



Hidden Voices: Evaluation Report

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“Perhaps I began with a hidden voice but now it has most definitely come out into the light.”

(Carer and Hidden Voices participant)

Summary

Link to accompanying portrait series [here](#)

Hidden Voices was devised by Midland Arts Centre – MAC to ‘create safe, compassionate and inspiring environments for female carers in Birmingham within diverse communities, encouraging mutual support and musical creativity.’

The implementation of Hidden Voices was affected by the Covid-19 pandemic and subsequent lockdowns during 2020/2021. Activities took place online instead of face-to-face at the MAC, which resulted in a decrease in and inconsistency of attendance. There were multiple reasons for this for example increased caring responsibilities, unable to participate with a loved one in the same space, not having access to digital devices/broadband, dislike or uncertainty of being in an online space with others, and mental health issues among the carers. However, for some having the sessions online made them more accessible than if they been delivered face-to-face.

Of the carers who did attend the sessions (approximately 78) there is strong evidence that all three of the intended outcomes – increase in wellbeing and self-esteem and decrease of feelings of isolation and loneliness – were met.

The style and approach of the team of music leaders and assistant music leaders was a particularly effective aspect of the programme. They made adjustments to ensure the sessions were fully inclusive and accessible, and created a non-judgmental space, meaning that carers were able to be present however and whenever they chose. Sessions were high quality, with music leaders being flexible and responsive to the needs of the carers. It was a ‘test and learn’ approach focussing on process, with a range of musical outputs (notably songs) created as a result. Content of the sessions was usually partially or wholly dictated by the carers, leading to carers feeling empowered by this co-constructed approach.

The wellbeing of carers was increased during the sessions. Carers were able to bring their whole selves to the programme by regularly sharing with each other and the music leaders, leading to a strong sense of belonging and inclusion. Carers felt listened to, heard and understood, and had a mutual sense of respect and understanding for each other.

Carers were able to relax during the sessions, often due to specific activities focussing on relaxation, for example breathing and mindfulness exercises. Despite the fact that many of the carers hadn’t participated in music or singing activities before, there were few reports of anxiety. Carers felt comfortable to participate including (during online sessions) unmuting themselves and singing in front of others. In a few cases, the music activity helped carers with physical issues they were experiencing.

For many of the carers, Hidden Voices provided momentary respite from their caring responsibilities. Carers regularly shared how they looked forward to attending, and there was positive engagement in the music activity with carers singing, dancing, moving, playing and creating. For some it was an opportunity to discover a new love of and interest in music, for others it was an opportunity to rekindle musical interests they already had.

There was much smiling, laughter and joy, with carers indicating that the Hidden Voices sessions helped to cheer them up during extremely difficult times. Carers expressed feeling energised, and in some cases this renewed energy continued beyond the sessions.

For many, Hidden Voices provided something to feel optimistic and positive about, particularly during the challenging times of lockdown. Some carers expressed an interest in wanting to carry on with doing music activity beyond the sessions, and a small group participated in a series of training and mentoring sessions provided by project partner Quench Arts.

There was some evidence that carers developed increased skills, knowledge and understanding of music. Engaging in group music making (notably singing) activities was something that many of the carers hadn't done before, and represented stepping outside of comfort zones.

There was a genuine sense of community within the groups, with carers connecting with each other and the music leaders, leading to reduced feelings of social isolation and/or loneliness. Carers reported feeling happy and energised through being with each other, despite the online space creating some barriers to building relationships. Informal conversations on messaging platforms that went on between sessions were an important factor for an ongoing sense of connection. For some the Hidden Voices sessions represented one of their few social outlets during the lockdown periods.

Self-esteem was increased with an evident sense of pride among participants. Carers were able to make a positive contribution to the sessions, at whatever level they felt comfortable. They could see and hear themselves in the musical outputs that were created. For many carers their confidence increased, both in music making/creating and confidence about themselves personally.

There was some evidence that Hidden Voices supported carers in other areas of their life, particularly with regard to feeling good about themselves in general, and feeling like they have a voice. The sessions provided a way of sharing more about their own identities and what is important to them, and this was often drawn on in the music/song lyrics.

There were many ways in which carers helped and supported each other through the sessions, which in itself can lead to increased feeling of self-worth. Across the groups, carers' willingness and instinct to help one another, even though they were all dealing with their own challenging circumstances, was profound. For some the sessions were affirmative, making carers realise how much they have to give to others and to society, which was a way of increasing their own self-esteem.

While the impact on carers was evident, improvements could have been made centrally by MAC to improve the overall effectiveness of the programme delivery, and partner relations, although we do acknowledge the exceptional and unforeseen circumstances that this project was operating in due to Covid-19.

Hidden Voices was a complex programme with a number of different partners involved. For many, the partnerships element of the project was considered effective. In some cases, partners explained that the positive impact of the sessions on carer wellbeing actually reduced their workload with

supporting carer wellbeing. One partner talked about how Hidden Voices has been a positive catalyst for working more closely with other organisations. However, the programme did suffer from challenges at a strategic and management level, including staffing changes and gaps in leadership to drive forward the important areas of partnership development and relationships, advocacy and sustainability. Despite these internal challenges, much was shared about the important, caring and nurturing role that MAC took, particularly the communications provided by the project administrator.

While measures were put in place to support carers to be able to continue with music making beyond the programme, resourcing for sustainability was identified as a less effective area. Technology weren't made available to carers until a later stage in the project, and needed to be returned at the end. The training programme for carers delivered by Quench Arts, while effective in terms of the impact on those involved, had been delayed in its delivery, meaning that carers weren't able to co-lead sessions with the music leaders as originally intended which would potentially have had an impact on other participants and enabled music sessions to continue.

The programme has served to raise awareness internally with the carers, music leaders and partners on the impact of music with carer groups. There was much desire from those involved to find ways of sharing more broadly the critical work that carers do, often in highly challenging circumstances, and how music can support them. However more external advocacy is needed about the social value of this work, and it feels like there has been a missed opportunity for advocacy and sharing learning while the project has been taking place. Funding is a major barrier to sustainability, and a legacy plan for funding the continuation of the work with carers doesn't appear to be in place.

We have made a series of recommendations for how the project may evolve and develop:

1. Sustain existing and develop new partnerships with community groups working with carers to enable Hidden Voices to continue
2. Further investigate the social value of Hidden Voices
3. Use the portraits as an advocacy tool for the importance of the arts and cultural sector working with carers
4. Prioritise embedding and implementing training and support for music leaders and trainee music leaders
5. Engage participants in the co-creation of the evaluation

Introduction

Background and context

A carer is an unpaid individual who looks after a family member, partner or friend who is younger, older, disabled or seriously ill. There could now be as many as 8.8 million adult carers in the UK, compared to 6.3 million adult carers recorded in the 2011 Census¹, representing more than 10% of the population. In the 2011 census there were 107,380 unpaid carers recorded in Birmingham, 10% of the city's population.

A recent Carers UK survey² on caring during the pandemic found:

¹ Source: [Carers UK](#)

² [Breaks or Breakdown: Carers Week 2021 Report](#)

- Many carers have had to go without the same level of support during the pandemic, with carers losing on average 25 hours a month of support from family and friends and from care and support services
- 35% of carers feel unable to manage their caring role, and their health and wellbeing is impacted
- 75% of working carers are exhausted and 55% are overwhelmed by their caring
- Only 14% of carers are confident that support they relied on before the pandemic will continue in the future
- 72% of carers have not had any breaks from their caring role at all
- Of those who did have a break, they would use it to focus on their wellbeing (53%) and physical health (52%) and to maintain social connections (50%)
- 71% of carers are stressed and anxious
- 65% of carers feel lonely and isolated

Most carers in the UK are women, and women make up 72% of those in receipt of the Carers Living Allowance³.

