



# MY POCKETS MUSIC



Report  
By  
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**YOUTH  
MUSIC**





# MY POCKETS

## INTERIM REPORT – JULY 2020

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## **INTRODUCTION**

As an independent, external evaluator, I came to the project very much as an objective observer, interested in all its angles. On the face of it, what I saw was groups of young people enjoying themselves through music. But look below the surface, question the why, the how, the what, and it soon became clear that there was much more taking place. Some of it I recognised and understood, while some of it led to picking up threads and seeing where they took me. In essence, not only were the young people learning, so was I.

I began by going along to a range of sessions, where I joined in through percussion and chatted with group members, informally gathering their feedback. I then followed these visits with a series of in-depth interviews with staff, youth workers, the musicians, and some of the parents. The result was a solid view of the project, exploring not only its original aims, but also other themes that surfaced along the way.

Much of the observation and feedback was interconnected, so at times it felt like I was walking through a complex Venn diagram. What follows is my interpretation of what I saw and heard during that journey.

### **Groups visited**

I went along to sessions at:

- Lollypop (LGBTQ), Beverley
- Astra Youth Centre, Bransholme estate, North Hull: Junior Creatives, Senior Creatives, and the 16+ group
- Mind, Beverley Road, Hull
- The Market Weighton School, East Riding
- Child Dynamix, Greatfield estate, East Hull
- Home-educated group, Bridlington

I carried out in-depth interviews with:

- The My Pockets staff – musicians Shane McMurray, Adam Parrish, Katie Sunlay
- Pete Scott, Youth Worker, Astra Youth Centre
- Lynne Scott, Manager, Astra Youth Centre
- Nicola McCartney, Mental Health Recovery Worker, Mind
- Dave Brown, Prevention and Education Team Practitioner – ERYC – Lollypop group
- Emma Miles, Project Leader, Christ Church Bridlington Network, The Key Centre, Bridlington

At performance events I also had conversations with: Lisa Gadd, project facilitator, Mind (covering Nicola McCartney's maternity leave) and her manager; youth worker Paul Clark from Child Dynamix; and several parents.

## Feedback from the young people

### Overview

*Where words or phrases are in bold, this indicates that the topic is covered in more depth in the main body of the report (page 10 onwards)*

I began by asking the young people how long they had been coming to the sessions and how they had found out about them. Whether they were there by choice (as at Astra Youth Centre) or by referral (as at Mind), the one thing they had in common, with the exception of just one participant, was that they enjoyed it and were pleased they had gone along. This included non-referrals who had 'tagged along' with friends or relatives, following recommendation or gentle persuasion.

Absences were usually attributed to events in the young people's often chaotic lives, such as 'a massive meltdown.' Occasionally it was that they had 'just been busy' or 'couldn't get there.' It was not appropriate for me to question them further on this.

At Mind, project leader Nicola told me:

The group I run is 26 weeks long and there are lots of reasons why people stopped – it wasn't just because of My Pockets. Sometimes things happen or whatever ... and numbers do tend to naturally drop anyway. There's only one member that I think dropped out more recently.

As expected, many of the young people, across all venues, told me being in a My Pockets session was 'fun', although it was difficult for them to define this. 'I don't know,' they told me, with a smile and a shrug of the shoulders, 'it just *is*.' For others, although the sessions were generally vibrant and noisy, they opened the door to a personal space where the stress of their everyday life was greatly reduced:

It just makes me calm ... I can just sit back, relax, I don't have to worry. I can just do this [taps rhythm on table] and it makes me feel like falling asleep, because sometimes I don't even know I'm doing it ... it's like my brain goes completely blank. [Brandon, Home-ed, Bridlington]

It kind of helps me sleep, because it exhausts me. It's fun and it's after a school day, which is totally different, and it makes me feel relaxed.  
[Harriet, Mind]

Shaun, a long term sofa-surfer from the Astra Youth Centre group, told me that what he particularly liked was how the music 'allows you to express yourself.' The **lyrics** for one of the group's songs, *Bus Ticket Blues* [bit.ly/3cPml8e], was based on Shaun's life. To him, it had just been an average day of trying to use the McDonald's voucher on the back of his bus ticket, but talking it all through meant he could share his frustration and disappointment:

*Bus ticket blues / bus ticket blues  
Ain't had no luck today / but that isn't news  
They said I'd get some / but that was just lies  
They wouldn't even sell me some regular fries.*

Pete Scott, youth leader at Astra, told me the song had been completely unexpected:

There was a lad called Jack who'd done all the lyrics for an earlier song, *Rhythm and a Beat*, because he was a care leaver and he was quite passionate about it all. He had loads to share, but he wasn't here one night and I think Shaun came in and just said something like 'I haven't had owt to eat' ... and he told us how he'd been to McDonald's but they wouldn't sell him what he wanted.

Another young person, this time Charlie in the Mind group, said:

The main thing it makes me feel when I come here is **safe**. Outside, it feels judgemental, you're under pressure.

For Alex, one of the participants at Lollypop, it was about her growing in **confidence**:

I wasn't very confident when I first started coming here. I mean, I'm not a confident person, but I've become more so.

I was curious to learn what it was about the group that had helped Alex become more confident. The answer was **acceptance**. Both she and her friend Skylar talked to me about coming out and said:

The guys are really nice. They treat us just like everyone else. It's *really* important. I mean, at school, they do kind of treat us as human beings, but not that much. It's not so much the teachers, it's the students.

What would all the young people be doing instead, I wondered, if they were not coming to the sessions? Their answers generally centred around boredom, predictability and being on screens. They would be:

just at home, not doing much, probably gaming	[Josh, Astra]
having tea and then maybe watching TV, then going to bed	[Harriet, Mind]
homework [sigh] ... that's about it	[Abbie, Mind]

Scarlett's mum (West Hill, Bridlington) told me:

If she hadn't been going to it, she'd have just been sat at home. It gives them something to do, on an estate where there's nothing.

**Distraction** from their anxieties was clearly a key issue:

It stops me from being bored and thinking about things. [Mark, Market Weighton]

I'd probably be at home doing nothing! I mean, I have my **phone**, which is what I usually do, but ... yeah. [Charlie, Mind]

At a Child Dynamix session, teenager Katie – who was wearing a multi-coloured top and being very chatty and laughing – told me:

I'd just be in my room, pretending the outside world wasn't there, because I don't like **the outside world**. Normally, I'd be dressed all in blue or all in black. This is the only place where I feel I've got **confidence**, because I've been **bullied** for lots of years.

Later, at the Beverley College performance evening, I spoke to Katie again. Although I was dressed predominantly in black, she had made up her face perfectly to look like a cat. She explained:

I enjoy looking like an idiot and being OK with it, so this group helps, because it's made me realise I'm not the only idiot in the world, and I'm not the only weirdo or freak and that there's other people who are as weird as me. So by using this and by using the music, I'm like showing 'ok, I like music, and I like this, and I'm weird.'

Thinking back to what Katie had told me about confidence and being bullied, I asked her, if her problem in the outside world were an animal, what sort of animal would it be?

Probably a shark. I love puffer fish – they're my favourite animal – and sharks eat puffer fish, so that's basically me, and if I don't hide, then the sharks will eat me. But I can use this place to puff out, to stand out. If I puff out, then the shark can't get me. It's my way of representing life – I'm a puffer fish.

Over pizza, I asked her how she felt about the group's video, which was going to be on YouTube:

It's scary, knowing my full family are gonna watch it! The thing is, they'll all sit round at my auntie's house and they'll all have pizza and drinks and that and then all watch a three minute video. It's like, it's not that big a deal, is it, I mean it's three minutes. It's a bigger deal for these two [Nakita and Kieran, either side of her] because you two have sang it, you two have acted in it, and I was just a character ... like, if you remove me it's like there's nothing changed.

I left the event, mulling over the issues of confidence and bullying, then parked them for a while.

I also gave some thought to the issue of food, because the pizzas at the evening's event had been wolfed down, the same as they had been at the Beverley College performance. Three of the session venues I visited offered the young people food, ranging from toast to simple

burgers and soup. Where food was not on offer, the My Pockets team supplied biscuits, fruit and bottles of water. Whilst the food was clearly much appreciated when they were eating it, very few of the young people mentioned it when I was talking to them outside of that, and for this reason it has not been explored beyond this Overview.

Back at the regular sessions and digging more deeply around earlier feedback, I tried unpicking the young people's definition of 'fun.' Why, I asked them, *did* they engage with the sessions?

I came to explore new stuff. I already do music but it's nice to carry on and do more and meet nice people. I have drums at home and I've got two guitars and a ukulele, and we've got a piano, and I've got a mini DJ set as well. I think I'm learning stuff. I like writing songs at home.

[Rory, home-ed Brid]

At my schools that I went to I never liked music and then my mum just found this club. When I came out from it, I was rapping Minecraft, and I was like 'oh, this isn't like me!' and ever since I've just loved it and loved it. I'm even doing it when I'm playing Minecraft. I'm just sat there going [makes general percussion sounds] ... I just do all sorts with the music. [Brandon, home-ed Brid]

Alex from Lollypop echoed the voices of many when she told me: 'It's more relaxed than school. It's more about *making* music rather than having to just learn individual notes.' One of the Mind participants added:

When we do our music lessons at school there's always that feeling of a teacher watching us or judging us if we do a key wrong or something like that. The guys here are nice. They've helped me with the chords and they don't mind when I'm screwing stuff up. [Charlie, Mind]

Sasha, the drummer in the Lollypop group, told me he joined to make new friends, because:

I feel **isolated** in other areas of my life, I don't go out much.

What was it about being the drummer?

Because I can smack things and **vent my feelings**.

We went on to talk about other ways that Sasha vented:

I play video games. I've played a *lot* of video games. Sometimes I go out and skate. Sometimes I go out and cycle.

I was interested in the difference between a My Pockets session and the young people's other displacement activities. It seemed taking part in My Pockets was a more potent distraction, as Sasha went on to explain:

Music is quite complex – like, you’ve got to go through the process of making the beat, making the lyrics. And it’s the feeling of being in a group and working on something together, I guess ... you’re not alone, you can communicate with someone else.

I asked him to tell me more about that communication: did he mean by chatting with one another or did he feel they were communicating with each other musically?

Both really. There’s more ideas going round than it being just yourself. I’ve tried making music before by myself and it was pretty boring – like, trying to make a beat on the computer and things like that – but within a group it’s more fun. You’re not isolated. You don’t go crazy. I guess you don’t get as frustrated.

Returning to their definition of ‘fun,’ it seemed **singing** took more of a back seat, largely because people were often reluctant to do it:

I don’t really like singing in front of people. But I was just kind of like singing along and someone said ‘you’re doing the vocals.’ [Phoebe, Home-ed Bridlington]

I think more people should do it, because I kind of have to sing now [unwillingly], because the person who was singing doesn’t come any more. [Alex, Lollypop]

Like Rory in Bridlington (home-ed, above), a number of young people already had **instruments at home**. They ranged from self-taught to unable to play and, not surprisingly, demographics often had an impact:

I play the piano at home and I’ve got a guitar but I don’t know how to play it. [Sasha, Home-ed Bridlington]

I’ve got a guitar and my mam paid for two lessons, but they were £70 a time and she couldn’t keep it up, because she had to save up money for a school trip. [Kieran, Child Dynamix]

For some people, their interest in music had developed beyond the project:

I’ve got a bit more interested in the music at Mind, especially recently. During half term, me and my school have been doing garage band music, which I absolutely loved, and I’m now debating what subjects I should do, because I’m choosing them after Christmas, so it’ll be a tricky decision. [Harriet, Mind]

I’m getting a piano at home soon, so I can practise. I’ll probably do some song writing and upload it on Spotify and stuff. [Abbie, Mind]

I wanted to explore the question of instruments further. Some of the young people had at least one at home but said they didn't know how to play. So what were the obstacles around this and to what extent had My Pockets helped?

I've been practising the guitar between sessions. It's taught me a lot, because my mum got me it and was like 'oh, you can teach yourself' but I never got round to it, so this has proper helped. It's *massively* easier when someone shows you, because not only do you have a 1:1 structure and you can see *them* do it, so you have more a kind of visual learning, but you can actually talk to them if you're worried about it. If you think you're going to go wrong, you can double-check it, which you can't if you're just doing it by yourself. [Esme, Mind]

In Bridlington, I asked home educated Brandon whether the choice of instrument made a difference:

Yeah, because with a drum you can make it loud and you can make it quiet [demonstrates]. With the ukulele, you can make it peaceful or you can change it and you can make it loud. Bass guitar – always loud.

