Sonic Bothy

Report:

Supporting artistic development for people with learning disabilities

Learning Space Sharing Performance
Photo Credit: Cherryman Media

Accessible Formats

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Chamber Music Scotland

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1. Background

Sonic Bothy is an award winning inclusive new music charity based in Glasgow. Since formed 12 years ago, we have engaged with over 600 participants with learning disabilities and over 2500 audience members witnessed our people's achievements through performances on stage.

We want to learn how best to support people with learning disabilities to engage in music and cultural activities through mentorship.

We set out to collate learnings from inclusive arts organisations with their rich knowledge and experience.

This interim report outlines the progress of the research.

Through this research supported by Creative Scotland and CMS Classical EDI Development Fund, Sonic Bothy addresses the stark inequality in opportunities available for people with learning disabilities to access music and culture. The scale of opportunities offered currently is a drop in the ocean. 1 in 4 people in the UK are Disabled, while public arts funding bodies are continuing to underfund the inclusive arts sector. Through 2023-26, Arts Council England (ACE) has awarded disability-led organisations less than two per cent of the total ([Disability News Service](), [Arts Council England]()). The demand for our work is high, and long waiting lists.

2. Aim

In this research we address two key questions:

- ***How to best support people with learning disabilities to identify goals and have autonomy over their development?***

- ***What processes best support people with learning disabilities who communicate in different ways?***

The new knowledge and learning will not only benefit Sonic Bothy and our freelance musicians, but also will be shared amongst wider networks and benefit the arts sector.

3. Methods

Online Survey

We invited inclusive arts organisations in Scotland and beyond to share knowledge and experiences. This report summarises the findings, and with consent of respondents, an anonymised report is made available publicly on Sonic Bothy website. To date, seven inclusive organisations have taken part.

https://www.sonicbothy.co.uk/survey

Interviews

To date, Creative Director Atzi Muramatsu interviewed three Directors of inclusive music charities and asked more in depth of their experiences. We aim to extend our reach further. All seven organisations have agreed for their responses to be included in this report.

4. Findings

Respondents

- 7 responses from inclusive organisations (6 CS MYF, 1 no longer operating)
- Across art forms - Music, Theatre, Dance, film,
- 4 (66.7%) organisations annually engage with over 100 Disabled participants

All seven organisations have run mentorship or personal development programmes that support people with learning disabilities' artistic and personal development.

Experience with Mentorship & Personal Development

The respondents each offer varied types of mentorship, with different aims and target beneficiaries:

- Artistic development opportunities for **young people** facing barriers due to condition or impairment.
- Weekly sessions and an annual leadership programme for **disabled dance artists**.
- One-to-one mentoring and performance opportunities in music and dance for **people with a wide range of additional support needs**.
- A transitions programme leading to volunteering pathways or further study, tailored to each individual.
- Mentoring for **people aiming to work in the arts sector**.
- Individualised support for participants **who are yet to know that they are artists** to contribute ideas, skills and talents to their charity's activities.

As well as mentorship, they support personal development through other programme strands:

- **Group Creative Learning workshops** offering opportunities to connect with others through participatory music and dance
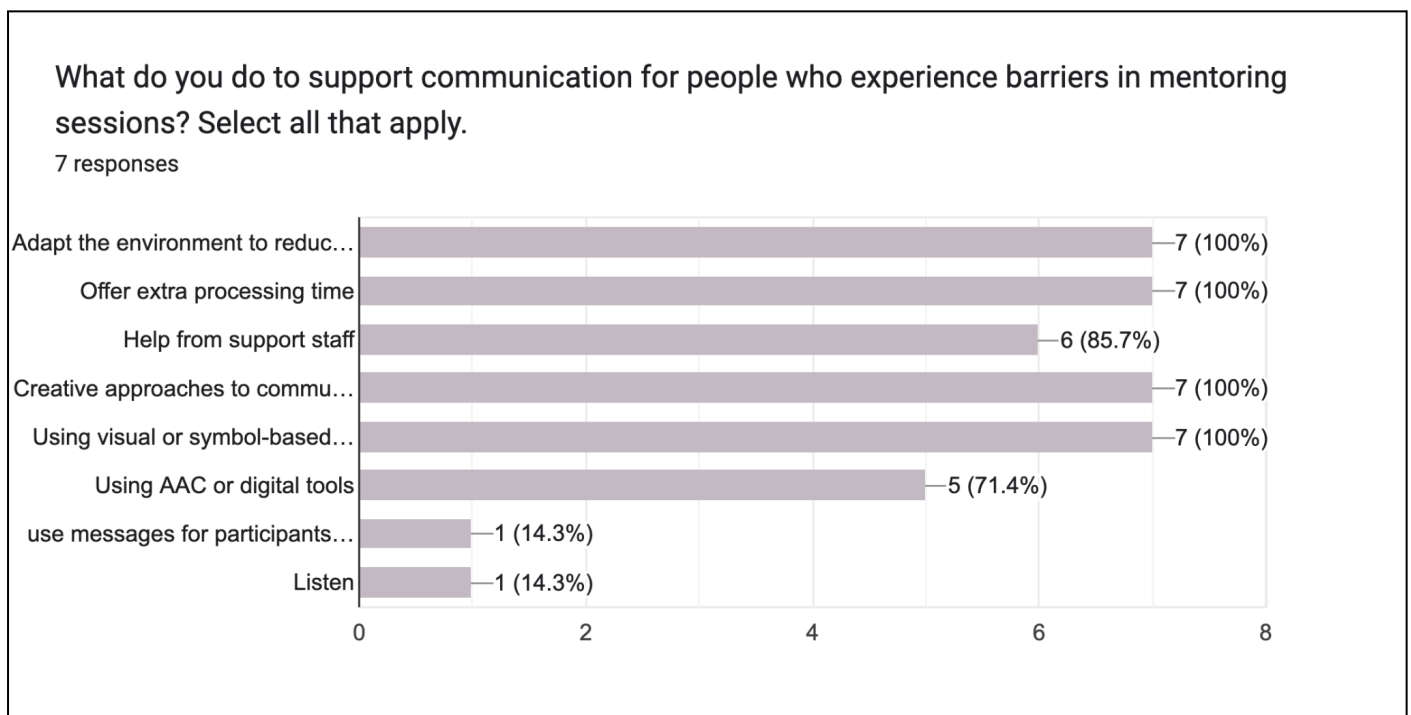
- **Quarterly members' meetings** where we gather feedback directly from beneficiaries about our services
- **Regular inclusive music workshops** for people with learning disabilities, open to all regardless of prior musical experience
- Opportunities to gain experience and **participate directly in productions** and creative projects

Inclusive Communication

All 7 (100%) organisations said they use following communication support:

- Adapt the environment to reduce sensory or access barriers
- Offer extra processing time
- Help from support staff
- Creative approaches to communication (e.g. music, movement, visual art)
- Using visual or symbol-based materials

A majority also get assistance from support staff and use Augmentative and Alternative Communication (AAC), or digital tools.

What do you do to support communication for people who experience barriers in mentoring sessions? Select all that apply.
7 responses

Category	Value
Adapt the environment to reduc…	7 (100%)
Offer extra processing time	7 (100%)
Help from support staff	6 (85.7%)
Creative approaches to commu…	7 (100%)
Using visual or symbol-based…	7 (100%)
Using AAC or digital tools	5 (71.4%)
use messages for participants…	1 (14.3%)
Listen	1 (14.3%)

What worked well?

- **Build trust and relationships** with participants, their families, and support networks
- **Prioritise autonomy** by respecting participants' own choices in how they communicate
- **Tailor communication** to each individual's preferred style..
- **Offer a variety of communication methods** (e.g. speech, SMS, iPads, alphabet sheets) to suit different needs.
- **Flexibility** is key — no single method works for everyone, so adapt as needed.

What are the challenges?