About Hidden Voices

Hidden Voices was devised to 'create safe, compassionate and inspiring environments for female carers in Birmingham within diverse communities, encouraging mutual support and musical creativity.'⁴ It is supported by Spirit of 2012's Carers' Music Fund, and led by Midland Arts Centre - MAC in partnership with Midland Mencap and Quench Arts.

The programme delivered a range of music sessions for existing and new groups of carers via partner organisations ASIRT, Birmingham Mind, Balsall Heath Cats, Chinese Community Centre, Home Group and Resources for Autism. Activity ranged from songwriting, singing, music production, creative music making and instrumental playing, led by expert music leaders and supported by assistant music leaders.

Evaluation approach and methodology

The evaluation worked towards the project's three intended outcomes:

1. Wellbeing of the participants is increased
2. Feelings of social isolation and/or loneliness among participants are reduced
3. Self-esteem of the participants is increased

Additionally, it considered the overall effectiveness of the programme, including advocacy and sustainability.

Sound Connections were engaged as evaluators towards the end of the programme, meaning some of the quantitative methods we would normally deploy on a large programme such as baseline and end point surveys supported by regular observational monitoring were not possible. The evaluation instead adopted a retrospective and reflective approach, consisting of two main strands: qualitative data collection and analysis, and the creation of a series of portraits of some of the carers involved (see below).

A booklet laying out all of the portraits is available [here](#).

³ Source: [Carers Music Fund](#)

⁴ Source: [Midlands Arts Centre - MAC](#)

The project outcomes are broad to measure, and as evaluators we were making judgments on what extent they were being met through one data collection point. The development of a set of qualifying statements based on the Warwick and Edinburgh Mental Health and Wellbeing scale was implemented to support the ambiguity of this task. Due to the timescale the full implementation of this tool wasn't able to be utilised, however the development of a set of qualifying statements gave a framework for guidance. Areas we were seeking to evidence, and which are therefore alluded to in this evaluation are:

- Feeling included
- Feeling relaxed
- Showing interest in the activity
- Feeling optimistic about the future
- Feeling cheerful and/or happy
- Listening to others
- Interest in learning something new
- Showing enthusiasm
- Feeling part of a community
- Feeling a sense of belonging
- Feeling less lonely
- Able to develop and maintain relationships with others
- Feeling a sense of pride
- Making a positive contribution
- Feeling confident
- Feeling good about themselves
- Helping and supporting others

Qualitative data collection involved session observations (via Zoom), group and individual interviews with carers, music leaders, partners and the MAC team. The evaluation also considered data collected by MAC notably reflective diaries completed by music leaders, and attendance data. Quench Arts also shared survey feedback collected at the end of the training programme that they delivered.

Interview and reflective diary data were transcribed and mapped thematically against the intended outcomes and qualifying statements. Interviews with carers from the Chinese Community Centre group were done via an interpreter. All those who contributed to the evaluation consented for their words to be quoted in the report anonymously. When a carer or a Music leader was referred to by name, this has been changed to 'P' and 'ML' respectively. The majority of carers in the portrait series provided consent for their names to be used, in one case the carer requested their identity was protected so the name has been changed.

The portrait series is the work of award-winning photographer [Emile Holba](#). It was designed to capture an in-depth depiction of the lives and stories of some of the carers involved in Hidden Voices. Carers from each of the community groups volunteered and provided consent to have their portrait taken, and were briefed on the aims and intention of the portrait series. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with each of the carers, and audio recorded to be listened to alongside the portrait viewing. Carers dictated where they would like the portraits taken, based on where they felt most comfortable. This included individuals homes and gardens, and public indoor and outdoor spaces.

Carers were supported in co-creating their own portraits. This collaborative process enabled carers to make decisions on how the portraits should be taken. By being regularly shown how the images

were presented on screen and having discussions about this, carers could make subtle adjustments to the images. This resulted in the best quality portraits that were also the most representative by the carers themselves.

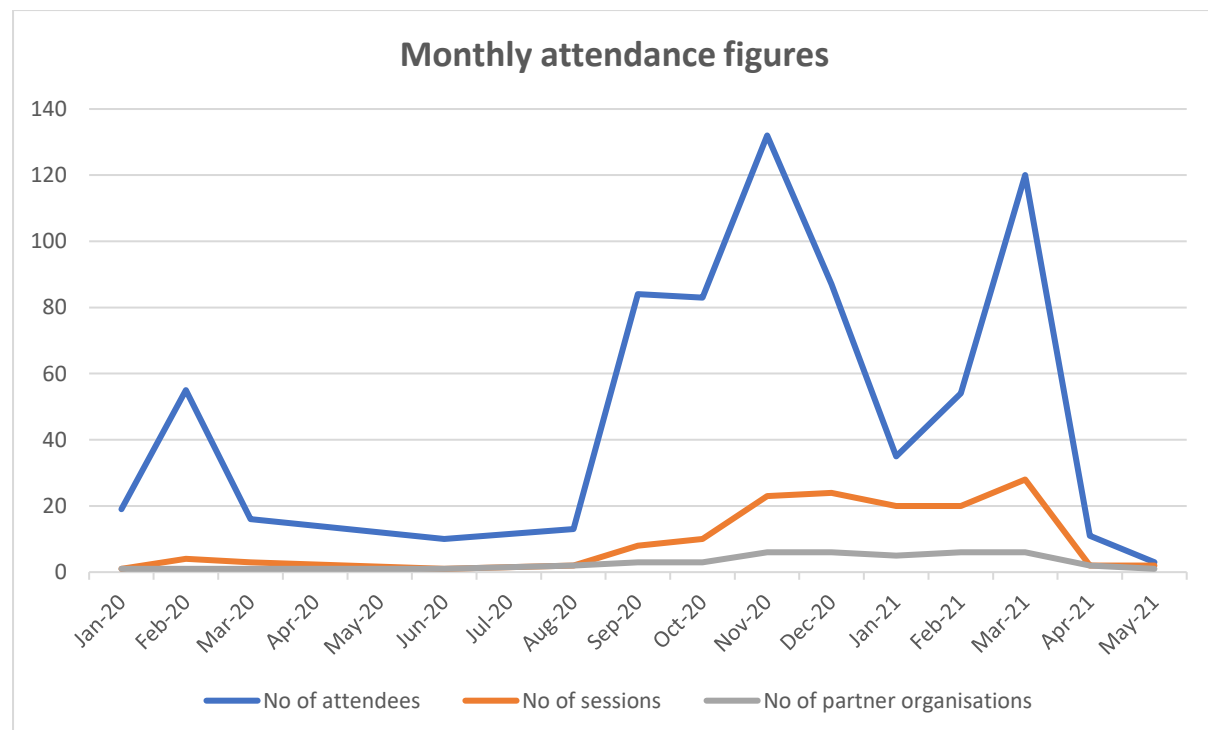
The Covid-19 pandemic and the move online

Hidden Voices began in January 2020 with a few groups of carers running prior to the Covid-19 pandemic lockdown in March 2020. As MAC closed and furloughed all employed staff, the project was halted. In summer 2020 with the partial re-employment of core MAC staff it looked at ways to restart the programme. The re-implementation of the programme was gradual and varied between face-to-face and online sessions, dependent on partner group preferences. However as the country moved into Lockdown 2 in November 2020, and Lockdown 3 with school closures in January 2021, MAC responded by moving all Hidden Voices sessions online.