Skylar and Alex at Lollypop told me:

It's nice when you find music that you don't want to study. Like, new music that you don't know, so that you don't expect what's coming.

This all linked into the **role of the My Pockets team**, which, it was soon to become clear to me, was multi-faceted.

I asked the young people about **group dynamics** and also whether they thought there were any **organisational issues**. At Lollypop, friends Skylar and Alex thought group size was a slightly knotty problem:

It feels like a more dynamic group when you've got more people than when you've got these smaller numbers ...

Yeah, I think if we did shorter songs and did them in smaller blocks, it might help get more people, because if someone wanted to join now it would be harder to get them into it ...

But if we did shorter songs in smaller blocks, then maybe more people would be like 'oh, it's not for that long, I won't bother' ... so, I don't know!

At Market Weighton, group dynamics seemed to come down to individual participants and behavioural issues. Amy simply told me:

The annoying boys are a bit of a problem. I wish their attention spans were longer.

The musicians echoed Amy's frustration. Shane told me:

Look at Amy on the keyboard now! Without the boys here, it means I can just leave her to practise. She's continuing to learn and, even though I'm not there standing over her, she's practising and she's learning, whereas with the [disruptive] boys here you can't do that, because it's a different dynamic.

I was in no doubt the project worked. The question was: *how?* Was there some kind of My Pockets alchemy going on?

For Amy at Market Weighton School, who had presented with **suicidal thoughts**, it was very much about lifting her mood:

It's definitely helped me a lot, because you're always looking for a distraction. I've never played an instrument, apart from a piano years ago, but now I've come along to this and learned to play the keyboards.

Pete Scott, youth leader at Astra, told me:

I think it's because just about everybody loves music. I know for myself that if I'm not feeling great, I'll put some music on and it gives me a bit of a lift.

And obviously being a *part* of something, being involved. And being heard, I think, because a lot of these young people probably don't get heard and probably have a tough time because of that, both outside of school and in school. So yeah, I think that's probably why it's making them happy.

## **DRILLING DOWN**

### **Confidence and self esteem | safety**

Dave Brown, youth leader at the Lollypop group, told me ‘the kids absolutely loved it’, and went on:

For some of the ones that don’t get involved with things, it’s brought them out of their shell a bit, on both the music side and the video side, and they’re also getting involved in other things, like the night walk we’re doing with Humberside Police. They’re getting to know some of the other group members more too, whereas before, they didn’t really get involved and speak to them; they were more in their own world.

Dave spoke in particular about a young person called Lily (who was known as Josh when the sessions began, then transitioned to identify as female):

Lily, is a really, really nervous person but has really enjoyed it. When Josh first came to us, they were very sheltered and, although they could already play guitar, they sort of sat on their own and didn’t really get involved in anything but this has really brought them out of their shell, which has been amazing. She doubts herself a lot and I think at first was really unsure about the project, but once the weeks went on, she got involved with the guitar and the video-making. And now, on the back of that, she’s getting involved in a lot of other things, like making the baubles and pompoms we’re doing for Christmas.

It was also very interesting to hear that, now:

Lily’s been coming to me for advice and support, whereas before, she was probably a bit sort of dubious and scared about asking for that.

This outcome suggests there is perhaps a legacy around young people opening up to youth workers and developing closer relationships with them in terms of advice and support.

In Child Dynamix on Greatfield estate, group member Nakita talked to me about her cousin Kieran, also a member of the group, and told me about his stammer. I had already spoken to Kieran, but not noticed anything. Nakita explained:

Usually, he has a speech impediment. When we were playing with my dolls when we were little, he didn’t stammer. Now that he’s coming to the group and engaged with the music and totally into the sessions, he’s not stammering here either.

I also found it interesting that Nakita had chosen to tell me this of her own volition. This was often the case. Rather than tell me what they thought I wanted to hear, the young

people simply told me what it was like to be them – whether that was being bullied, losing a parent, coming out, not fitting in – and what it was like taking part in the project.

I later spoke to Kieran in more depth – see **Lyrics**.

His girlfriend, Katie, is also a member of the Child Dynamix group. She told me:

At school I'm bullied, but I don't get bullied when I come here. It's a good group.

She didn't say *why* she was bullied – and I had not yet built up enough rapport to go further with this – but she did tell me that, over the years, bullying had 'knocked all the confidence out of her.' From later chats with Katie, I concluded this was possibly something to do with her unconventional choice of clothes and make-up (see page 5).

In Bridlington, home-educated Phoebe said:

Getting bullied is normal for me, because I was bullied from when I was about three all the way until I was 13. I was bullied because I was different. My dad passed away when I was one and a half, so I never knew him really. One of the bullies blamed me for my dad passing away.

Phoebe was responsible for the group's lyric: *I've been waiting for being different to be a good thing*.

At Mind, project leader Nicola was in no doubt that the biggest thing the young people got from the group was confidence ...

... because if you're feeling anxious or lonely, your confidence takes a massive knock. There's one girl who's got a stunning singing voice but is also really shy. She's been able to do some performances. She might not be overly confident and be able to perform in front of *anybody*, but she did build that confidence up to be able to perform, which for her is a big step.

Pete Scott, youth worker at Astra, said if he were to pick somebody out of the group who had 'really progressed and changed a helluva lot', it would probably be Danny, who discovered he had a talent for drumming:

A lot of the time, he's running errands for his disabled mum. I think that's always been a barrier for him moving on, because he's felt like he's got things to do for her. Not necessarily washing and cooking, but going to the shop and running errands, going to the bank and all them type of things.

Before My Pockets, he used to stay up all night on his games and, when he wasn't running errands for his mum, sleep all day. Things changed when he became a father. He didn't stay with his son's mother, they separated, but he

started having regular contact with his son after a few months of him being born. He was a bit flaky at it and this was all to do with his routines and stuff.

Then he started coming to the *Rhythm and A Beat* sessions on a Monday night and playing the drums. I think My Pockets is probably the first thing he's committed to in years in terms of being in every Monday. It's only a couple of hours, but it's something. He's been getting up and out of bed. He's realised – and I think it's probably a lot to do with his confidence – he's realised that he's good at something and he's got involved and he's kept it going and he's really enjoyed doing that.

And then that's led him to maybe think a little bit broader in his life about, you know: 'things aren't as bad as I thought and maybe it's time to change things.' He's had a massive, *massive* change round in his life. I can't say it's *all* down to My Pockets, but it's definitely helped.

**Social** | group dynamics | acceptance | pastoral care | flexibility

Musician Shane, who has many years' experience working with young people, said:

The fact we get so many of them to share their lives and they're willing to put themselves out of their comfort zone is a huge success that overwhelms me most times.

This was not the first time I had heard a member of staff refer to 'comfort zones.' It seemed that, yes, some of the young people were being encouraged to step outside of them, but by and large they were OK with this, because of the friendly, supportive environment and their respect for the musicians.

Adam told me about their relaxed approach:

I try not to invade in their private life too much. But if they *have* got something going on, then we give them the best of our adult knowledge, because we've been through all this sort of thing ourselves – arguing with friends and things like that. I've personally struck up some good friendships with them.

Although she has worked on fewer sessions than Shane and Adam, musician/film maker Katie echoed this. She told me about being at Market Weighton School, where the young people had each recently experienced the loss of a parent:

On our last session with them, I sat with Poppy and her friend Amy. We started to write new lyrics for a different song and they both opened up to me about their stresses and troubles with school. We wrote the beginning of a new song and the girls seemed so much more confident in expressing their ideas and unloading their troubles onto paper.

These comments from the musicians were reflected in the feedback from young people, who told me:

I like talking to new people, including the guys who run it. [Rory, home-ed Brid]

Coming here puts you in a good mood, it makes me happy. I met Charlie through the group and he's funny – he's my friend, he makes me laugh. It's a nice, social environment. [Esme, Mind]

I've met new people and me and Charlie sit next to each other and wind each other up, we have a laugh. [Abbie, Mind]

It helps me to make friends, because I don't really have any or talk to people. It usually takes me about a year to get to know somebody before I can tell them about stuff in my life, but here I can talk to people. A lot of the people

at school and at band aren't very nice, whereas the people here are my peers and the leaders are really nice and they make it fun as well, so I'm learning. [Mark, Market Weighton]

It makes me feel relaxed. It's just sitting talking to people. I don't talk to people and it's getting to know different people and that. [Sasha, Mind]

I was quite intrigued by this last comment, because when I joined in with sessions, I noticed how Sasha was markedly more quiet than the others, barely speaking. Outside of the group, in a one-to-one chat with me, she said she was often quite tired:

I have to get up at six o'clock every morning. I don't like leaving when it's later because of the buses – it's all crowded. Everyone's kinda like screaming and shouting.

The other Sasha I met – the young man at Lollypop who liked to vent his feelings through drumming – was more interested in instruments than his fellow group members. When I asked him how he thought it might affect things if there were more people in the group, he said: 'Well, we could have more instruments, I guess.'

Yet there was, in the main, a general feeling of camaraderie across the board. Going forward, it would be interesting to see if young people who have met through the groups contacted each other outside of the sessions.

I asked the musicians how important they thought it was to be flexible and just go with the flow. Shane said:

We have to be able to adapt, because we're dealing with different people from different backgrounds and ultimately this isn't mainstream education, it's voluntary. The goals are fixed but the young people have an impact in determining how we get there, either by being vocal or by voting with their feet. Ultimately it has to be fun but challenging and personally I feel we do that quite well.

Adam told me:

We're constantly trying to make things better. So like, this time around, in the 12 week session, we tried to shorten it so that we could possibly do the process [of song-writing] twice. It turns out that the creative time we gave them after the first session works pretty well and we ended up running with the creativeness of it. So, in certain groups, we'd produce two songs and in some groups we'd produce one and then there'd be extra lessons for young people who wanted to learn more on their instruments and we did more one-to-ones, things like that. It's about judging what they wanted, really, and what we thought we could provide best.

Katie agreed with them both:

Being flexible is so important with these sessions. Young people respond well to structure in everyday life, but when it comes to creativity it's difficult to know and predict what will be developed in the session and where the members will want to take it. I think you have to go with the flow, especially with vulnerable young people. It's important to let their ideas lead the way so they feel they are being heard, listened to and that their creativity is the main part of the process. In short, if we're flexible, it helps them to let go.

As Pete Scott, youth worker at Astra told me:

You never know who you're gonna get week to week. There *is* no sort of commitment. There *is* no punishment if you don't come ... it's just as and when. So, often there's a birthday or there's something on after school and ... Peter came down on Tuesday to start filming and I think there was only three people here, so it was all like 'grrrr!' But this is the nature of youth work.

## Distraction and the outside world

Esme, a member of the Mind group, told me:

Being in the house is just boring. You're lonely, and it's raining outside ... you're just in a bad mood, because you're not doing something, you're not out and about.

I asked young people, across all groups, what they would have been doing if they hadn't been coming to the sessions. The Junior Creatives at Astra said: messing about and getting into trouble, watching Netflix, eating.

I was interested in the 'getting into trouble' response. Did this mean that, since coming to My Pockets, this didn't happen as much?

No. Because you're busy.

And was that the key to it, did they think, keeping busy?

Definitely, yeah – this gives you a direction.

And the fact that you have total control over what you're doing.

Yeah, and the fact that instead of being *told* what to do you get to *choose* what you do, and that's more exciting.

For Abbie at Mind, the distraction took a different form:

It helps me concentrate. I'm usually rubbish at it. I literally can't concentrate on anything! It kinda takes me to a different place in my head. It helps me to forget things. Like, if I'm in a lot of stress with school and I just think about music or I just sing a song that I've got stuck in my head, that helps me forget about all the stress that I've got at school.

If coming to the music sessions helped her to concentrate and forget about things, what was the opposite of that? What was it like outside of them?

I annoy people. Like, I start having a go at them for no reason and then they have a go at *me* and I have a go back at them and go off on one. I don't get angry when I come here.

At the Beverley College performance, the keyboard player in the older group at Astra – Josh – explained that he was a children's football referee, but had given his apologies to the team that evening so he could come along to the event.

When I come to the sessions, my problems go away, because it's keeping my brain busy. I get it now and again when I'm at work too. I come here because I can play the keyboards. I'd never played them before.