- **Effective communication requires patience** — waiting, listening, and avoiding pressure on participants to respond; Understanding each person's communication style takes time - it's normal to make mistakes at first.
- **Limited resources** (time, funding, accessible materials) can make it harder to provide the right support and environment; Balancing individual needs within group settings is challenging and resource-intensive.
- Online communication (e.g. Zoom) can be difficult when AAC devices are also used for the call

Creative Autonomy

What specific approaches helped participants shape their own creative learning or take ownership of their development?

- Providing **tailored support** (mentors, access workers, PAs) to help shape development.
- Encouraging **freedom of expression**, confidence, and choice — including freedom within a clear structure; Validating and valuing participants' creative ideas to build self-esteem and motivation.
- Offering **participant-led workshops** and involving participants in shaping themes and plans.
- Using **clear learning plans** and options to support ownership without overwhelming.
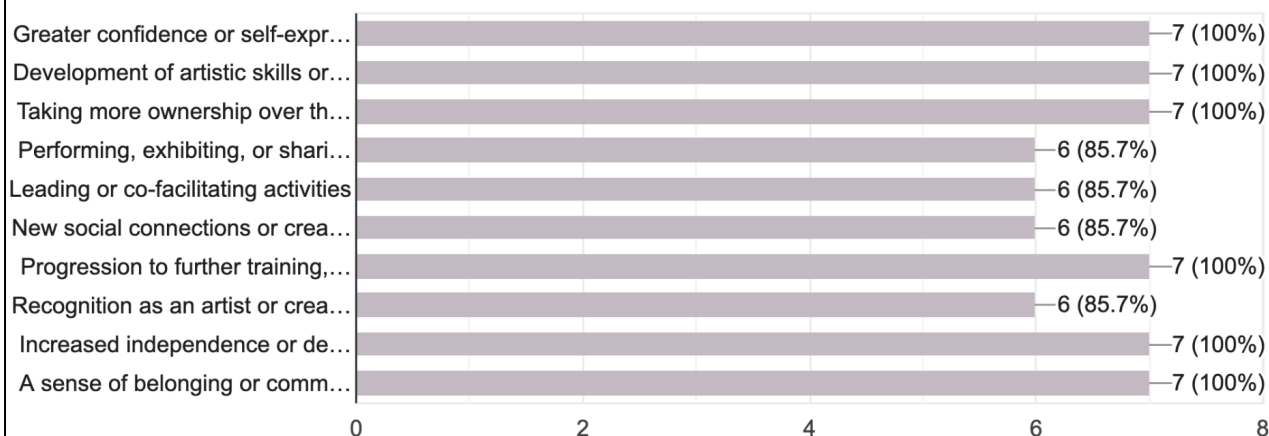
What outcomes or changes have you seen as a result of your mentorship or artistic/personal development programme?

The respondents almost unanimously agree on the positive, life-transforming effects their programme had on their participants:

- Greater confidence or self-expression
- Development of artistic skills or creative practice
- Taking more ownership over their own learning or creative direction
- Performing, exhibiting, or sharing work publicly
- Leading or co-facilitating activities
- New social connections or creative collaborations
- Progression to further training, education, or creative opportunities
- Recognition as an artist or creative contributor
- Increased independence or decision-making
- A sense of belonging or community

What outcomes or changes have you seen as a result of your mentorship or artistic/personal development programme? Select all that apply.

7 responses

Outcome	Count
Greater confidence or self-expr…	7 (100%)
Development of artistic skills or…	7 (100%)
Taking more ownership over th…	7 (100%)
Performing, exhibiting, or shari…	6 (85.7%)
Leading or co-facilitating activities	6 (85.7%)
New social connections or crea…	6 (85.7%)
Progression to further training,…	7 (100%)
Recognition as an artist or crea…	6 (85.7%)
Increased independence or de…	7 (100%)
A sense of belonging or comm…	7 (100%)

Stories

Respondents shared stories, moments, or examples that illustrate their outcome specifically as a result of mentoring:

- T's journey: Autistic boy, grew from shy to confident performer; achieved Music Highers, college place, performs his own music; Paragon support also helped through personal loss.
- Disabled dance artists: Two artists employed as PAYE staff created and performed their own work.
- Young participant → volunteer: Progressed from participant to volunteer; sang in group performance; built confidence to apply for sound production course.
- Participants became confident performers, capable of performing internationally; L started own radio show; A overcame fear of performing/social spaces; J now eager to perform, while before he would be very hesitant.
- Staff progression: One staff member started as a placement student, now an Associate Artist.
- Many others: Over 20 years, countless stories—impact ranges from carers recognising hidden talent to participants performing on major stages.