Most participants received delivery packs relevant to their group associated with what activities music leaders were planning. This usually consisted of a small musical instrument, wellbeing treats, and craft activities aimed for family inclusivity.

Approximately 78 carers engaged with the programme overall by attending one or more sessions. The pandemic encouraged the MAC team to consider how to deliver a programme of this scale most effectively in a pandemic to vulnerable groups. There were advantages and disadvantages to an online approach.

There was a decrease and inconsistency of attendance throughout the programme. The following chart represents the total number of attendees, sessions and partner organisations represented per month. There are noticeable dips around the lockdowns, particularly lockdown 3 in January 2021.



There are a number of possible reasons for this happening, as described mostly by partners.

1. Additional caring responsibilities due to other care, support and/or schooling being removed in lockdown

Parents were overwhelmed with cooking, cleaning, home schooling and most of our children require supervision/care at an intense level due to their high care needs. There was no free time and parents were exhausted. Some parents were caring 24/7 with no break there was no free time for anything else. *(Partner organisation: interview)*

2. Unable or difficult to participate when the cared-for are in the same physical space, and potentially dominating the home environment

For the ones that could connect they often felt embarrassed as often this was done in the same home as the cared for. Sometimes they were ridiculed for singing out loud or general attention being paid to the carer for that moment. *(Partner organisation: interview)*

Some people are not able to connect [on Zoom] because their loved ones are in the room. *(Carer: interview)*

They were not able to fully engage as everyone was at home, lots of the carers live in small homes, there was no space for them to be alone and engage in the sessions. [There was a] lack of confidence to take part at home due to others at home hearing them sing. *(Partner organisation: interview)*

3. Not having access to digital devices, insufficient wifi/broadband, or a lack of knowledge of how to use the technology

Most of our carers are a little older and don't have the technology to connect. That then also leads to some of them having the technology/smart phone/pc/tablet but no understanding how to connect or use it correctly. *(Partner organisation: interview)*

[Our carers faced] immense digital poverty, and lack of devices especially if children were home schooling. Poor WiFi connection was really off putting for many as they would try to log in and the connection was really bad. *(Partner organisation: interview)*

Use of Zoom has hampered a lot of things. They struggled with technology. *(Music leader: interview)*

4. Dislike or uncertainty of being in an online space with others

Some felt that it just wasn't for them and it lacked the personal touch that we developed in the first few weeks prior to moving online. *(Partner organisation: interview)*

Very little technology experience - overwhelmed by learning to use Zoom and the features, simple things like turn audio on, using mute etc it was too much for some. *(Partner organisation: interview)*

Other reasons indicated by partners included the mental health of carers and 'caring exhaustion', lack of motivation, lack of alone time to participate, and change of routine during lockdown. Partners were keen to highlight that a drop in attendance wasn't due to it being a music programme, or the approach of the music leaders. Instead it was circumstantial due to the deeply challenging time the Covid-19 pandemic was for carers.

At least a couple of our carers roles became extremely challenging. Sadly this led to their own mental health being affected. *(Partner organisation: interview)*

Online delivery created some technical issues reported by the music leaders for example latency, challenges with playing percussive sounds (clapping etc), carers dropping in and out, and carers/music leaders being able to hear each other.

We had problems with Teams, was quite frustrating but it showed their determination. *(Music leader: interview)*

However, the online space also brought opportunity and positivity.

When we first got together in groups it felt really positive, there was a real sense of seeing people again for the first time, and whilst people talked about things being difficult, there was both a sense of it's wonderful for people to see people but also there was stuff they needed to talk about which was really difficult for them. People were happy to see people's faces even if not in person. *(Music leader: interview)*

We were worried that the women wouldn't engage with the project as well online as if they were face to face. Seemed to have the opposite effect. Had regular attendees, was positive to see the impact on [their] mental health. *(Partner organisation: interview)*

For some carers, having the sessions online made them more accessible than if they had been delivered face-to-face, due to the physical effort to get there which takes time, the timings of sessions around other responsibilities, and factors such as parking, and facilities of a physical space.

Zoom has its advantages - we can do it in the evening. When it is live we can't because of travel. Evening at 8.30pm they have done the dinner, washed the dishes. Most women have their house chores, and then they can relax and have fun. *(Partner organisation: interview)*

Little thing that niggles me, and that's parking at the MAC. Toileting facilities are really important for parks, and often basic facilities aren't available for autistic communities. Aren't many places carers can go to. *(Partner organisation: interview)*

Working online suits some people much more. Particularly carers - getting somewhere is really hard, but if you can access from home it is better. *(Music leader: interview)*

One music leader talked about how working in peoples' personal spaces helped with building trust between carers and music leaders, that being in a physical space may not have done so effectively.

I do think an element of Covid is the fact that we're working within peoples personal spaces. Rather than them being at MAC and having a tea trolley come to them, we are in peoples' homes. We've definitely gained trust from the group in a really wonderful way, in a way I wouldn't normally work. *(Music leader: interview)*

It also meant that the power dynamic between carers and music leaders was more balanced, as music leaders were isolated in their home environments too, meaning there was a shared sense of 'being in this together'.

The group were also really aware that [we] were in the Covid situation because we were in our homes as well. It again felt different. Difference of online delivery in a health crisis, was a lot of trust there.” *(Music leader: interview)*

With covid it was a special time with them, felt they needed it more than ever. So much panic and worry and stress. That time was really valuable for all of us. *(Music leader: interview)*

When I was looking back I realised that a lot of the time it lifted my mood, I was energised, especially when I felt that the participants were quite responsive and energised. *(Music leader: interview)*

Music Leaders: Style and Approach

The personality, style, approach, manner and expertise of the group of music leaders delivering the activity was identified as a particularly effective aspect of the programme by carers and partner organisations.

An inclusive approach

The music leaders created inclusive spaces online where carers could talk, share, create, develop themselves and build and sustain friendships. To achieve this, time and energy was put into building rapport with the carers. In some cases there were trust issues and language differences between the music leaders and carers, and it was important that the music leaders had the time and space to gradually overcome these.

P in the first session, sat with her arms folded.....wasn't the trust there, did a lot of improvisation, she made a comment at the end of the pilot 'you need to appreciate how busy our lives are and it's too tiring to engage in music making for an hour'. So we planned it that listening to music would be incorporated with a long tea and coffee break. *(Music leader: interview)*

The bond between the participants and the facilitators is very important. If we have a bond then you feel secure, you feel like you're not going to be ridiculed, not going to be laughed at. All it takes is one thing to knock someone's confidence that's already teetering on delicate. Not once did we ever have that. *(Partner organisation: interview)*

When you arrive, they talk to you kindly. You feel like you are talking to someone you know more with, they make time for you. *(Carer: interview)*

Asking for musical references and influences worked well, getting them to self-analyse was a way of getting them to share and open up. One of most valuable things, songwriting, always start with mind mapping.... The gifts and skills that people have really do translate into songwriting. *(Music leader: interview)*

Where necessary music leaders made adjustments to ensure that the sessions were fully inclusive and accessible to all:

Everything was always dealt with complete sensitivity. Even one of our carers sometimes struggled with words - not understanding what rhyming words are for example - but everything was explained in such a sensitive way, really encouraging. She wasn't ever made to feel silly or that she'd done something wrong, wasn't contributing in the right way. *(Partner organisation: interview)*

ML started by leading a physical movement warm-up. They made this inclusive for one of the ladies who was struggling with pain she has been in hospital for, so we could join in standing up or while seated. *(Music leader: reflective diary)*

The 'non-judgmental' space created, where people could be present however and whenever they chose, was one way of making carers feel included.