At the same event, I also spoke to Shaun, Astra's singer on *Bus Ticket Blues*, who was still sofa-surfing. He told me:

My problem sort of disappears when I come to the group, because it's distracting. It's stress relief. When I'm singing about my problem, like with the Maccy D's song, it reminds you about it a little bit, but it also helps you see the lighter side of it. Certain parts of the problem stay inside me, but bits of it go away.

If his problem were an animal, I asked, what kind would it be? Not surprisingly, he replied:

It would be a hermit crab, because it's always on the move, going sideways looking for somewhere to be, and that's how my life has always been. I've lived in 52 different places and I'm only 23.

Pete Scott, youth worker at Astra, told me about a young person who recently returned after an absence that was related to issues going on with her nuclear family:

She's never touched any instruments, never really shown any interest, she'd sort of sat in the room and took a back seat. But she learned a few chords on the guitar and then, when the rest of the group went for a chill out, she stayed in and did some one-to-one stuff with Adam. And I think that was really as a distraction for her. You know, 'I can go and chat to the others and they're probably gonna quiz me about what's going on and am I all right and stuff, or I can carry on in here with guitar and just lose myself in the music for a couple of hours' and I think that's what she chose to do, which was great.

I was curious about *how* she had gone from 'taking a back seat' to choosing to learn chords. Pete recalled:

I think she took her usual role of just sitting and observing and then one of the guys said 'come on, you've been in this room, you're obviously interested – nobody's gonna laugh, grab the guitar and do what I do.' So she sort of did that, realised it's not as difficult as she thought ... and then she was keen to stay in there and do another hour.

He talked about how the group recorded all the different instruments and the vocals separately, then it was all brought together through software:

So, with them doing all that stuff separately, it also gives the young people some one-to-one time for conversation in between.

At Mind, Nicola felt the distraction was more about energy:

I think they love that energy level. It's different and there's the chance to be noisy. I mean, it's not for *every* young person. Sometimes it's just not their thing or they're just not as confident putting themselves forward in that way, which you get with young people ... you know, it just happens. It would be quite easy for someone to go 'oh I'm not going to turn up that week' but, because of the way the sessions are delivered, the less confident ones still come along. And, even though they might not be centre stage and they're trying all these weird instruments and things, they still join in, so I think there's still an element of feeding off that energy as well as feeding into it.

### 'Stickability'

It was clear, then, that not surprisingly many young people welcomed the distraction the sessions offered them. But I was interested in looking at how many of them stayed the course, particularly those who had not been referred, and how this compared with other displacement activities.

Emma Miles in Bridlington said seven of the original ten young people on the West Hill project had 'stuck it out to the end', but she was pleased with that:

I think that's still quite good out of ten. It was that coming back. I was encouraging the kids and saying 'each time you come back, if you put in the work, you're gonna see the finished thing' so I think on the video we've got six or seven kids, a mixture of genders.

Some of them have got behavioural problems. We have one lad that's constantly getting excluded from school. He's missed a couple of weeks but overall he's stuck with it. His mum comes with him, and his sister's involved as well, but he's an absolutely *brilliant* musician. He already had some sort of musical knowledge.

Some of the kids that come along come to everything we do. They're all in mainstream school [apart from the one above]. But the kids that initially came – when we had the 10 – some of them were ones that had issues with school. So one of them was on 1:1 tuition here, because he's not in mainstream school, but he dropped out.

That's the thing – it's getting them to commit to come in every fortnight and they moan ... 'oh, its boring.' The reason they feel that is because they're just learning one note. But actually bringing it all together is such fun, you know, doing the video and that. So I think it's just getting them ones to stick at it.

It wasn't really strict or anything and I put on food as well. The guys aren't like: 'right, you need to stay in this circle.' You know, there's some real freedom with it, definitely, but we're talking kids of sort of 11 or 12 and some

of them are younger, so it's just that stickability thing, and I think that *is* the problem up there on West Hill. It's just getting them to do anything and keeping them engaged, because they're all so engrossed in staying in and playing on video games or being on their scooters outside. Getting them to actually commit to something is a problem across the board.

I was interested to learn how My Pockets compared with other West Hill projects in terms of this 'stickability,' and Emma went on to tell me about various community activities her team had organised, including boxing, the 'beats bus', sports days, crafts, and community cooking. All of these had 'generally attracted massive crowds.'

For stuff that's just been for kids, like the boxing, I think we had the same amount as My Pockets, which was about 20 kids initially. It was packed. But the ones who actually *completed* the six week boxing programme and got their t-shirts was probably about half of that, about ten, because again it was that same thing where people drop out.

My thinking was that this was possibly symptomatic of the age we were living in, where young people wanted instant results and had low boredom thresholds. Did Emma agree?

Yeah, I think that's right. But I feel that the more we do it and the more they see the results, the more they're prepared to work for it. I think once I air that video online, young people are gonna say 'I wish I'd have stuck at that.' When we watched it here last night, I thought: 'oh, I'm just so proud of ya!'

She went on to talk about teenagers in particular:

It would be great to have teens doing it. There's a group of them that hang around this bus stop – 13, 14 yrs old – one of them's only about 11 but he *looks* about 13, and he recently won a rapping competition. So they like rap and freestyle. There's no reason why that couldn't be incorporated into something like this. If we could look at that and say why don't we do something musical where they're actually rapping on top, it would be brilliant. That's how I think you're gonna get them sort of kids.

There certainly seemed to be potential around this. For example, the youth worker at Child Dynamix, Paul Clark, was experienced in rap and hip hop, and it was primarily for this reason that My Pockets had been keen to get him on board. When I visited a Child Dynamix session, Paul was being very helpful with guiding the young people through their lyrics.

The person I spoke to who struggled with 'stickability' the most was Tia, a group member at Mind. As a peer mentor, she was only interested in the 'stuff that teaches you about mental health – I just love learning about the brain!' She said:

I just wanna get as much experience as I can so it helps me in the future – because I want a bright future. I wanna do well in life. I'm not a creative person. I do listen to music – all music – like Sam Smith ... I can relate to what he sings.

**Lyrics, self expression and mood** | upbeat | downbeat | suicidal thoughts | writing | music outside of My Pockets

Pete Scott, youth leader at Astra, summed up the lyric writing process:

Shane leads on the lyrics, really. So, Adam might come up with some kind of beat and then Shane'll just sort of prompt them with 'what's going on in your life at the minute? what are you up to? exam pressures, relationships, what's going on? let's talk about it' and then in a sort of jokey way he'll start putting it into lyrics ...

And then, you know, they'll say 'that's daft' or 'I like that bit' or 'can we change it to this?' and it'll prompt the generation of the lyrics. So he'll write them down as quick as he can while they're talking and then it comes up to some sort of verse and a chorus and it grows from there, really.

Some of the lyrics, particularly in the Seniors, are a bit silly at times and they just wanna sort of recite Christmas songs, so it's like 'well, if you wanna do a Christmas song, let's do a Christmas song,' but this is in October.

There's a young person who'll take control and they'll maybe throw out other people's suggestions, and then that'll get challenged, because everybody needs to have input and stuff ... But everybody's had the chance to contribute. Seventy five per cent of the lyrics will probably come from two or three that are really keen to be creative, but yeah, the others have contributed.

For Kieran at Child Dynamix, the most important part was using lyrics to work through his emotions:

My favourite band is Little Mix and I used to really like their happy, positive songs. Now, since I've been coming here and thinking about break-up songs, I've been listening to more of their break-up songs. But I think that's good, because I think writing songs when you're going through a break-up is a good way of working through it – it helps you think about how you're feeling and thinking about your emotions. So I'm thinking about song lyrics more.

I noticed how this contrasted with the Market Weighton group, where the bereaved young people wanted up-beat lyrics, and they had created a juxtaposition between sad verses and a more up tempo *Lift yourself* chorus.

At Mind, group leader Nicola told me:

It's being able to share their own frustrations, their own experiences, their own feelings and stuff and being able to have a voice, because young people don't always get listened to, really. So I think for them, especially a couple of

them in particular, they felt they wanted to share and it's been really good for them to have that empathy.

Sasha, in the Mind group, told me how the sessions had broadened her musical horizons:

I always listen to 90s music. Like, I don't listen to any of the new stuff. But they [MP] do kinda newish sorta stuff, so I listen to stuff like that as well now.

It was already clear that learning music in the My Pockets environment was very different from school, but how did the creative writing and lyrics fit in?

Kieran's cousin Nakita (Child Dynamix) told me that at one time she 'thought she might like to be an author,' but then ...

... they told me at school my writing was rubbish, so then I didn't do that no more. Now I'm really into the music and I've got lyrics coming into my head all the time.

Her friend Katie, also Child Dynamix, said she too had 'songs coming into her head all the time.'

In the Lollypop group, friends Skylar and Alex referred to writing about coming out:

If we were writing the lyrics at school we probably wouldn't be writing about *this*, because people at school would probably be a bit weird about it ...

... Yeah, they'd be like 'you're still rubbing it in our faces.'

Had either of them written about their issues outside of the group? Alex said:

I kinda want to write music when I'm older but I've not really tried it. Like, I've thought about lyrics in my head but I've never written them down ... I've just never really had time, because I've had a lot of school work. It's like, if I started it, I'd want to finish.

In Bridlington, home educated Rory immediately volunteered to work on the lyrics. However, he preferred to do so on his own, rather than with the rest of the group:

I can concentrate more on my own and think better. When I was in school and we used to do writing, my ideas just never got put onto it, even though I'd speak out. I like focussing – I don't like being sat in a school room with loads of people.

I remembered how, at Child Dynamix, youth worker Paul had helped the young people on a one-to-one basis in an ante room. Going forward, this approach could be offered as an alternative for young people who felt less confident about contributing in the group.

At Market Weighton, writing lyrics was allowing bereaved young people to deal directly with their grief. One of the group, 15 yr old Poppy, had unexpectedly lost her father a few months earlier, following what was meant to be just a short stay in hospital. Her experience was at the heart of the group's lyrics:

*woke up in the night / to be told you were gone / from me*

although, as the whole group was keen for there to be an upbeat message, a change of tempo brought the chorus:

*lift yourself / don't wanna to be lonely / really sad / but I wanna be happy*

A few weeks later, at the screening of the group's video in Beverley, Poppy said the whole experience of being with My Pockets had changed the music she listened to at home:

When I first started in the group, I was listening to sad music, but now I try to listen to more uplifting music. I definitely found the lyric writing helpful. I'd never tried it before. A lot of songs are about break-ups and losing someone that you're in a relationship with. But then, once my dad died, I started interpreting them differently and thinking of the losing being about losing my dad, not about losing a person in a romantic relationship.

Poppy went on to say that, because her GCSEs were coming up, she 'wasn't really continuing with music or lyric writing at the minute,' although, as her proud mum added, 'after this, it spurred her on to do more singing, so she started having singing lessons.'

Another member of this Market Weighton group, 15 yr old Amy, explained that she had 'only started coming along because Poppy had suggested it.' In a sensitive conversation around suicidal thoughts, Amy told me:

I was in a situation where I just didn't want to be here, and Poppy was the same, so we support each other and coming here has helped me a lot.

Bearing in mind this group's chorus, and also recalling Kieran's comments at Child Dynamix about Little Mix, it seemed quite important that the song was uplifting, rather than sad: did Amy think it would be fair to say that?

Yes, that's right, because when I was going through a bad time and feeling really down, all I could listen to was miserable songs that matched that mood. But now I've been coming along to this group I've started listening to more positive things.

Mark, from the same Market Weighton group, had also found the lyric writing helpful:

It allows me to talk about stuff and get stuff out and try to explain things.

All three of the young people I spoke to in this group said that if the project was based on something other than music, it might not be the same, because music was good for expressing their thoughts and emotions.

However, I found that using lyrics to work through grief did not work for everyone. As home-educated Brandon in Bridlington told me:

The part where it was talking about the dad, that made me a bit sad, since I don't have a dad any more, and I don't like thinking about it, because I just see so many flashbacks.

Nevertheless, he did like the *idea* of putting words and music together, saying it was 'quite good, because it gets your mind thinking,' and he linked the process to his obsession with his X-box:

It's like doing a maze in a game. It's like you don't know where the end is. You don't know where you're going, even though you've built it yourself and it makes no sense and you just don't know where the exit is.

