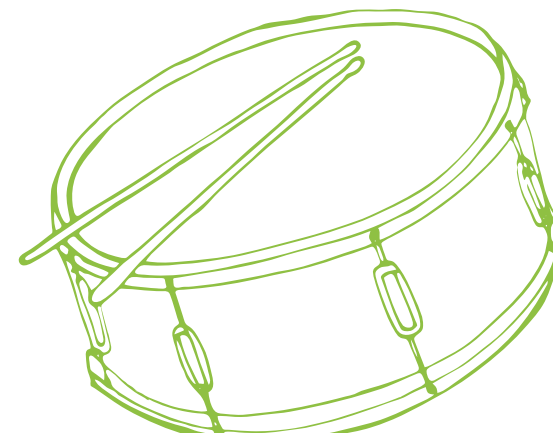


Our conclusion

This impact report has stated the urgent need for a music therapy service in the community for people with mental health needs, including those which are severe and complex. It has also highlighted the need for unpaid carers to receive the benefits of a music support group. Talking and peer support groups on their own are not enough for many people. Following Soundwell's closure, there is now a gap in provision that could, if left unfilled, cause huge issues for individuals. This could include withdrawal from community, isolation, suffering and mental deterioration, and could result in escalation in mental crises and an increase in hospitalisations. Partner organisation and participant testimonials and feedback have strongly voiced and illustrated this concern.

For many of our participants, having a non-verbal means of expression and communication is paramount in the processing of difficult or painful feelings and life experiences. Being able to come together without pressure of finding (the right) words straight away, to create together and ease isolation is a must. Skilled professionals who can work safely with risk, unconscious material and sensitively bring people together to recover and learn from each other is also essential. In this way, joy, camaraderie, freedom and empowerment can be experienced. Mental health need is rising, and music therapy can respond to this, compassionately and effectively.

Since beginning to write this impact report, our services have drawn to a close. Many of our participants have taken advantage of the one-to-one signposting meetings that were provided. The ending has been processed in sessions and participants have reflected on what they've gained from coming to Soundwell sessions. Many are determined to use their newfound confidence and self-learnings, forging new paths by going to other community groups and in their lives more generally. We are deeply concerned however that for some participants; there is no alternative provision that is supported enough and they could fall between the gaps.



Key recommendations

1. Music therapy provision should be available within the community to all adults experiencing mental health challenges, offering a range of group and one-to-one sessions that can be tailored to varying needs and adapted as individuals' recovery journeys and therapeutic goals evolve
2. Consultant or advisory opportunities are available for ex-participants of services, to benefit the service, keeping it relevant, while providing further opportunities for maintenance of mental health and empowerment, leading to employment possibilities
3. Carers provision includes some music support. Carers need the opportunity to engage in non-verbal creative activities that provide respite, enable fuller self-expression, and foster peer support and social connection

We want to thank you for your time and attention in reading through this impact report. Please share it with others and where possible, champion the cause for music therapy in the community, for mental health recovery and for carers support.

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Photos credited to Gareth Hamer, Matt Lincoln and our therapists



Geographical spread



We give thanks to our excellent Trustees who, over the years have given immeasurable time and skill in ensuring that Soundwell Music Therapy has been effectively, safely and responsibly governed.

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