I think that the continuity, regardless of how many sessions a person has attended, there's just that space where you always know when you go away that you can come back, and we can. It's like a non-judgemental space and that makes me feel good. It has a continuous feeling for me.

(Carer: interview)

The music leaders also ensured that the musical interactions were high quality by sensitively and appropriately sharing their expertise, inspiration and skills – even if in some sessions very little music making took place.

Knowing their facilitators could play instruments, could sing, they were musically trained, brought a lot to the session. Knowing that there is the quality in the sessions. Even if they just come and listen to the facilitators play, you know they are getting something of quality. Much better appreciation now of the carers of music and things played by somebody.

(Partner organisation: interview)

There was humour in the sessions – laughing, joking and playful banter between music leaders and carers. The importance of this playfulness shouldn't be underestimated, as it is vital for creating a relaxed, joyful, comfortable environment, that leads to improved wellbeing.

We then asked them to come up with a new name for the group, which they named after one of the items we talked about, choosing it because it sounded like an 80s band and had brought them all a laugh (The Rainbow Bath Salts) *(Music leader: reflective diary)*

Getting ready for session, I told the [internet] network to behave today else no treats! Love the humour here. *(Music leader: reflective diary)*

She found the fact that we were out of time in the choruses quite funny. *(Music leader: reflective diary)*

Flexibility

Music leaders were able to adopt a flexible, responsive, 'in the moment' approach. While session plans were in place, these inevitably needed to be flexed based on the mood of the carers. It was a process rather than product 'test and learn' approach, even though this could be challenging at times for the music leaders. While the focus wasn't on producing musical outputs, having this flexibility to let the sessions flow still led to the development of multiple creative pieces.

Most effective was leaving the musical content open to interpretation. Was effective for them, because they could decide what they wanted to explore. Came round to a natural progression to do with singing and songwriting. *(Music leader: interview)*

It was so useful and so helpful to have music leaders who were able to adapt to any scenario, and have a session plan for whoever turned up, whatever their situation, just everything that doing the session entailed. *(MAC team)*

Have been difficult bits to negotiate, I like having a plan.. but had to be so flexible. *(Music leader: interview)*

The reason that we wanted to do this is because we realised the value that could be achieved, but I don't think we actually realised how much of an achievement that would be. *(Carer: interview)*

Getting a song was brilliant but it wasn't the most important thing..... by the end it was the time and the space that was important. *(Music leader: interview)*

Co-construction with participants

The content of the sessions was often wholly or partially dictated by the carers. This included bringing ideas and sharing thoughts about how the music could be structured, requesting songs, showing instruments (or homemade instruments), and asking to work around a certain theme.

One of the ladies asked a question about singing techniques, and then we went on to do some vocal warm-ups that practised breathing, scales, pitching leaps and tongue twisters to practise diction. We created a game out of the tongue twisters to see who could say it fastest, which the ladies enjoyed. *(Music leader: reflective diary)*

P suggested previously that we have a theme for each week – e.g. self-reliance, emotions, ambition. *(Music leader: reflective diary)*

Participants sharing a song from their culture and teaching words and lyrics to the musician leaders felt really empowering (I felt). They worked together to teach us the spelling, pronunciation and delivery of the song and they were both the most engaged and excited they'd been in the whole project so far. *(Music leader: reflective diary)*

After listening to the track, the ladies suggested we just use single words over the track, every 4 bars, and recorded them saying words which are meaningful to them over this period. They then suggested where to place these and how they should sound. *(Music leader: reflective diary)*

Both women were able to clearly express how they wanted the words and the melody and the vibe of the new section of the song to be. The co-creation of the music and structure of the second half of the song was very collaborative with participants leading the process with support from music leaders. *(Music leader: reflective diary)*

This music leader talked about the creative process:

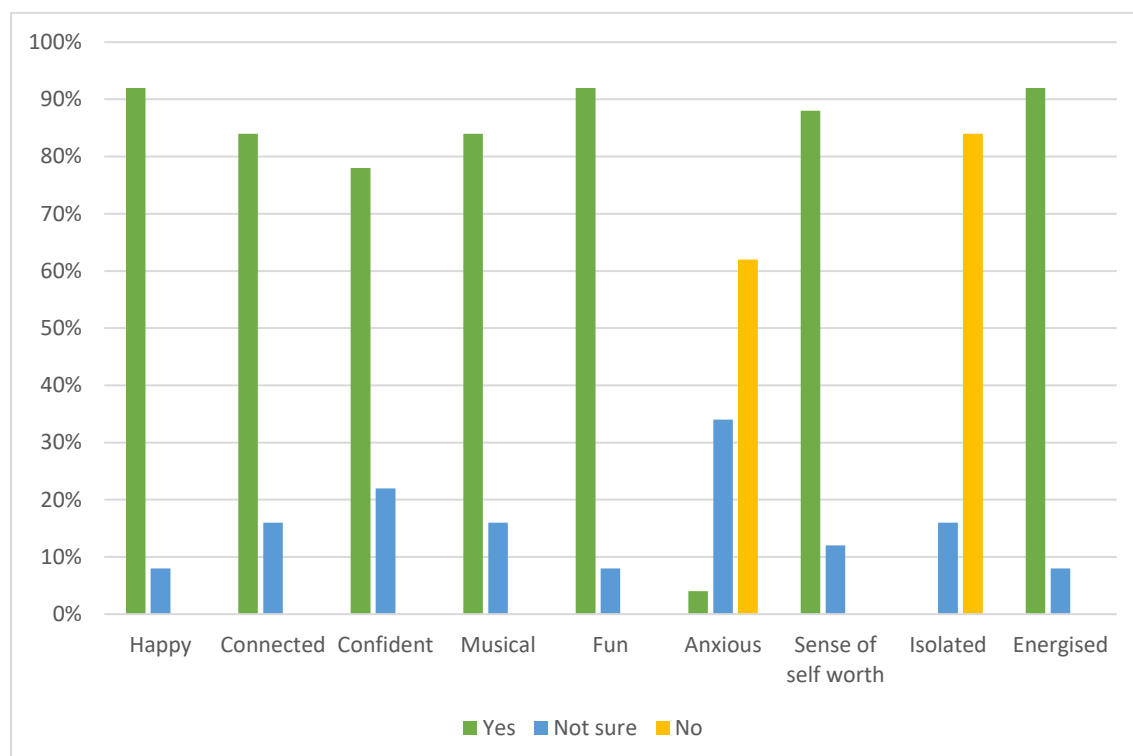
Despite the songwriting starting with quite a lot of silences, slowly the women started to share, and soon there were enough ideas to make a start on the lyrics. It was good to see them start to open up and share ideas, give opinions, and collaborate together to create a piece. *(Music leader: reflective diary)*

Impact on participants

The data suggests that all three intended outcomes for participants – increasing wellbeing and self-esteem, and decreasing feelings of loneliness and isolation – have been met.

In the group evaluation sessions (on Zoom) carers were shown a series of words on slides, and were asked to indicate using hand signals (thumbs up, hand straight, or thumbs down) or emojis, whether they had experienced any of the feelings during the sessions.

Approximately 40 carers participated in this activity. The responses indicated overwhelmingly positive feelings.



For those carers who said they experienced feelings of anxiety, most qualified this by saying it was a 'good nervous' (as one carer described), rather than a negative feeling.