At Mind, although Sasha liked some of the lyrics her peers came up with, she preferred to take a bit of a back seat:

I was here when they was writing the lyrics, but I don't know what to say. They was all doing, like, personal stuff ... you know. I don't like talking to people about anything.

I wondered whether she did any writing at home, where she could keep 'personal stuff' to herself?

I used to write stories, just about anything. But then I stopped. I go on my keyboard at home and just kinda like play some songs.

In the home-educated group, where Brandon had found the lyric writing uncomfortable, for some of the young people it was positive:

I like that I can hear about lots of different things that have happened in other people's lives. [Sasha]

I've tried writing my own lyrics but I couldn't think what to write about so I got sort of stuck. But it's helped now, seeing the process here. [Phoebe]

Esme at Mind had a similar experience to Phoebe:

I tried writing a song by myself before, but it just didn't work. Didn't work in the slightest!

She did, however, come up with the chorus to the group's song, which was all based around the expectations placed on young people:

I was just mumbling something to myself while various ideas were being bandied about, then one of the guys said 'hang on, *what* was that?'

The lyrics were, as peer group member Charlie explained, 'mostly targeted towards girls – *wear your skirt past your knees* and stuff' – and he had very little input to them:

... but that was OK with me, because I'm happy playing keyboard.

Esme went on to tell me how she had had another go at writing her own song at home:

I tried it the other week and it worked, but it made me *really* upset, because I chose too much of a real topic. I'm gonna return to it though.

And will she carry *on* trying?

Yeah. I might even carry on with that topic ... like, 'it's OK, it's gonna be fine.'

Esme was absent in the first lyric-writing session, but:

I think they were saying there was no such thing as perfect – and Abbie argues, like, 'what is perfect?!' – because people had different expectations of you.

When I chatted to Abbie one-to-one, I picked up on this issue of perfection:

I don't really think there's any such thing as perfect. I mean, people say things like 'they're the perfect child' when there's no such thing as a perfect child. But apart from that ... well, I mean, if people wanna *think* they're the perfect child, then go for it.

She went on to tell me she 'came up with half the lyrics,' and I was interested to know if she also wrote at home:

Yeah, I write about my life. I write about ... like, I write it in a song, like in a story sort of way.

It was Abbie who had earlier told me about her plans to possibly 'write and upload it on Spotify and stuff.'

At the Potting Shed performance event, I spoke to the parents of Harriet, another member of this Mind group, who told me she was on the autistic spectrum, having been diagnosed at the age of six, and 'soaked everything up like a sponge.' I wondered whether, at home, she expressed herself in written words in any way?

No, not really ... but she does a lot of drawing. Like, at the weekend, she wrote a lot of her feelings around this artwork and it was pretty amazing.

I found it curious that this written response to the artwork was not seen as Harriet expressing herself in writing. It could be interesting to explore the possibility of young people writing about the experience of coming up with song lyrics.

Towards the end of my conversation with Harriet's parents, they said:

Her support worker said how when kids with autism are on screens they feel safe and when they're off the screens, they feel so unsafe in the world.

Meanwhile, Harriet was busy chatting with peer group members Abbie and Charlie, and Mum confirmed: 'She's also seemed to keep in with some of the others from the Mind course as well.'

Nicola, the Mind group's project leader, talked to me about the song lyrics and reflected on the young people's thoughts about perfection and expectations:

We had a conversation to see if we could get a bit more depth around that, and actually they were really quite open about some of the stuff, which was good, because I didn't know how well that would go in terms of how open they would be and how much they would want to share – but they did, and it did get quite deep.

It sounded as though this direct approach was something not to be shied away from? Nicola explained:

I think it depends on what issues they're having. It comes back to that energy. Peter's so open about things and I've always encouraged them in the group: 'you *can* share'. So we've had that kind of understanding already. But sometimes yeah, not shying away from it and saying it like it is – especially with teenagers – they really appreciate that.

Nicola went on to tell me about the song created by the Beverley Mind group:

Where that song stemmed from kind of surprised me. There was a girl who didn't really want to sing, but she was like: 'oh yeah, *this* happened' – because it was about meeting a boy and things. She was quite happy to explore that and have those conversations.

She added the very slight reservation:

I do think sometimes Peter gets something in *his* head that they don't necessarily always follow through with completely, but I do think they need that extra guidance, that formulation, because they haven't necessarily got

those skills themselves. I think because he's using their ideas then that kind of balances it out.

Although Tia, a volunteer in Nicola's Mind group (not to be confused with a young member of the group with the same name) had only joined in two sessions when I spoke to her, she had already picked up on the benefits to the young people:

Sometimes it can be hard to talk to someone about the way you're feeling, but by putting it into a song and just sitting down with them, it gets more out of them. It gives them a way to express themselves without that scary confrontation. It's a way for them to get their feelings out in a fun way and take their mind off it all. They can relate to each other and know it's not just *them* having these typical teenager problems ... it's normal.

The 'saying it like it is' approach was also clearly appreciated at Astra, where Pete Scott told me about the Seniors:

The lyrics were heading along the lines of 'you might *think* you want a big house, fast car and this, that and the other, but think about people who are less fortunate than you.' And there's a young lad called Tom who comes nearly every week who's not particularly musical but he likes the project, and he said: 'well yeah, because it's all just like material stuff and basically that's not what makes you happy – it's warmth and friendship and love' and all like that. He said: 'we need to put summat like that into the lyrics, because it just sounds like we're listing loads of things that everybody wants and then we've got just a line or two at the end saying that's not what life's all about, but let's talk a bit more about what life *is* about ...'

So, it sparks conversations and debates, and it's interesting what they come out with. The Seniors are generally all from this estate [Bransholme]. They've done a lot of projects with us and this one particularly has brought out a lot of conversation starters. It's surprising how many of them are dealing with the same sort of issues. It all comes out in the session and then they put it into lyrics.

I wondered whether any of these issues were new to Pete?

Not necessarily no, but they're probably issues they don't talk about as much as they would do. Shane in particular is fantastic at drawing the lyrics out of them. For instance, if they said 'tonight I don't feel like going out, I just wanna be on my own,' then he'll say 'why?' because the next line needs to be a little bit explaining why. Then the next line after that could maybe be 'well how do you turn that around?' and 'how do you feel if you turn that around?' and 'how does that impact on other people?' ... You know, and that's how he gets the lyrics, because he asks questions and they're real down to earth lyrics that they come up with in the end.

At Lollypop, Dave Brown told me it was a similar situation and that ‘the kids were putting in different lines, so they all had an involvement, which was good, so they’ll all feel part of it.’ He added that some of the young people were ‘very arty and like doing poems and things like that.’

In Bridlington, the group created lyrics based on old text messages. More is said about this under **Phones** (page 34).

## Singing

There was quite a split around this. One or two young people actively enjoyed singing, while others (a larger proportion) took the view 'oh OK, go on then, *somebody's* got to do it.' However, some of those in this latter group left me wondering whether they really did take on the singing role quite unwillingly, or whether actually they were secretly quite pleased.

I explored this at the Lollypop session, with a girl referred to here as Alex 2, who told me:

That's pretty much what I do – show up once, play the ukulele, go away again. I like singing and I can play the ukulele, but I'm shy.

Out of earshot of the group and using her iPad, Alex 2 shared her singing skills with me. They were good. Why, I wondered, did she come just the once and then go away again?

Because I didn't feel they needed me around.

In an earlier conversation, 'the other Alex' (friend of Skylar), had told me how the role of singing had fallen to her because 'the person who was singing doesn't come any more.' Presumably, this was Alex 2. Frustratingly, I was unable to follow it up, because I had no further sessions at Lollypop, but I was left wondering whether perhaps singing could/should be brought more to the fore, along with instrumental skills? For example, at Astra, Pete Scott, had told me how Shaun – serendipitous singer on Bus Ticket Blues – had 'sung more confidently the second time round, when Peter [Snelling] was joining in.'

There was a similar story at Market Weighton, where 15 yr old Poppy showed an interest in singing but hadn't done much of it outside of school, so was a bit apprehensive. Over the coming weeks, musician Katie sang alongside her, giving her tips and encouragement until she had recorded the group's whole song. (See also page 21.)

Interestingly, when youth leader Pete Scott talked about his own singing, he said:

I don't mind singing, but I haven't sung with any of the kids, because obviously that's one of the roles that the kids wanna get.

'Obviously'? This was definitely a grey area from my perspective and I wondered whether it varied from group to group. Adam told me:

There are three or four girls at Astra who progressed not only on their instrument but vocally as well. They've got to the point where when we turn up for the lessons they're not only there, but they're there practising. For instance, there was a couple of girls that had written their own song (together). We hadn't been there and we came back and so we had a listen to it and told them how they could maybe progress it. It didn't end up going anywhere, but they'd attempted it, you know, they'd done it themselves off their own bat, they'd just got into it.

**Instruments** | percussion a quick safe way in | variety | instruments at home

My Pockets' project model is a very different approach to music. The standard route is, as Shane explained: 'you learn an instrument, get better at it, then you join a band. Whereas here, you form the band and you get better at it as you go along.'

The tried and tested way in is through a combination of percussion, enthusiasm and going with the flow. Certainly, for me, joining in with percussion was a great way of subtly engaging with the group: usually tambourine, as even the ukulele was a bridge too far for my coordination skills.

It was the same for Pete Scott at Astra, who said:

As a youth worker, you've got to get involved. If you're hoping the individuals are gonna get involved, you've got to get involved yourself. I'm always conscious that I make a boo-boo though, aren't you? You know, that I sort of take it out of rhythm or whatever! But then again, that's what the kids come up against, isn't it? That's what *they're* facing. I'm just a tambourine man – that's easy enough, isn't it?

At Mind, volunteer Tia told me she had learned 'loads of different stuff!' I had seen her playing ukulele, the cajòn, and keyboards, so wondered whether she'd ever played an instrument prior to sitting in on the sessions:

No, never! But the people are really friendly, Adam especially, and he taught me the ukulele in my first week.

Also at Mind, Harriet (on the autistic spectrum) told me that, although she had an acoustic guitar at home, she 'got bored of it very soon.' For her, it seemed to matter very little what the actual instrument was, as long as she was trying a variety:

I've tried a keyboard and that didn't really work. I've tried a xylophone. I've also tried that cajòn thing and I think I've tried the triangle as well.

Harriet's dad told me he thought the project had been good for her:

She enjoys music, she likes the keyboard, and now she's discovered the African drums. I just think *everything* to do with music's beneficial, at the end of the day.

For Sasha, the most shy member of the same group, it was a case of settling for 'being OK with what she was already doing' [percussion]:

I'd like to have a go at keyboard or try guitar, but everyone wants to be on keyboard and stuff like that.

Pete Scott at Astra certainly appreciated 'the box of tricks' that My Pockets brought:

The guys always bring plenty of instruments. Here at the Centre we've got a drum kit, a couple of keyboards, one guitar and a ukulele, but everything else is brought by My Pockets. So then they're able to double up on the instruments, meaning one person can teach the other something. Again, limited to what we've got, we can't do without them instruments really.

Two young girls at Astra, who didn't take part initially, ended up playing the drums and enjoying it and one got a drum kit for Christmas. As Adam said:

That's what we're trying to push, really – to be creative, to broaden their own horizons and to get their family or friends into it as well. There was a couple of them that was expecting to get their own instruments at Christmas, maybe a guitar or keyboards, and another one was getting a set of drums.

Having instruments at home was not always welcomed by the rest of the household, as Skylar at Lollipop told me:

If I played at home I'd get 'shut up – the tuba's too loud!'

This reminded me of Danny at Astra, whose mum was not keen on having drums in the house. As his youth worker Pete Scott said: 'It's one of them things where you've got to have the space and have understanding neighbours.'

On the West Hill estate in Bridlington, Scarlett's mum told me:

Scarlett had never played an instrument before she started going. In fact, because of this, I bought her a guitar on her birthday, because she wanted one and she wants to start lessons now. Also, we got a keyboard at Christmas as a present from my cousin.

Pete Scott at Astra said:

And then the guys bring the expertise, don't they? You know, they talking about learning chords and bars. I mean, it goes above my head, but the kids really enjoy it! Sometimes they're worried about taking part because they can't do it or they're no good at it. And that's another thing that the musicians are really good at – they're really patient and they say "there's no can't, it's always won't" ... you know, give it a go.