Main challenges

Unanimously, the respondents mention a significant constraint on resources:

- **Resource constraints:** levels of funding not matching the high costs of delivery while ensuring support and access (e.g. AAC, safeguarding, specialist support, staff time)
- **Capacity pressures:** Limited time and pressure to serve waiting lists, referrals, and funder demands of increasing engagement while maintaining consistent, long-term

engagement; planning, delivery, and support often take significantly longer and cost more than for neurotypical participants.

- **Structural barriers**: Scheduling conflicts (e.g. with college); limited exposure to opportunities; accessible transport.
- **Emotional support:** Balancing enthusiasm with realistic expectations; supporting participants cope with disappointments and setbacks; building confidence in decision-making.

Further advice

- **Active and careful listening** is essential to understand each individual's ideas, hopes, fear and individuality; they create the conditions for people to find their own creative voice, flourish and take ownership of their artistic journey.
- **Individual autonomy** must remain at the centre, while the inclusive sector must collectively advocate for equality.
- **Ongoing learning** and exploration are key. Learning is collective, and with participants we grow.

5. Conclusion

This interim research evidence the real impact of supporting artistic and personal development of people with learning disabilities through mentorship across artforms. The work is transformative. With right mentorship, people with learning disabilities have built confidence, taken ownership of their learning, and live a more independent, rich cultural life. The stories shared by respondents show what is possible when support is consistent, flexible, and person-centred. By continuing to listen, adapt, and advocate together, the arts sector can support more people with learning disabilities to flourish creatively and be part of the cultural community.

This report recommends key methods in supporting mentorship - flexible person-centered communication, taking the time to listen to each individual, and respect their autonomy. There is a need for building trusted relationships with the participants, and collective learning with compassion. These are only possible with long-term sustained support and adequate resources.

The need for creative inclusive opportunities for people with learning disabilities is urgent, and the financial constraints the inclusive organisations face are real - limited funding, time pressures, and stretched resources. It is prohibitively difficult for organisations to provide the personalised support that participants with learning disabilities desperately need. The current scale of opportunity is far too small compared to the demand, and there is a clear need for more investment to ensure that people with learning disabilities can fully participate in cultural life.

Appendix

Resources:

Scottish Commission for People with Learning Disabilities Report on Supported Decision Making. Published April 2025.
https://www.scld.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2025/04/SCLD-SDM-Report-April-2025.pdf

The La Trobe Support for Decision Making Practice Framework Learning Resource
https://www.supportfordecisionmakingresource.com.au/

Scottish inclusive organisations' life-transforming works:

Sonic Bothy
See the talent, energy and joy that drive Sonic Bothy: **We want to show you who we are.**
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=RomLppDQ4vU (7 minutes)
Creative captions and audio-described versions are on our website www.sonicbothy.co.uk

Indepen-Dance
FRSA Adam Sloan was one of the SCLD RSA Fellows in 2016 - this is his story of how life has been since becoming an RSA Fellow. An example of the results of supporting our disabled dance artists to develop their skills and knowledge.
https://vimeo.com/361804430 (4 minutes)

Paragon Music
Groove is an artist development programme for aspiring musicians and dancers.
https://www.paragon-music.org/groove

Birds of Paradise Theatre Company
BOP Young Artists - Artist Development initiative
A space where young people with a passion for the performing arts, can learn skills and develop their own creative practice
https://www.boptheatre.co.uk/projects/bop-young-artists/

Hear My Music
Spectrum Transitions: Group and individual music sessions for young adults aged 17-25 with complex needs, transitioning from children' s to adult services.
https://hearmymusic.org.uk/projects/

Cutting Edge Theatre
Inspire: Workshops
https://cuttingedgetheatre.co.uk/inspire/