OUTCOME 1: Wellbeing of the participants is increased

It definitely proved that regardless of experience, backgrounds, cultures that absolutely music can improve the wellbeing of our carers. I do think people are worried that 'I haven't got music experience, or will I have the time with my caring responsibilities'. [I] do feel we have proved all of those points wrong. You don't have to have experience, can improve wellbeing. (*Partner organisation: interview*)

Feeling included

It was evident that the carers felt a strong sense of belonging in the sessions, which contributed to feelings of warmth, positivity and inclusion among the carers. All were made to feel welcome, and were encouraged to engage at whatever level they felt comfortable to.

Carers were able to bring their 'whole selves' to the sessions through regularly sharing. Examples were given of sharing songs, particularly in reference to their culture or home countries, the sharing of items from their home lives through hobbies such as baking, recipes, books and growing things in the garden. There was also evidence of the sharing of common experiences that were specific to their lives as carers such as school knowledge or additional support services. Musical activity was often then shaped around the sharing of such personal interests and enjoyment.

We gave space for the carers to chat and they shared how they were feeling, fears they had, their confusion, and also how much they're appreciating these sessions. *(Music leader: reflective diary)*

A lot of the session revolved around talking about the instruments and how they make them feel, and from their own cultures. Seeing them creating a piece of music that they 'own' and seeing their creativity come alive shows they are engaging with the activities, and they are really thinking about what represents 'them' in terms of the musical instruments, the tone of the song, and are aware of embracing and representing their different cultures in the song they are creating. *(Music leader: reflective diary)*

They enjoy sharing with each other in the positive item thing, everything from bath salts to Socrates. Every one participated in the group conversations and the activities, and were acknowledging their similarities in their struggles and all sharing their different coping mechanisms and escapisms. *(Music leader: reflective diary)*

We are all immensely looking forward to seeing each other in person, but agreed these sessions uplift and give a chance to say hello and connect, and to make friends. *(Carer feedback noted in Music leader reflective diary)*

This was seen as being empowering for the carers, and in some cases therapeutic.

[This was] A space women could come to, to share quite personal things with us that helped them to offload. It was therapeutic, could share things with your sisters, mourn, maybe in the country that they had left...A lot of sharing of external things, some of it came into the music some of it didn't... It was a chance to moan and share the difficulties of home schooling, the pandemic, the hope and joy when the vaccine came - in an international sense rather than a local sense. *(Music leader: interview)*

We had to sing something in my language, and that brought me back home. We had to connect back home, it was amazing, we shared with ML and ML – they had to sing it in our language, it was beautiful. I felt connected. *(Carer: interview)*

Carers were in a space where they were listened to, heard and understood. Music leaders regularly cited moments where carers opened up about their lives and caring roles.

People talking and sharing songs and stories. Has helped them being able to be themselves and be listened to. *(Partner organisation: interview)*

They started to talk about their caring roles more. In the first instance it was more to do with music and thinking that they had to perform. As it went on, I think it was because we leaned towards songwriting, as it evolved lyrically the song became about capturing this sense of flow. I noticed they started opening up a bit more about their lives. *(Music leader: interview)*

For some they didn't want to talk about things that were sad, whereas others found it really helpful to talk about difficult stuff. *(Music leader: interview)*

A mutual sense of respect and understanding was developed through this.

[We] Had people of different and no faiths in the group, people were genuinely very respectful, people were talking about being from different faiths and acknowledging differences. In one session, lyrics about God - Christian, one of the women said we have to make this for everyone, and make things equitable. Gives people agency, enables people to see they do have a voice. *(Music leader: interview)*

A lot of the group, some have been in Birmingham for a while, some have just arrived, some don't feel welcome in the communities in which they live. Some actively feel like they don't belong. Having a space that has been safe and nurturing, I get the sense it has been helpful. *(Music leader: interview)*

P is keen for it to be culturally embracing and use instruments that are from their known cultures, and we talked about the instruments they know, have played, and how they might like them used. The ladies talked about different instruments they know, and we spent some time talking about what instruments we have, and what instruments are similar, and how we could maybe use them in the song. It was great to see the ladies taking this in their own direction and leading what they want to happen to the song, including using the 'peaceful' instruments at certain parts of the song, and when to use a lower-sounding instruments. *(Music leader: reflective diary)*

In some sessions where appropriate, the music leaders did some activities for children to make sure the carers could also stay included, as this music leader explained.

We all sang Happy Birthday to P's daughter. Great to see women bringing kids and feeling more confident that the kids can be part of what we are doing together, rather than the women having to miss out on their time together. *(Music leader: interview)*

An important factor with supporting carers to feel included was that they could access the sessions in the most appropriate way for them, with no pressure or commitment. They were able to drop in and out between and during sessions, could opt to have their cameras on or off, and could tend to their cared-for person if necessary.

That helped them to know that nobody is going to say anything if they only come occasionally, they can slot in... knowing they have super busy lives, have so much going on... When they do come they feel valued and appreciated. Music facilitators have made everyone feel like that. *(Partner organisation: interview)*

Carers regularly found ways of including one another. One music leader described the sense of 'comradeship' and the way in which they supported new members to the group. Being in smaller groups possibly helped to aid this.

The way they welcome new people is great, really encourage to participate. *(Music leader: interview)*

Would have been nice to have more people but in some ways some of the value has been the small groups, participants have had a lot of contact time... in smaller groups their contribution is more valuable. *(Music leader: interview)*

Laila's story

(Pages 30/31: Portrait booklet)

Laila is a carer for her four children, two with additional and complex needs, one of whom requires 24 hour care. She explained how her life is guided by a strict routine dictated by her children's medical and physical needs.

"I'm a carer first, and then a mum. It's pretty full on, it can be tiring. It can be restrictive. So we don't have certain things, certain luxuries where we can just get up and go. We don't do impulsivity, it's just not in our daily routine. Equally, we enjoy it, it gives us a lot of focus, keeps us working hard, doesn't allow us to be lazy."

For Laila, Hidden Voices was a platform during Covid that behaved like a support group for her. "I was invited to quite a lot of parent support groups during the Covid period, which I shied away from very early on. Because it was very much focussing on the problems that we're having as parents, and I really wasn't ready, or I didn't really feel like I wanted to talk about it because there was no resolve, there was really no resolve during the first few months.

The thing with Hidden Voices was there was no expectation. So there were times where I had A in the background and she would be making noise, or I would have to run off and do something with the boys, but I would have it on and I would listen.

And it was a lot of fun to be honest, there was a theme but there was no hidden agenda. It just felt so inviting. I remember I think sort of midway after things started to become a bit more relaxed, and I was a bit down. I still joined in, and it was just myself, ML and ML who started. And I felt like they actually listened. Although there was – it wasn't about talking about our problems, but I was having a particularly bad week, and it was like I was heard and understood. And that just made me feel like I can trust these people, and you know it is a music project, I agree to that, and it was a lot of fun, but there was somebody there at the end of the phone I can trust, and I can talk to, and there will be no judgment or recording.

I absolutely loved it. I didn't have to behave or act or talk in a certain way and it was like they understood that things had come to a standstill, however they were still carrying on and talking to us."

A time to relax

Carers gained solace from the music making, listening and sharing. In session observations this was apparent for example when carers would close their eyes, sway, visibly relax their bodies when the music they created was being played.