When I asked Scarlett's mum about the My Pockets expertise, she told me:

Oh, their patience! Patience is everything. I mean, kids and instruments, that's a bad recipe, isn't it? But they've been excellent.

## School | home education | My Pockets tuition

'Home educated' divided into two categories: those who were home educated by full parental choice, and those where the situation could perhaps be seen as 'exclusion in disguise.' Nonetheless, the young people often had underlying family issues in common:

My dad's awful. He doesn't give my mum child benefits and he never sees me and he's a drug dealer. I wish I didn't have a dad. I never even see him, so I basically don't.

I've got two dads but I don't know where they are. I know one of them got put in jail.

Several of the home educated young people referred to the comparatively slower pace:

When you're home educated, you've got a lot of spare time on your hands.  
[James, Home-ed Brid]

I went to school for five years of primary and then I came out right before Year 6. At school they want you to do it fast because the lessons are set times, but where we have the two hours here, they're more easy going, they explain more than what I've been through in school. [Rory, Home-ed Brid]

It wasn't a choice to be home-schooled. My mum just pulled me out, because I was being bullied and I've been at home for just over a month now. You don't have to go real fast when you're home educated, really. It's all at your own pace and you've just got as many hours as you really need.  
[Brandon, Home-ed Brid]

So, it seemed that the My Pockets approach fitted the home-ed slower pace ethos, whilst for young people in mainstream education it came as a welcome change.

At The Market Weighton School, Amy explained:

It's more focussed here [in the sessions] and it gives you the opportunity to learn different things and have a bit of fun at the same time.

For youth worker Pete Scott at Astra, flexibility and lack of pressure were key:

That's the difference between a school and a youth centre. Here, the youth workers dip in and out of the session. If the young people don't want to take part one week, for whatever reason, there's no pressure on them. We still sort of pursue them and maybe try and get to the underlying reasons why they're feeling a bit different or acting a bit different, but ultimately it's up to them whether they want to take part in it. And taking part in it could be five minutes a week or it could be the full two hours a week, depending on how

much they want to engage. We like them to do an hour of the project and then have an hour chill time if they want it, but it's up to them.

It's absolutely not like them being at school. The guys are really flexible and I think it's more children-led. They've said what they want to do and they've had the input into the lyrics, how the video's going, what musical instruments are going to be played, and that's been right through the full thing, which has been good.

At Mind, Nicola explained how the My Pockets sessions complemented ones directly related to mental health:

We have one-to-one support, sort of therapy, and we have the young people's group stuff that I run, which is more like psych education, so I try to keep those interactive as much as I can – like we might make something creative – so there's 'this is what mental health is, what experiences we might have ourselves'. That side's more kind of educational, a school like way.

[There was one young person in this group who much preferred this 'psych ed' side. See Tia, page 19]

Whereas with this I think they've got that freedom to do whatever, and it can be whatever ... kind of structured in a non-structured way. I think that kind of thing really suits young people, because they've got that creativity and that imagination to be able to kind of explore that, and I think that's what makes it different. And it's music and it's fun. It's not coming into a course to learn – they're actually learning without realising they're learning.

For me, Nicola had hit the nail on the head. One minute everything could seem focussed and quite serious, then the next minute everyone was larking about again ... it was all part and parcel of how it worked so well.

At The Market Weighton School, Shane was 'blown away' by how quickly Amy had learned something on the keyboard. He had written letters on the keys to help her along.

She just picked something up really quick that took me ages to learn when I was at college! It was all felt tip and dog-eared bits of paper ... but it seemed to work!

Along the way, I had picked up that, whilst the 'dog-eared bits of paper' could to some extent be put down to general untidiness, it seemed more likely this was all part of the underlying 'organised chaos' approach. Lots of things might *look* like they were off the cuff, but actually they had been very well thought through. The dog-eared lyric notes were in keeping with the open, informal approach. Putting them in a neat plastic folder would border on it like being in school. Amid all the paper-shuffling, the young people could also see there were other groups, with other lyrics, making everything feel less pressured.

I was learning here, matching comments from youth workers and young people alongside what was put in place. There was, for example, much more to what was seen by some as 'messaging about for the first 20 minutes' than just messaging about. It was clear that at Astra, Pete Scott understood all this and could see there was a structure from start to finish. My Pockets' method of holding that structure in an environment of freedom – even when some of that freedom was achieved through smoke and mirrors – felt key to the project's success.

## Phones

The use of phones first began to interest me when Charlie at Mind, talking about what he would otherwise be doing, told me: 'I have my phone, which is what I usually do, but ...' His use of the word 'do' intrigued me. When it came to distractions, did the young people use their phones simply because there was nothing better on offer, or did they choose to go on them, because they enjoyed it?

One of Astra's Young Creatives told me that, if she were not in the group (or going to majorettes), she would 'probably just play on her phone or listen to music.' Had being in these sessions and away from her phone made her think differently about how she used it?

Yeah, I think I use it too much. I'm on it nearly all the time, apart from when I'm in lessons. I think it's because it gives me something to do. But then I also enjoy being on it ... because it gives me something to do! It's a bit annoying really!

Rather than ban the use of phones in sessions, the musicians actively incorporated them where appropriate.

At Market Weighton, Shane told me:

They all learned what the notes were, picked up the notes and tuned instruments by listening through a phone app, and listening to the playback of the recording they'd done the previous week.

I noticed this approach was used regularly, across the board, with phones being a helpful tool.

On the West Hill estate, phones had a particularly important role, as youth worker Emma Miles explained to me:

They wrote the lyrics using their old text messages. So whoever had a phone, they got them to bring their phone in and then they wrote the lyrics from them. So it's 'mum gave birth at half past two' and stuff! Just little messages. They've put it all together in a rhyme. The chorus is '*ding ding ding and beep beep beep / our phones never sleep*' and the actual video was each kid holding up their messages on the phone. It was good, really good.

I asked Emma whether the young people had shown much desire to go on their phones for general use, given that they had brought them into sessions: 'No, no.' This fitted with my observation at sessions in general. Although some of the young people had phones with them, they were looking at them significantly less than the stereotypical young person – and indeed adult – in the 'outside world,' which to me suggested a degree not only of self discipline but also of respect for the facilitators.

Emma went on to tell me:

This woman rang me last night and said had I got anything for her 13 yr old daughter: 'I wanna get my kid away from her console, so I really wanna get her involved in community.'

At the same time, I was also mindful of the input from Harriet's parents, who had been advised that 'when kids with autism are on screens, they feel safe.'

Going forward, it might be interesting to tap in now and then into the young people's views about phones.

## **My Pockets - the team** from three perspectives

### The musicians' perspective

I began by talking to Adam, who also rehearses with Shane in a local band, and asked whether being part of the team had helped him develop in any way:

Definitely. Progressing on the instrument every time I pick it up. Having that freedom to go in and just make things up is progressing as a musician. In the band, me and Shane are trying to write songs and stuff like that, and I think sometimes we find it easier to do it with the kids, because they're sort of brimming with ideas. They've all got different things going on and if we introduce a chord or a melody or *some* sort of structure to their lesson, then it progresses in a way that whatever they say or do helps us get on with the lesson in terms of making something new.

Adam and Shane have known each other 'for years and years,' since their college days, so I wondered whether, in terms of My Pockets, this was a different way of working together?

Yeah definitely. Because there's a certain level of professionalism we need to use and ... One thing is, Shane's been a teacher before. I've done teaching but never full classroom teaching, so I'm learning a lot off him and Peter.

What were the key things he had learned from Shane?

I think temperament. I'm not a temperament sort of person but ... well, knowing how to deal with children and what they're going through, really. So when there are certain issues – it might be that they're acting up or playing up, trying to impress friends sometimes maybe – I guess I've found little ways to maybe stop them being disruptive, whether it be something like just taking them to one side and asking them personally whether there's something going on, is there something we could help with.

Shane, on the other hand, had joined My Pockets after 15 years of teaching in further education, so already had 'lots of realisations you get from working with young people.' However:

As this is not as regimented and the relationship is different, I think we get to appreciate more the situations these young people find themselves in.

At a more personal level, Shane said:

I feel I'm continually developing in terms of my own production and feeling more of an advocate for the organisation as opposed to someone who just works for someone else.

Thinking back to what Adam had told me, I flipped it around and asked Shane whether it

was different working alongside him on the project, compared with writing/performing in their band. He told me:

I find it amusing how much doubt Adam has when he clearly brings a lot to the table. He's very relaxed and non threatening to the young people, he has lots of different knowledge of various instruments, and he's learning from Peter and myself. It's different to the band, because when he's on his bass he shows no signs of self doubt.

This resonated with feedback I had gathered in various places: whilst people saw Shane (or Peter, where attending) as taking more of a lead, they appreciated Adam's calm, kind approach. Pete Scott at Astra said:

Adam's quite new to working with young people, but equally as brilliant at working with them, really. He's really patient with the kids.

Picking up on the issue of pastoral care that had been coming through in my observations and interviews, I asked Shane to tell me a bit about his own approach. He had many years' experience, but was it different in a My Pockets session?

I really do take a personal approach. I gauge how much I can challenge people and generally am firm but fair when it comes to behaviour that's beyond young people being young people and spilling over into disruption of other people's experience.

If anyone was upset, I'd attempt to be a listening ear, but this would depend on the relationship we've built up. If someone is very quiet generally I would encourage them to get more involved, but respecting that some people should be free to sit at the back and observe and process the experience in a way they're comfortable with.

How would he describe the role that he and Adam played?

I'd say it's our role to make music with young people by being able to assess entry behaviour and set achievable but challenging goals to get the best music out of the young person as we can.

Alongside this is relationship building, being a mentor, a non judgmental ear, and occasionally we should inspire them to want to do more music in their own lives beyond our project.

This last point is certainly exemplified by drummer Danny at Astra, who Shane has continued to mentor.

Unlike Shane and Adam, Katie is primarily a film maker and has worked on fewer My Pockets sessions. Nevertheless, she has solid experience:

I've worked with vulnerable young people and adults for over ten years now. However, this has been one of the most rewarding projects I've taken part in. It's not often I get to work as a musician, so that aspect of it is really enjoyable for me and, unlike film, it helps people to express themselves without even having to say a word. I think I've learned a lot about the resilience of young people and to me that's been very inspiring.

I was interested in hearing more about the young people's resilience and her experience of their self expression. She told me:

The bereavement group we worked with [Market Weighton] was completely different for me. I was nervous of how we would handle the subject or even how the young people would handle it. But Peter took the lead with that and I learned a lot from observing and being a part of the group. It was eye opening, emotional and lots of fun too.

This fed back into what others had told me about not shying away from taking an open, direct approach to the issues young people were dealing with.

Much like Adam, Katie's approach to handling different types of behaviour was very much based on gentleness:

It's always important to show kindness, understanding and compassion. If someone is being disruptive *or* quiet, then I think it's important to address this quietly and by not making a huge deal out of it. If someone is upset, you give them the space to be able to talk if they want to. If someone is being disruptive, I try to include them like everyone else and ignore the bad behaviour so it doesn't get the attention it deserves. If it gets too much then I would address it away from anyone else and again give them space to talk if they need to.

She added that, as she was a friendly person, she had found it easy to engage with young people, which she considered one of her strengths when working on this project.

What did she see as her key role?

I generally work with and encourage singers, ukulele players or pianists in sessions and help them to write lyrics. But I think one of my most important roles is to make the participants feel at ease and relaxed.

### The staff perspective

It was quite difficult to disentangle people's feedback on the team itself – 'the guys' – from the organisation per se. Nevertheless, it confirmed things I had observed. At Lollypop, Dave Brown told me:

They're all different characters ... it kinda works. Peter's the more bubbly one and gets the kids involved and then the other two guys are really good with the musical instruments, showing them what to do and that kind of side of it. But the kids seem to have gelled really well with all the guys.

I asked Dave how important he thought it was to have musicians who did this for a living, as opposed to bringing in someone who was just good at playing instruments:

I think that helps massively. Obviously they're showing them the right way to do it and if the young people are struggling with a certain thing, they can say 'look, why don't you try this, or maybe think about doing this, or tweaking this?' They did that with Lily and the guitar and I think Lily's guitar playing has come on from that as well and hopefully Lily will keep that going.

Emma Miles, youth leader at West Hill, said:

I think they're great guys and I like the fact that they're relaxed and not taking things too seriously. They love what they do and that always helps, doesn't it?