Music is really helping me right now. I have a cry every morning to a song. It helps me to empty out. *(Carer feedback noted in Music leader reflective diary)*

Even if they just come and listen to the facilitators play, you know they are getting something of quality. Even if they just relax during the session. *(Partner: interview)*

There were various strategies used by the music leaders to help the carers to relax, for example: breathing exercises; mindfulness; guided 'body scan' relaxation exercises; use of live instruments to help the carers relax – cello, tongue drum for example; listening to music or watching relaxation exercises on YouTube and engaging in these collectively. This became an important way of not only

helping the carers to feel relaxed during the sessions, but giving them some strategies to support their own wellbeing and stress relief that they could use beyond the sessions – either for themselves or with other family members.

One music leader referred to the ‘lightness’ that they observed among carers as the sessions progressed. Relaxation activities and ideas were also shared in some of the WhatsApp groups, meaning that if carers missed a session they were still able to access the relaxation activities. Over time, music leaders noted positive changes in body language on Zoom indicating carers were feeling more relaxed.

After the first one it really makes a difference how at ease I was put with ML and ML. It’s like they create this atmosphere of fun and relaxed and I think the relaxed element is really integral to doing something like this. *(Carer: interview)*

Because of the focus on wellbeing we could do a lot more relaxation, a lot more listening, we got the chance to just be... we did breathing, yoga type exercises. Opportunity to give space to just be, don’t often get that allowed within projects. *(Music leader: interview)*

The ladies all seemed to enjoy the relaxation element of the session and all fed back they would like more of that. Some of the ladies got a little visibly emotional and said how peaceful it made them. *(Music leader: reflective diary)*

P said she watched my mindful video yesterday... and it really helped. During the Mozart listening she was able to sit still and close her eyes and commented [on] how relaxing it was. *(Music leader: reflective diary)*

Despite the fact that many of the carers hadn’t participated in music or singing activities before, there seemed to be little anxiety evident. Carers felt comfortable to get involved in this new activity through the welcoming and inclusive space created by the music leaders.

The online singing activity predominantly relied on carers muting their microphones. However, as the sessions progressed music leaders commented on carers voluntarily unmuting themselves to enjoy collective singing – despite the latency issues – indicating a decrease in anxiety in singing in front of and with others.

It’s been interesting, because singing is very good, so whenever I join and we’re singing I feel very relieved of stress. *(Carer: interview)*

No, the first time that I felt anxious was at the first one. But ML and ML created a very safe environment and that’s really important for me. I had a little bit of anxiety because I didn’t know what to expect and that was the only time... *(Carer: interview)*

Vocal training was brilliant, helped them to get over the anxiety of making noise. Some of them don’t speak up, in the background, don’t get to express their voice. To ask them to sing, makes you vulnerable, so it’s a lot of confidence building with them doing that alone. Because they’re carers, they rarely have time to themselves. I tried initially to do a soundscape with them, but when we got to lyric writing they were really anxious about time. We ended up making a song about the time that they didn’t have. *(Music leader: interview)*

You would see someone arrive and share difficult things, watching the change in someone's body language. *(Music leader: interview)*

I've started listening to music and thinking about how it's put together and spotting repetitive things which is really good when you're stressed. *(Carer feedback noted in Music leader reflective diary)*

In some cases, the music (particularly singing and the breathing exercises) helped with physical issues carers were experiencing.

I've had a stroke so my throat is quite tight. Coming to these sessions makes it all feel a bit looser, using my voice and breathing exercises. It's all been very relaxing really, a form of mindfulness for me...I feel so stressed a lot of the time, I don't realise that until I come to this and we start to do the movement and I can actually feel the difference in my body. It really benefits in that way. *(Carer: interview)*

I could see what was happening with her throat and I could see it was a confidence thing - some anxiety. In the session she felt there was more freeing in her throat. She associated the relaxing and the using of your voice together. *(Music leader: interview)*

Physical warm up really appreciated by both women. Feeling really tired and a bit down, sick of waiting. The physicality really made a change – leading to smiles, more relaxed body and more alertness. *(Music leader: reflective diary)*

One of the music leaders however felt it would have been better to be face-to-face with carers to be able to work most effectively on vocal techniques and strategies.

Hidden Voices as respite

For many of the carers, Hidden Voices provided much needed respite. Having this break, and time to themselves, was considered critical for supporting the carers' own wellbeing.

It feels like I've had a break, a holiday almost. It's only an hour and I come away and it's just blocked out a bit of time and made a punctuation mark between what I was doing before and what I'm doing next. *(Carer: interview)*

When you spend all of your time worrying or caring for someone else you don't think about what do I want to say, what do I want to express. So having the opportunity to be the most important voice in the room is really powerful. *(Music leader: interview)*

One lady joined, despite having had a hard week with her son and saying how it's felt a bit like an unmanageable few days, so it was nice for her to get away and do something for herself. *(Music leader: reflective diary)*

They [the carers] need respite away from the typical day to day monotony of getting up, switching into what's today going to be like, before they've even encountered seeing their loved one - whether they live with them or not. Sometimes it's a text before they've woken up. Is complete respite away from caring role. To completely switch off is really valuable. They felt like they had time for themselves, take time out, forget about what was going on in their lives for that hour...*(Partner organisation: interview)*

It's helped me to engage with something different when the world often revolves solely around my son. Life with a child with autism is all consuming sometimes, and not getting out of the house increases that feeling. *(Carer feedback noted in Music leader reflective diary)*

They both used to say at the end of the session, even though it's only an hour, they wish it was every week, and they wish it was continuing, they knew that having that hour for themselves was really important, having that time and space. They originally came on thinking they would have to achieve something musically, but by the end it was the time and the space that was important. *(Music leader: interview)*

If my children are at home, I tell them this is my time, they can join or do whatever else, but they know this is primarily for me, not for them. I need something for me in my week to look forward to. *(Carer feedback noted in Music leader reflective diary)*

Music does that, really helps you to switch off from everything in life. *(Carer feedback noted in Music leader reflective diary)*

Lisa's Story

(Pages 14/15: Portrait booklet)

Lisa is a carer for her two teenage children, one who has autism and an eating disorder and the other who has serious mental health conditions. Music was an important part of Lisa's upbringing, and Hidden Voices provided a way of helping her reconnect with who she is and support her own wellbeing and mental health.

"I idolise my children, they are my whole world, my whole life and I would do anything for them.... you have these fairytale images of what family life is going to be growing up and everything, and it's not like that.

So for that project to come through and for me to have that space...it felt warm and nice, and just a time to relax and have a bit of fun and play. We were playing with music - other people might think about playing with water or splashing and things like that, but it was like that with music for me, and it was a chance just to come alive and wake up. It was really really beneficial. It re-introduced me to music which I've lost. I would say for the last five years of my life everything has just kind of stopped to care for [my children], and it was like at the end of it it's like an awakening, the music was there, the Hidden Voices project was there, and I went back and listened to loads of music, lots of different styles.

You can't imagine how it must feel – I was in the house with other people but it was like I was on my own, responsible for everything, and that was really difficult. But actually [Hidden Voices] was a break from that, so that was really good."

Engagement and interest

Evidencing engagement and interest can be challenging during online sessions, especially if carers don't want to or aren't able to be present visually.

However, carers regularly shared how they looked forward to attending each week, and it was something they tried to make sure they could attend, which is an indicator of positive engagement. Towards the end of the project, most carers expressed how they wished that the sessions could continue.

It gives you more pleasure and you're always looking forward to another week. *(Carer: interview)*

The carers look forward to the sessions. The participants were so keen that during the week they also tried to remember what we did in the sessions and recorded voice messages and singing clips on the messaging service. Sometimes they would come to the session saying they had been practising. *(Carer feedback noted in Music leader reflective diary)*

It was great to see so many women back and engaging in the session, and to hear them talk openly about the impact it has had on their lives during lockdown, both to connect together, but also to express themselves through music. *(Music leader reflective diary)*

The fact the sessions were online and many had children or other family members with them showed the carers determination to stay connected and to participate. This is evidenced through some carers joining from their cars, and persevering with the sessions even if they had other family members present, or needing to be hidden from camera due to babies sleeping etc.

I was so happy the first time I got here. We are bringing music together, it was funny. I feel great. If I don't feel great or happy, I won't come back. *(Carer: interview)*

If they don't enjoy the sessions, they just won't turn up because they have no time to attend things of no relevance to them. Just them turning up is evidence that they do enjoy the sessions. *(Partner organisation: interview)*

A few people attended the Zoom sessions from precarious places - the bus, outside a vaccine centre, the car. People were making the effort to attend. They were keen to be in the group. *(Music leader: interview)*

The fact that people turn up speaks volumes. This is reinforced by peoples enthusiasm to sing, give it a go and make music at home. We've had no instruments, but people have still been really enthusiastic and willing to participate. All have the camera on and actively sing and engage. *(Music leader: interview)*

Where carers did have their cameras on in session observations, there was clear engagement in the music activity with carers singing, dancing, moving, playing and creating. For some it was an opportunity to discover a new love of and interest in music, for others it was an opportunity to rekindle musical interests that they already had.

A couple of times I just feel too busy to come, but when I do come I really enjoy it, I get so much from it and I continue to come because of that. *(Carer: interview)*

I enjoy music and used to play music a lot... playing instruments so it appealed. When I was young and I played instruments I was able to find a lot of comfort and express my emotions through the music that I played and I've lost that. *(Carer: interview)*

Really surprised that certain people were engaging, sharing, sending their voice recordings. Especially to do with music, you're in the spotlight, a lot of these parents they are usually in the background, never get to shine. *(Partner organisation: interview)*

A new participant stood for the whole session - often still dancing after the music had stopped. She was also confident and willing when asked to be the leader for a short time for the visual musical activity. *(Music leader: interview)*

For many carers the sessions provided something to feel optimistic and positive about, particularly during the challenging times of lockdown. It was a place to discuss and share much broader hopes and dreams, and this is reflected in some of the songs that were created.

I feel it has given the women a voice and a safe space to share their thoughts, feelings, hopes, dreams, ideas. *(Partner organisation: interview)*

Thinking and talking about the future and giving them a platform for sharing their views around female empowerment and change...Some women mentioned ambitions to travel and explore more in the UK. *(Music leader: interview)*

It was nice to hear the conversations took a more positive outlook this week as people are looking forward to the restrictions easing and the brighter weather etc, and that seemed to help with people's outlook on things. *(Music leader: reflective diary)*

Some of the carers expressed an interest in wanting to carry on with music, either through actively singing or playing instruments, or through continuing to listen to and share music. This indicates some optimism about the future, and a desire to want to continue dedicating time for themselves. Since the official Hidden Voices sessions have finished, some sharing of music (including voice recordings) is still continuing with some groups.

It's helped me think about music more and realise how much I love it and that I need to carry on. *(Carer: interview)*

We started to talk about future wishes, participants have a lot of musical ambition now that they didn't have previously. They want to carry on singing, want to form a band, lots of dancing, just the raising confidence - I can do this and yes I can do this next. The women really want to come to MAC because they feel a personal connection. *(Music leader: interview)*

I can see a potential, although I'm a bit nervous as to where it's going to go as it will mainly be me playing alongside the CD and I don't know how that will go forward, but that's made me remember a part of me that I had forgotten. *(Carer: interview)*

They found a new confidence to continue with the music making after the project, and P in particular mentioned about getting some new books for her flute/saxophone, and has taken her instruments to get serviced after a long time of them not being played. *(Music leader: reflective diary)*

Other carers expressed that as soon as it is possible to reconvene face to face, they want to come together to sing.

We're all going to start a group. We're all going to go for X-Factor next year! *(Carer: interview)*

I want to go on the microphones. Am looking forward to the centre re-opening. *(Carer: interview)*

Siu Phen Lay's story

(Pages 28/29: Portrait booklet)

Siu Phen Lay is from Vietnam. She is in her 70s, and is a carer to her adult son who has epilepsy. She learnt about Hidden Voices from the Chinese Community Centre group. Before Hidden Voices she hadn't engaged in music activity or singing at all.

"Since I joined this Hidden Voices I changed a lot. I used to be quite passive and just look after my son but for this especially for carer activities that I joined. I love it, I don't know how to sing before, but they teach us. Now, yeah, actually, now three times a week at night time they will be singing karaoke. Sometimes it's on the Zoom sometimes it is just recording the voice.

When we're with ML she is not [just] teaching us how to sing, she is playing the keyboard, playing some tune and then we are following....we give her the Chinese pop music and then she try to play that tune that we are singing.

But it's really happy to meet up when I'm free, when my son don't need me, I can enjoy to be relaxed, to listen to their singing, I do some singing. Before, when it start, I was too shy. Then, yeah, I can see other people yeah, they getting better and better, so we practice and then we stand up and we are singing.

The music, it mean, when I sing something happy I also am really happy. I follow the song, the mood. I never learnt singing before in my life but I really enjoyed and now it's one of my habits."

Feeling cheerful and/or happy

It is reported in various scientific studies that listening to and participating in music releases endorphins in the brain, giving a heightened feeling of excitement and potentially reducing anxiety. This was evident in the interviews about Hidden Voices.

On Friday I'm very smiley, then during the week because I have other things going on, I focus on 'ooh I've got it on Friday'. It's like I've got that connection through the week that I'm going to have that positive feeling on Friday. When you achieve something in these sessions, it just gives me a buzz for the rest of the day. Then I'm telling my mum, I'm saying to my friends, it's just really good. *(Carer: interview)*

Anyone can have talking therapies, but not everyone can go and release endorphins the way we did in this group. *(Partner organisation: interview)*

It's like a feel good factor that you feel like, I've just achieved that. There's a lot of feedback from ML and ML, they praise you, I enjoy it. It is bringing my youth back and making me feel alive again, and that's why I enjoy it. You just feel on a high afterwards. *(Carer: interview)*

While some of the sessions involved the carers sharing challenges they were facing, there was also much smiling, laughter and joy. For some, the sessions helped to cheer them up during extremely difficult times. One music leader described a 'communal sense of joy, achievement, and fun'.

They felt like they had time for themselves, take time out, forget about what was going on in their lives for that hour, completely have a laugh, joke around. Main quote was they found their inner child. *(Partner organisation: interview)*

Participants enjoyed being asked to lead a few seconds of the visual musical activity - they had so much fun and laughed so much that one of them had to get her inhaler! *(Carer: interview)*

Lots of laughing, the session was hysterical during the group 'trills' and 'laughing' part of the session; all the participants were laughing a lot (alex). [One participant said] "I'm beaming I'm really happy" *(Music leader: reflective diary)*

Often the evenings were full of creativity and laughter, as they enjoyed the social aspect as well as gaining a lot of new music skills. *(Music leader: reflective diary)*

I would say that nobody watching that video would ever know that we were in a pandemic because we all embraced it and had so much fun. *(Carer: interview)*

Despite some of the musical challenges working online posed, these music leaders expressed how that didn't stop the sense of enjoyment.