Pete Scott at Astra told me:

I think Peter goes and chases the ones that are not taking part a bit more than Adam and Shane. Say we've got a group of 12 kids and maybe seven of them are in the room, Peter'll go round with his ukulele and sort of do summat daft and get the kids to react and he'll go 'well, *you* could be part of this' or whatever, whereas Adam and Shane will stay in the music room and they'll just accept who wants to take part and who doesn't. I think there's pros and cons to both approaches.

Nicola at Mind was slightly more hesitant (although I could tell that, like Pete Scott, she had good insight into the overall process). She told me:

I think it was more difficult for Adam last week, because obviously he didn't have Peter there and, as far as I'm aware, it was the first time he'd delivered a group like that on his own. But I think it does work well, especially when there's Peter or Shane there to bounce things back and forth. They know their stuff and they listen to the young people and balance that out as well as being able to rein them in when they need to.

I later learned that it had been a conscious decision to hold Shane back, so that Adam had to take more of a lead. In the following session at Mind, I saw that Adam was clearly finding his feet, and as the weeks went by, across various groups, I watched him grow in confidence, whilst maintaining that calm, patient manner that the young people warmed to.

At Astra, I asked Pete Scott whether he thought it helped that Shane grew up on Bransholme?

I think it *does*, yeah. He's very grounded, is Shane. I know he's kind of moved on to other things now, but I think he thinks back to when he was younger and when he was growing up on the estate, and he understands the things that these kids are dealing with, because he's dealt with a few of them himself.

[Similarly, I noted that Katie lived in Howden, making it easier for the young people in the East Riding to relate to her, and vice versa.]

And then, obviously him and Adam are musicians, so I think their job is to sort of teach young people how to play basic instruments and then to coach them into creating this song, but then at the same time they have the personal conversations with the young people. You know, maybe about why they're not feeling up to taking part tonight or ... you know, maybe there's some drama in the group where somebody's fell out with somebody else, or something's spilled over from school and they're finding that hard to get over and it's affecting the session. So it's not all about them just coming and learning to play guitar, because that's not always what the kids want – sometimes they just want a sounding board to talk to – and that's what we're here for.

As youth workers, we need people like Adam and Shane and Pete that can play instruments, because there *is* a demand for music and we can't provide that. You know, *we've* got different skills – computers, sports and stuff – every youth worker's sort of got a specialism in a way and none of us, at the minute, are really musicians, so it really does fill a gap for us.

Dave Brown at Lollypop summed up the thoughts of all the youth workers when he said:

They're like part of the furniture now! I'd absolutely love them to keep coming.

It seems it goes much further than musicianship. What also makes a good My Pockets team member is authenticity and flexibility. As Dave Brown said, they *are* 'all completely different characters.' Refreshingly, they are not made from the same mould. They spark off one another and seem to be interchangeable depending on the needs of any given group. Undoubtedly, all three of them feel empowered by the trust that is placed in them (which mirrors the way they interact with the young people). In such a nurturing environment, it makes it easier for them to take ownership and feel safe when making decisions – all of which paves the way to keeping things fresh, evolving and growing.

### Staff involvement

I had noticed that, in the sessions I went along to, staff involvement varied from place to place. So I was interested to find out whether this was by My Pockets' choice, or whether it

was down to youth workers needing to be in two places at once.

At Astra, Pete Scott told me how he often felt guilty:

We do quite often leave them to it, because there's other young people in the building that don't always take part and they need engaging. Like, there might be reasons why they're not taking part and they might wanna talk or they might just not want to do it that week or whatever, but a lot of the time, because Adam and Shane are musicians and they know what they're doing, they do get left to it a bit in the music room.

So I do feel a bit guilty about that, because sometimes Shane'll come find me and say 'oh, what do you think to this, and what do you think to that?' and I sort of feel like I should be in there all the time ...

But sometimes I'm just like a bit of a spare part and so when I have things like, say, an educational visit for a forthcoming pantomime trip, I'm just gonna disappear and do that.

They've never said it, but I hope they don't *feel* we leave them high and dry. Because they have everything they need and they're leading on that part of the session, so sometimes it's the right thing to do, just to leave them to get on with it. We've known them for long enough now and I'm sure they'd tell us ... they're honest enough to say 'we could have done with you in there.'

Picking up on Shane coming to find Pete to ask his opinion on something, I wondered what Shane himself thought to staff presence? He said:

When staff are supportive it makes the experience smoother and occasionally when staff get too involved it can be a distraction.

Katie told me that, in the groups she had been involved with, 'the staff came and went.' At Market Weighton, where 'a lady would drop in to deliver snacks for break time,' she felt the staff were just there to inform them what the group was and tell them about any specific circumstances, although they were always on hand if the team had any serious problems with behaviour or if something was not working.

Adam appreciated the fact that he learned to deal with the young people – which he said he 'guessed could be bordering on social work' – not just by working with Shane, but also through the staff:

They're always helpful, especially at Astra and Mind, and the staff at Lollypop are amazing. They come in and out, see what's going on, and they're always pretty aware. We always talk to them at beginnings and ends of sessions.

At the Mind sessions I attended, Nicola was present (sometimes with volunteer, Tia). She felt: 'maybe it helps, me being there, because I know the young people.'

When he was telling me about Peter 'going round with a ukulele and doing summat daft', Pete Scott said:

We're doing a lot of that as well, trying to stimulate the ones that aren't in the music project and find out maybe why and try and encourage them to be part of it, so ... I don't know ... maybe we just *let* Peter do that when he's here and then when he's not here we pick up that role.

Pete was also clearly affected on a personal level:

To be honest, I've been inspired by Shane and Adam. Adam went to a different school but he's the same age as me and I didn't know him before this. I'd love to be that creative. You know, just to pick up all them different instruments and lose yourself in the music every so often and just have a bit of a release.

My release was always sport. I just went and bashed somebody about on a rugby field and got my frustrations out, then had a drink afterwards and had the friendship and the camaraderie. But Adam just picking up an instrument and having a bit of a jam is another way, isn't it? It's great.

In that case, I wondered, might Pete be getting a guitar for Christmas?

Not with these fingers, no! Plus I've got three young kids – aged two, five and nine – so at the minute I just don't have time to do things like that. I have *tried* a couple of times here, but I really struggle. I'd love my kids to be musical. They do a lot of sport at the minute.

There was no doubt that Pete completely bought into the project. This reinforced the old adage 'never judge a book by its cover.' As a bearded rugby player of large build, Pete's appearance and Hull accent completely go against the stereotypical 'arty type.' Similarly, when I spoke to Lynne Scott, it reminded me of our general tendency to be judgemental when it came to appearances (see page 44).

### The young people's perspective

None of the young people I talked to gave negative feedback about anyone in the team. On the contrary. As already seen, many of the young people warmed to them, finding them friendly, helpful and easy to talk to.

Pete Scott, youth worker at Astra, said:

I think certain individuals will be absolutely devastated when they go, because there isn't really anybody here that can continue the development of musicians. They *are* used to having new projects every four months, so

they'll be prepped for change and, come January, they'll be ready for something different. So, in a way, because they already knew the goalposts and the end dates when they started, I guess they'll be able to get their heads round that, but I do think there'll be a few that'll be gutted that Shane and Adam aren't coming in any more.

Whilst she didn't say anything negative about individuals, there was just one member of the Mind group (Tia) who preferred it on the weeks when Nicola was 'doing all the talking and stuff.' This was because she was a peer mentor and 'just loved the brain!' Interestingly, she saw no connection at all between music and mental health, even though she said she listened to music when she was upset: 'I just see it as music.'

## **My Pockets - the organisation** | organisational partnerships | the project, going forward

I began by looking at how partnerships had come about and developed. At Astra Youth Centre, manager Lynne Scott explained how she was pleasantly surprised right from day one:

I first started working with Pete [sic] when he'd worked in Winifred Holtby School, and how he was with the young people was amazing. He's just so natural. Some of our young people can be really challenging.

Pete's always really smart looking. He said he wanted to bring some really small cameras in to work with the young people in the Open Access session, doing a day in the life of a teenager on the estate. Now, the Open Access is where they can just come in off the street, they're allowed to go a little bit off site, and they can just go when they want – that's the nature of the session – so we do get some quite challenging young people on them. I said 'well, you *can*, Pete ... but these really tiny cameras ...' [winces]. He came in and just sat next to them, talking to them, and they just gelled with him straightaway. So that knocked what I was thinking ... I mean, you've got to mention it to people, because it can work the other way. But he just engaged with them, they listened to him, and he got every single camera back at the end of the night ... I was *amazed*. I said: 'Pete, I can't believe you've got all them cameras of yours back.' He'd got that respect straightaway.

We're around as youth workers. The kids have already got the relationship with us anyway – that's why they come in – but it's up to the people that are part of the project to engage with the people and, to be quite honest, Pete's been one of the best I've seen, and I've worked some years in youth service. I love to watch him working.

So we've been really pleased that Pete's always contacted us when he's had further funding about working with the various groups he needs to reach, and we've been happy to have him come along.

So, the relationship was clearly very important?

Oh yeah, you've *got* to have that relationship. You see, there *is* quite a few people that think 'yeah, we'll work with this group' and that ... but they just haven't got the skills. And if you can't go into it sensitively and you can't build that relationship, you just won't go nowhere, because it's your grounding, isn't it?

This particularly resonated with me. Over the years and across several regions, I have seen many a project parachuted in, where worthy activities were 'done to' the participants and it was a case of seeing staff thinking: 'If it's Wednesday, it must be [whoever]'. By complete contrast, with My Pockets, all the evidence is that they are very much plugged in. Rather

than the project being organisation-led, or even youth-led, it is very much a collaboration. Whether an idea comes from a young person or a member of the team, those ideas have the same level of strength and are all listened to. Nothing is laughed at, ignored or dismissed out of hand. Similarly, the musicians are inspired by the young people, not just vice versa. Going forward, this in turn will have a positive effect on the young people's life skills. They are learning in a very real, practical and fun way and gaining/strengthening the confidence to share their ideas.

Reflecting on discussions I'd had with the musicians and youth workers around pastoral care, I asked Lynne about My Pockets' role in terms of exploring people's issues. She explained that, as well as Centre manager, she was also a qualified counsellor (though no longer practising) and told me:

I know what's needed for counselling and all that and ... It's like, with the thing we've just started for carers, he introduced music and that, but he talked with them first about the issues that are going on in their life. I did say to him at the end: 'a lot of issues came through there and you've really worked ...' I mean, there was some really deep issues, you know, resentment and that coming through.

I had already discovered that young people, not only at Astra, welcomed this direct approach, but was there perhaps a risk that some of this older generation might have felt such level of discussion was over stepping the mark?

They could have done yeah ... but they didn't. Because, once again, the way Pete and Sally are and how they work together is unique. I think they're absolutely brilliant. They're so understanding and caring. I was really worried that he might open a can of worms and I said: 'how would you work with that?' because once you've brought that up with a person, you can't put it back in the box.

So he's not only great with kids, he's good with the older generation as well. One of them's looking after her elderly husband. She's in her 70s, still really active, but her husband kinda doesn't like her out of his sight. After the first session – because she'd never touched musical instruments before and she started doing it and it was really impressive, I think she started on a ukulele – she said to me: 'I feel as if I've been on holiday.' It was that release for two hours and talking about it. And Adam had got it all set out and it was a real relaxing atmosphere and that, and I just thought: 'well, you've cracked it on another one now.'

In terms of structure, and still referring to the carers' sessions, Lynne saw it as:

Adam's the one that's in the background. He's more the music, and he just sits there quietly and then just brings in a little bit of music and shows them what to do. But it's Pete and Sally that does the talking.

Pete Scott, youth worker on Lynne's team, said:

You've got Peter at the top. He's the one who sells the vision, he's the one who says 'this is what we're here to do – are you interested? and this is what we'll achieve.' But then he's not involved week to week. He sort of leaves a lot of it to the musicians.

I think when Peter's there he brings a lot more of the whole picture rather than just the music. I suppose there's more opportunities around, because he brings the photography and the videography and the editing and he sort of steers that side of things. And then when certain young people are not here, it's like 'well, we're going to have to come back again.'

The quirky ways My Pockets go about things is just great. I don't think we've got anybody that can think on their feet like they can in terms of being spontaneous and just doing things in an alternate way. They bring things to our team, they bring opportunities to our kids that we don't present.

I was interested in learning more about these 'things they bring to our team.' Pete explained:

I learn things off them. I mean, I can't go away and teach kids how to play a guitar or to play keyboards or anything, but I can probably equip somebody to express themselves in terms of writing lyrics and things like that, because we've see how they've done it, how they coach kids, so we're in a better place now to maybe do some creative writing ... you know, poems, things like that.

He added:

I think, equally, they love using this building, because they know we've got quite a workable membership and a fit-for-purpose building.

Lynne agreed:

We've got a really good relationship with them – we really respect them and they respect us – so I try and support them as much as I can. This is a nice big room and when they want a space [for something else] they always say 'Lynne, can we meet at your place?' and I've said 'feel free,' so they have regular meetings in here.

In Bridlington, Emma Miles told me how My Pockets had come to be involved with the West Hill council estate:

I had some meetings with the Council through East Riding Voluntary Action Services and they said: 'you'll never get Peter, because he's always booked up for a couple of years.' So I just put it to the back of my head and thought:

‘sounds good, but we’re probably not going to get them.’ That was in March last year and I think by about May time, maybe June, somebody else said: ‘Emma, I’ve been speaking about you to Peter from My Pockets and I told him about two different projects and he said he’d really like to do the West Hill one.’ I said: ‘You’re joking!’ So he came here and met me in the July and we booked it in for the September.

I was left wondering – perhaps cynically or unjustly – whether the person who had said My Pockets were ‘always booked up a couple of years’ actually had an ulterior motive. Maybe they were being ‘precious’, wanting to use the organisation for themselves, or perhaps even CCBN’s religious foundation did not sit well with them?

Like Shane growing up on Bransholme estate, Emma grew up on West Hill. She told me:

There was an article that said ‘This is West Hill, not the Bronx’ and it was talking about everything that was negative about the place and how people was frightened to come out of their homes because of the kids. So we’re now trying to change it, and everything we do is #welovewesthill. The families are just so thankful.

I was really enthused by Peter’s enthusiasm and their not wanting to exclude young people that were ‘labelled’ with issues and stuff like that.

I’ve developed a little team since last year and we’re all really committed to doing this, so I would love Peter to come back at some stage.

At Mind, although finding the right fit had taken considerable partnership time and energy, an established group was settled on, being run by Nicola:

So that made it easier to have people coming in to sort of try it out, because it’s really new for me and for the rest of this partnership.

When I got approached by Peter we already had two established groups and we were thinking ‘right, OK, so how can we get My Pockets off the ground? We need young people to participate in that.’

I think it’s been good and I get a lot of energy. Whenever I’ve been in meetings with Peter or in the group with them, there’s so much enthusiasm and you just feel the passion from them and you kind of get swept up with it.

During the performance event at The Potting Shed, I spoke with Lisa Gadd, who was covering Nicola’s maternity leave, and their manager. It seemed there was room for improvement when it came to communication between services. The manager told me about working with a school in the Holderness area where a pupil had taken his life and, as a consequence, about twelve children were really struggling:

So I'll be linking them up. I think they don't really know what this [My Pockets] entails. It's about linking up services. We should definitely be sharing and referring into other things.

When I spoke to Sasha's mum (Mind) shortly afterwards, communication raised its head again:

Sasha can be quite forgetful, so for her to tell me she's doing music ... well. I think what she's enjoyed most is 'ooh, I've got to go to ...' You know, she's *doing* something. It makes a massive difference when she *wants* to go. At one point, she sort of disconnected herself from everything, so this is a way of her getting back into something.

But really there's this thing around communication, like when you literally just get a text and then you've got to try and organise the family, because everything seems to coincide.

But it's really good, because it keeps the kids off the streets, yet I don't know what other groups are connected to this, or whether it's a free service, or what.

Sasha's mum went on to tell me about personal stresses she herself had been struggling with, which led me to wonder whether *she* might benefit from something like this?

Oh, I could definitely do with something like this! A bit of freedom, and play a tambourine and write songs? If there was something like that, it'd be just great. But the trouble is, with all the stress ... I've spoken to quite a few adults about what their children might be doing and what they're doing for them, and a lot of the time you have them going to My Pockets and Let's Talk and you get to a point where actually it would be an advantage for a lot of parents to have something and get together.

Certainly on a broader level, parents on West Hill were benefitting, as two of the mums told me:

It gets us out and the kids enjoy it and we've all come together as a community.

It's brought the community together, it really has. It's made us friends on the outside as well. And when them films are all on YouTube and stuff everybody'll be sharing them.

Emma Miles added:

The mums come as well, because the age of the kids was dropped, but they're interested and it's a chance for them to talk and everything. We're actually on the video in the corner, at the kitchen hatch! When we had four

weeks off from My Pockets, one of them said to me: 'Oh, I've really missed my Mondays!'

When I asked the musicians how they felt about working with My Pockets, Shane said:

I don't feel like I work *with* them, I feel like an *extension* to them. Compared to working for an FE organisation it's completely different and more flexible, but I like that a flexible organisation can react quickly and seize opportunities without the burden of being a complex organisation. Most importantly though, I'd say I have never felt more valued in any work I've ever done before.

Adam said:

I'd say it's the best employment I've ever had up to date. It's because of the way they treat you. You're treated fairly. If you have any concerns, you feel free to air them. It feels like a group effort, because, although I don't come up with all the ideas, the ideas I do have are listened to.

This resonated with My Pockets' general ethos of making sure young people's ideas were listened to. Adam went on to say:

In terms of them being organised, I'd give them 9 out of 10, because it's very rare that we turn up and a session's not on, things like that. We get enough notice. We generally get a week or a couple of weeks notice, and the ones that we don't have, that would be within a week. I'm quite flexible in that sense, because I've got a couple of part-time jobs that I can easily work round and they're generally good like that.

Katie said:

I love working with My Pockets! Their creative style is second to none and their dynamic with the groups is fantastic and awe inspiring. Sometimes we've had issues with session dates being mixed up and last minute cancellations but I don't think this is their fault as it's difficult having to organise young people, venues and staff etc.

Whilst it works fine for Shane and Adam (slightly less so for Katie), this amount of notice is too short for youth workers in some of the partnership organisations. This was particularly the case with Mind and Astra, although Dave Brown at Lollypop told me he had no problem with the organisational side:

We've contacted each other by email and it's been fine, it's been flowing.

At Mind, where Nicola had found it 'all a bit of a learning curve, because it's all so new,' it was a different story, and one that highlighted My Pockets' main organisational challenge:

Peter's really flexible, whereas I'd like more structure. Not necessarily in the sessions, but just knowing when things are going to happen. We've had some *very* last minute changes so that the young people could be able to make it. It totally makes sense *why*, but it can create problems because of all the other commitments. I just like to know what I'm doing and when! I kind of think: 'well, that's the way Peter works and I probably won't hear from him for a bit,' but I'm going off on maternity leave in three weeks, so part of my brain is going 'I need to know what's happening!' Then I can get that locked in, so then Peter knows and whoever's taking over from me knows. That's all to do with my own anxieties and my own issues more than anything.

But Peter and I *have* had a conversation saying we'll try and get that all booked in and moving forward. And the guys have just got that enthusiasm, all that passion and energy. You know, *they* want it to work, *we* want it to work, let's make it work!

Over at Astra at the end of November much of Pete Scott's feedback mirrored Nicola's:

I absolutely love the individuals. But I find artists and musicians quite frustrating in general when you're trying to pin down dates and get promotional material out. There's a massive showcase event coming up any time soon and I've been trying to get a date out of Peter for ages, because we have to do educational visits and prep the young people and speak to their parents ... Originally, Peter presented me with mid November. I started panicking and said 'we need that date' and he said 'don't worry, it'll be December and I'm onto it' but we're almost in December and if we've only got 7-10 days to get them there, that's gonna be difficult.

Conversely, putting things back *too* long brought its own problems, as Pete went on to explain:

Come January the young people are starting a thing called Youth in Nature, which is all about creating wildlife habitats and stuff, and if the performance event gets moved to January, then the minute it's booked in I'll have to tell *those* organisations the dates that we're not gonna be available.

Like Nicola at Mind, Pete said he was 'really organised in terms of dates and stuff.' He was quick to add that this criticism was 'his only negative' and that the scenario was not limited to My Pockets. He cited another community arts organisation that Astra worked with:

They're like: 'oh well, we're here next week, we're not sure about the week after, and we might be working and switching and swapping times and ...' I'm sure there's an organised artist out there *somewhere*, an exception to the rule!

What My Pockets deliver week to week is fantastic, and that's why you stick it out. I'm always showing people them videos on YouTube – I'm real proud of what they've done.

Pete's manager, Lynne Scott, echoed this:

When we're doing our trips out, all the relevant forms have to be filled in and then it has to go to our managers to sign off. But also, I have to have enough time to make sure I get the staffing in the right places. And I've only got a small team to start with. Youth Services were drastically reduced by 50% so it's made a big difference.

I think Peter had told Pete 'oh, it could be a Thursday.' Straightaway that's a problem for us, because I haven't got no staff on a Thursday night. It's the only day that Pete leaves at 2.30, because of childcare, but if he has enough notice he could make alternative arrangements. If you leave stuff til last minute, it just can't be done.

Clearly, there is room for taking a spanner to the organisational workings. To reduce pressure all round, a delicate balance needs to be reached, which is likely to involve more delegation whilst making sure standards are not lowered. However, continuing to train the musicians and equip them with skills that go beyond their musicianship definitely seems to be a step in the right direction. In the meantime, managers and youth workers across all the groups are very happy to 'stick with it,' because My Pockets as a whole has qualities that more than make up for this.

### Performance events

Staying with Astra, Pete Scott told me:

I'm gutted that I missed the Beverley performance night, because it was a late notice thing again. It was me that was running that group, so I really wanted to see them perform or see the video and see the kids' faces. But our manager had to take them because I was with another group at the time.

Lynne added:

*We're* the ones who get the minibus or the transport and *we* make sure the kids get there. I took them to the one at Beverley College, because there was no staff available. I shouldn't do really, because I've got loads on, but I'm still passionate about working with the young people, so I got all the relevant paperwork and took them in my car. Because I respect what My Pockets do, I really put myself out, but it makes it hard on us.

Thankfully, when the performance event took place at The Potting Shed in Beverley in late January, Pete was able to be there and it was clear to see how proud he was of his young people.

Paul Clark, youth worker at Child Dynamix, said:

It's one of the best bits of work with young people I've seen and it's so genuine and done for the right reasons.

The relaxed approach I had seen in action at sessions was replicated at performances, for example at the Beverley College event, where everyone in the room (parents and staff included) was told: 'Grab an instrument you're familiar with, don't sit back where you were before, let's change the seats a bit.'

The evening at The Potting Shed was the second showcase I had gone to and I found this one much more lively and enjoyable than the one at Beverley College. I wondered whether it was just down to my personal preference, based on the ambience of this one being in a pub and its more intimate atmosphere.

Musician Katie told me:

I love the performances! They're so fun and a fantastic way for everyone to come together and celebrate their achievements.

Adam and Shane agreed, and Adam recalled how at the Beverley College event, it 'went really well, to the point of the parents joining in, and the kids got to meet each other.' He was less sure about the success of using Kardomah94 (which was before I began evaluation and the venue has since closed down) because of its larger size: more intimate spaces worked better.

All three musicians felt these showcase events were in the right format. As Shane said: 'the pressure on the person is just right to not put them off turning up.'

Members of the Lollypop group are spread all across the East Riding and as far away as Bridlington. Lollypop provide rail warrants so that those who need to get to the sessions from further afield can do so for free, and a lot of the young people come by bus or as part of car sharing, but getting to a performance evening and back seems more problematic. I was unable to get to the bottom of this in the time available, but it certainly seems worth pursuing, particularly as, by contrast, CCBN brought the West Hill group from Bridlington to The Potting Shed performance by minibus. Is attendance at showcases a question of resources, or getting organised, or possibly both?

The parents I spoke to, particularly at The Potting Shed, clearly enjoyed the whole experience. Annie's mum (West Hill) told me: 'They'll be able to watch it on YouTube too. Exciting!'

One dad simply said: 'That's the best gig I've been to in 20 years!'

## Going forward

Reviewing all the feedback I had gathered, along with my own participation and everything I had seen, it was clear the project was a resounding success. What, then, might anyone want to change – if anything – other than the organisational side being tightened up?

As Adam pointed out, everything ‘seemed to be expanding in quite a rapid way,’ and I wondered how he and the others saw it moving forward. Was it expanding at a rate that Adam felt he and Shane could handle?

Oh definitely, yeah [and Shane later agreed]. We’re happy to take on more groups all the time. It’s expanding at a good rate to allow for new musicians that Peter’s bringing in as well. You know, like he brought Katie into Market Weighton.

Would this work on a permanent basis, or was it better for Peter to take an ad hoc approach? Adam said:

I’d say it’s judged on the groups. Sometimes three of us is too much, but sometimes three is perfect. If it’s me, Peter and Shane doing a session and then just two girls turn up, it’s not exactly intimidating – because we’re all lovely! – but it’s the fact that we outnumber them.

Katie didn’t think anything needed to change:

I think the groups work so well in their current format and, even if we do the same thing with each group, the groups are so different that we get a massively different outcome each time.

I’m really happy doing one session a week. I’m not sure I could do any more at the moment.

To be honest, I love the smaller groups [of musicians]. There’s more of an opportunity to create lasting bonds and less chance of any clashes!

Shane told me:

If the values and practice of any additional musicians help the organisation meet its goals, then that’s beneficial to the reputation and work of My Pockets.

I enjoy working alongside different people too, because it’s inherently in musicians’ DNA to be influenced by others and work differently with others.

He went on to say:

I think it would be good if we started producing to a quality where we could start musical careers of the people we work with, and even have songs licensed for adverts/TV etc.

It would also be nice to work with some established musicians to see what value we could add to them using the same principles we use at the moment.

This area also raises an interesting point in terms of the young people moving forward. As I had heard, a number of them could already play at least one instrument and several were doing music at school. At Astra, Pete Scott told me:

There's a few young people who've done music as a GCSE choice and they've got some skills they're sharing and they're mentoring others with them skills.

Making more room for working with those not starting from scratch would allow creation of songs that were not limited by the young people's ability to play. In such a group, it would be a win-win situation for the project overall, because the young people would benefit and the My Pockets musicians would be able to push their own musical boundaries, which in turn would feed back to the young people. As has already been seen (page 42), when it came to inspiration, it was very much a two-way street.

There is then the question of how to offer young people such as Danny (the drummer at Astra) further support. Additional mentoring from the musicians cannot continue indefinitely, yet how do you avoid making a young person feel like the rug has been pulled from under their feet?

Looking back over everything, it seems that, in terms of the *initial* approach to the music, the young people fall into three categories:

1. those who can't play at all and have a problem with 'stickability' because of the note-by-note approach – the 'oh, this is boring' category
2. those who can't play at all but have much less of a problem sticking with it – happy to give it a go note-by-note, because of all the benefits that being in the group gives them
3. those who can already play and want to develop further.

Of the many young people I spoke with, the one who most definitely fitted in category 1 was Tia from the Mind group, who said she *might* be interested if they just did songs they already knew: 'like Sam Smith and that – I just think it would be more better, because we know it and it would make everything a lot easier. I just like to get on with it.'

From my observations across all groups, what seems to make the gap between 1 and 2 so small is the strategic injection of fun.

Whatever the young people's definition of it, all of us – young and old – need fun in our lives, and this project would certainly not be the same without it. For me, what makes the organisation's approach stand out from the rest is the My Pockets alchemy.

## Legacy

Pete Scott at Astra told me:

If anybody deserves the funding, *they* do. But if they don't get it, there is a legacy left behind because of all the things that they've brought in.

Fortunately, we've been able to engage different groups, so we haven't felt like My Pockets have left the building for ages, because they've always been actively involved in one of our groups.

As well as the success story of Danny the drummer, Paul went on to talk about 23 year old Shaun, the singer on Bus Ticket Blues, who he said had 'a really colourful life.'

He's in William Booth Hostel at the minute, which isn't the best place for him, but one thing that it has given him is stability and routine, because he knows he's got a bed to go to every night and he knows that he's got food, and it's round the corner from a college that he's engaged in as well.

So, again, he's another one that's got into a good routine, which I'd say is 80% of the battle – getting up and doing something positive. At college he's achieved his Level 2 in ... Maths, I think it is ... it's GCSE equivalent and he'll never need to do that again if he doesn't want to. And he's working on his English still. But then he's doing all sorts of creative stuff. He's organising a Christmas party for the Goodwin community at the minute.

Again, it just so happened that he did used to live locally, but then he was sofa-surfing and right up *West Hull*, which meant he couldn't get in to Astra quite as often. But when he was in they did some great stuff. The Bus Ticket Blues song, you don't get much more down to earth than that, do you?

In closing, Pete told me:

They're a creative group of kids and there's a massive need for it in the East Riding. So yeah, music sessions are definitely something that I'd look to carry on.

Across the whole project, there were several unexpected 'small wins' in terms of legacy. At the Potting Shed performance event, Poppy from Market Weighton told me how she had since gone on to become a Mind ambassador:

You go on interview panels and stuff and you go on focus groups as well – it's really good, I'd definitely recommend it.

## CONCLUSION

Everyone involved in the My Pockets project, from youth workers and musicians to the young people themselves, has different life experiences and problems they are dealing with. For staff, for instance, it might be anxiety about paying the mortgage or the breakdown of a long-term relationship. For children and young people, the problems impacting on their mental health might include bullying, caring for a parent or grieving the loss of one, issues around sexuality, or where they are going to sleep that night.

At the start of the project, there is a strong chance each individual young person feels they are alone with their problem, that they are the only one experiencing this difficulty and that others in the group will not relate to it. They probably feel their peers might not treat them sympathetically, which in turn might exacerbate their problem. But, just as in the adult world, this is what the individual participant *perceives*: it's not the *reality*.

Evaluating the project over several months has repeatedly shown me this reality and how, by attending My Pockets sessions, each young person gradually sees they are not in fact alone with their experience.

Earlier in this report (page 9) I wondered whether there were some kind of My Pockets alchemy going on. My conclusion is that this is certainly the case. Reflecting on everything I have seen and learned, and mixing my metaphors, I now see it as a recipe. There are ingredients and there is a method. But, as we all know, with the best will in the world, not everyone can bake the perfect cake. It's not just about buying the ingredients and following the method. There are also mysterious and frustrating times when, even though you seem to have done exactly the same as the last time, this cake is a flop. My conclusion is that My Pockets are the bit in the oven – that bit you know is happening but can't see it at work.

It is, of course, true that most music projects are made up of a certain mix: young people, musicians, instruments, staff teams, partnerships. However, when it comes to the My Pockets project, I noticed there were certain key points along the way that were real catalysts. Forging strong partnerships, for example. Applying a 'smoke and mirrors' approach to delivery. The musicians' role of going beyond tuition, providing a degree of pastoral care. Unlike the projects I referred to earlier (page 44), My Pockets do not just come along, deliver the project, then leave. There is genuine change going on here, driven by their passion, and they leave a legacy. Along the way, for instance, it has been interesting to see the project unexpectedly unlock some relationships, with young people opening up to youth workers for advice.

I decided to look at this recipe more closely and consider the different steps involved.

All the young people participating in the project are facing problems in their lives. Such as Danny, caring for his disabled mum, or Poppy who is grieving for her father, or Abbie who struggles to manage her anger. The world is a difficult place for them. It holds fear, anxiety, isolation, and so they are, as several of the young people told me, always looking for distraction.

Situations in their day to day lives grow worse and worse, to the point where they are perhaps bullied, feel isolated, or even have suicidal thoughts. Help arrives. Either they search for it themselves, or it's offered by someone with understanding. They go along to a youth club, or join a course run by Mind, or perhaps a friend or relative encourages them to join a support group.

Enter: My Pockets. Their passion and tenacity means they don't simply *work* with organisations, they build *strong partnerships* with them, based on mutual respect and support. The organisations are My Pockets' route to the young people they are keen to work with, and the youth group leaders and other partners act as a bridge. They help with the pragmatic stuff – introducing, hosting and supporting the music sessions – and My Pockets bring much-welcomed extra instruments.

The My Pockets team members are not made from the same mould, making them, as Lynne Scott at Astra put it, 'unique' as an organisation. They are 'natural', spark off one another and are interchangeable depending on the needs of any given group. They have no-edge backgrounds and a down to earth, direct approach. They think on their feet – spontaneity and flexibility are always firmly at the core of delivery. The more the organisation sees My Pockets in action, the more they trust and support them.

This two-way trust continues to build, right across the board, and feeds off itself, which in turn strengthens connections. By now, a chain has been forged. The My Pockets team, the organisation and the young people are all strongly linked. And, all the while, confidence emerges and grows, along with self esteem.

The next step is key to success: mixing everything up to create organised chaos. There are no ground rules here. Participants can play a keyboard, shake a tambourine, have a go on a ukulele ... now, anything goes, and everyone is having fun. They might not be able to *define* it – but that doesn't matter. They are sharing a feeling of group connectedness. For me, this organised chaos, with so much going on under the surface, is like the invisible magic that goes on in the oven.

Not surprisingly, this fun breaks down all sorts of barriers. Not just between young people and their peers and the musicians and youth workers, but also *within* the young people themselves. With no right and no wrong, the Katie's and Phoebe's of the world can be 'a weirdo' or 'different' and nobody will judge them, the Skylar's and Alex's are accepted for who they are, and the Poppy's find that fun *can* return following bereavement. How many of us, as responsible adults, have had it drummed into us that it's now unacceptable to behave like kids? In a My Pockets session, this is nonsense. If you are a beardy rugby playing youth worker and you feel like shaking a percussion egg and singing, then nobody will laugh at you, let alone stop you. And when the young people see this – and not a lesson plan in sight – they see beyond the youth worker, beyond the musician, beyond the cover of the book ... they begin to accept people for who they are, just as they themselves are now accepted, and see that they are not alone. Everyone has a story to tell and they see that life experiences actually make people interesting, more colourful, and better placed to make something creative.

With barriers broken down, trust and fun firmly embedded, and confidence continuing to grow, it's time to focus more on those musical skills and start formulating the song. Although this is done as a collective activity, there is still room for individual self expression. Everyone is listened to. A simple conversation can turn into a lyric, an overheard snippet can develop into a chorus, but the trick is to do this whilst maintaining that element of fun and sense of group belonging. Yes, the conversation may well touch on difficult topics and perhaps confessions, but it's important to keep the laughter and daftness in the mix too. Bus Ticket Blues is a prime example of this. Shaun may have been sleeping on the umpteenth sofa of his life and not even have been able to buy a bag of regular fries, but when the story of his day evolved into lyrics, the music room was full of empathy, experimentation, focus, and laughter. He was able to escape for a while and 'see the lighter side.'

Before they know it, the young people find they have actually written a song. Not just any old song, but a good one, a song they can be proud of. They might not have realised it during the process, but they have all invested in what they have learned about each other and the conversations they have had. There is pressure to create something worthy of the experiences they have all talked about. The only way they can do this is by collaborating and concentrating. Again, this is where My Pockets very much differs from the 'parachuted in, do a project unto people' organisations. Collaboration is key and it's a symbiotic process. The musicians are unable to make the song on their own, because they don't have the young people's experiences, and the young people can't make the songs without the musicians, because they don't have the creative skills. Everyone learns and everyone benefits. This includes youth leaders who have participated in sessions – they see it all coming together and feel proud of their young people.

Just as the cake coming out of the oven needs to be tasted and shared, so the songs, films and art that have been created need to be seen. But, more importantly, the young people need to *see* it being seen. The performances, screenings or viewings with families and friends are a way of safely saying to people 'this is how I feel.' When the quality of the song is good, then the audience can say: 'that song is great!' What they actually mean by that is – 'You are great! The life experience you've had and the way you feel about it is worth something.'

As musician Katie said: 'even if we do the same thing with each group, the groups are so different that we get a massively different outcome each time.' If you change a basic ingredient in the recipe, you get a different tasting cake. But you have learned from it – and, who knows, you might even have created a better cake than last time.

## Recommendations

Going forward, it would be interesting to look at:

- the introduction of rap
- ways of supporting young people beyond the project
- setting something up for young people who can already play an instrument
- seeing if young people stay in touch outside of the project
- focusing on one specific group to get a more in-depth picture
- case studies – exploring ways to track young people’s progress beyond the life of the project to assess its longer term impact.

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