Musically [being online was less effective] - not being able to sing with them in same key, same time, but in terms of wellbeing, uplifting, creativity it didn't stop that. *(Music leader: interview)*

ML shared 'Dancing Queen' to get everyone dancing for a couple of minutes. Real joy in singing together and good feeling of connection. Great feeling of joy and celebration, through the words, melodies, and faces of the women. *(Music leader: reflective diary)*

Carers expressed feeling energised by the sessions. In some cases the happiness and energy continued beyond the activity:

The feeling after, I smile a lot after, I've noticed that. *(Carer: interview)*

I am excited after the session, I can't fall asleep. *(Carer: interview)*

I'm singing a lot more round the house and telling people about what I'm doing. Music is on my mind more which is great. *(Carer: interview)*

Happiness and cheerfulness were in some cases infectious within the groups – hearing people laughing and seeing them smiling had a positive impact on others.

I feel happy and connected. It's almost emotional, it really is. Magical. *(Carer: interview)*

It has been fun for them and it has greatly helped them to stay well as much as possible. It makes everybody happy when we see P become more confident. *(Partner organisation: interview)*

Marilyn's story

Pages 8/9: Portrait booklet

Marilyn cares for her husband who has mental health issues. She had to adapt to learning about Zoom during the pandemic, which she embraced, and she looked forward to the Hidden Voices sessions each week. She particularly enjoyed her time with the Hidden Voices music leaders.

“They are amazing people, especially ML – she’s a real, real gem. She’s a professional, she encourages you, she absolutely makes you feel – giving you confidence – and she makes you feel special.

It was something to look forward to. Unfortunately some people couldn’t adapt to the Zoom, because there were quite a few people when you physically went to the MAC, they couldn’t either access it, or we ended up there was about four left to do the Zoom. But even so we all really looked forward to it, and it gave you a buzz, it really did.

It was one of my favourite groups to go to if not the favourite. It had got all the elements, and we just had a great time. And ML encouraged us to write the song down, we were all given different themes, we could choose our themes. I chose nature and I talked about walking down by the canals and in the meadows and the fields, and it all rhymed.

You were given something that you didn’t realise you could do, because you wouldn’t normally sit there and start putting poetry to things, and ML provided the music with much encouragement from them both, and it was just great. We were put on Youtube, and what else could you possibly want!”

Learning something new

There was some evidence that carers increased their skills, knowledge and understanding of music. This included how to compose music/songs, understanding how to put ideas into lyrics, how to arrange music, technical aspects (such as rhythm, musical structure, elements and theory), vocal/breathing techniques, and learning new songs.

I was in a place where, with the Covid lockdown, I wanted more contact, and doing something new. When we write lyrics, I never knew I could write. I like writing poetry and things but I’ve learned a lot of things like how to rhyme them and brainstorm...When we were doing bits of learning about the actual music, like bridges and loops, and I was listening to things in terms of musical elements that I’ve never done before. I’ve felt quite musical actually. (*Carer: interview*)

I’d thought [there would] be more talking about our caring roles but what is really nice is that we don’t do that and we do something different and we play music for an hour and do musical stuff. Understanding how tracks are put together. (*Carer: interview*)

Engaging in group music making (notably singing) activities was something that many of the carers hadn’t done before, and involved stepping outside of comfort zones.

In one session a woman had written a song and she hadn’t done it before. It was so joyful. (*Music leader: interview*)

The creative aspect of the project has been really great... An excitement to create stuff themselves, that is their work. General willingness to just try stuff...That held true across all the groups, once they had come out of their shells a bit, felt like they were really up for trying. (*Music leader: interview*)

When we make up the songs you’re using your imagination and that gives you a boost because you’re exploring things that you’re not doing in normal day life and it’s a real boost to your mental health (*Carer: interview*)

For some, engaging with music continued beyond the sessions:

I was listening to something the other day and there were repetitive sections in it and I knew how it was put together so there's been a lot of pride in it, and excitement in that really.
(Carer: interview)

Debbie's story

(Pages 26/27: Portrait booklet)

Debbie cares for her 18 year old son who has autism. She shares the caring responsibilities with her partner, and she also works four days a week as a social worker. She would have preferred Hidden Voices to have been face-to-face rather than through Zoom, but she rediscovered her love of music nonetheless. She needed to do the sessions in her loft to minimise disruption to her son.

"We gradually put music together, taking stuff from around – just picking up stuff around you. A lot of the stuff that goes on in our loft is to do with railway modelling so there are all sorts of interesting bits and pieces in the loft. So I was shaking boxes of drawing pins which made a snare drum, and we just gradually put a track together. We would just do a bit each week."

Hidden Voices helped her to reconnect with her love of electronic music, and the synthesiser that she used to play.

"It was good for my wellbeing, cause it was just an hour that I was doing something for myself, and it's made me rediscover how therapeutic for me it is playing music. So sometimes it would finish and I would just carry on because I had everything out, particularly the synthesiser, I could just carry on and have a bit of a play afterwards... it's made me make sure for myself that it's something I'm going to continue."

OUTCOME 2: Feelings of social isolation and/or loneliness among participants are reduced

Regularly being in a virtual space together during challenging times created a real sense of community within each of the groups.

I've naturally felt connected with other carers... I think the music and the opportunity to come up with some lyrics and teambuilding has been a lovely exercise. That's made me feel quite connected... it's just been nice getting to know each other through the music and through the lyrics. It makes me feel we're all singing from the same hymn sheet really.
(Carer: interview)

Carers connected with each other, and with the music leaders, on multiple levels:

1. Through a sense of shared experience due to lockdown
2. Through their commonalities of having caring responsibilities
3. Through connecting with others in their communities
4. Connecting through the music itself.

A good sense of community, chatting, laughing together, encouraging one another to sing and applauding each other. (Music leader: reflective diary)

She was open in telling us about her hospital appointment – I think for many of the women, they have few people to talk to about these things, which is why the group is very important. *(Music leader: reflective diary)*

One woman mentioned she had had a hard week last week, but wanted to say hello this week as she felt a little better. Definitely connections being made, and women are feeling able to talk about feelings. Fantastic to hear P share song from nursery, that she remembered during our session – definite lift in mood from start of session, and feeling of connection between her and the other women. *(Music leader: reflective diary)*

A few of the woman noted how hard the lockdown feels this time round, and how important it is for them to get these sessions to supply them with space and interaction with people when normally they spend their time facilitating that for their children. It is clear the women are very aware of their isolation and feeling the lack of opportunities to connect with people. *(Music leader: reflective diary)*

Carers reported feeling happy and energised through being with each other again. For some they were seeing friends from existing groups, for others it was an opportunity for new friendships to develop.

We have had some friendships develop. Some of our families know each other. Some families we were referred by other agencies... Nice community to come into. *(Partner organisation: interview)*

They have started to build a relationship together and were asking each other about things going on in their lives. *(Music leader: reflective diary)*

We've had quite a small group, but I feel like P and I have worked really well together with ML and ML. We've got some kind of common ground. I feel connected to you all and I really will miss you all. I think we've made a great team. It's been fun. I think if we were doing it in person we would probably have coffee afterwards. I can imagine us doing that quite comfortably. It's obviously more difficult in this situation. *(Carer: interview)*

We don't even need to turn on the heating and have forgotten about the cold in the winter because of our warm friendship with one another. *(Carer feedback noted in Music leader reflective diary)*

However for some, the online space created barriers to building relationships.

If we'd met face-to-face it would have been so much easier and you have those conversations afterwards. You kind of connect with somebody in the group and you chat afterwards.. On Zoom you just press 'leave' and you're gone.. I think the Zoom bit has made that a lot harder and not wanting to impose on other people. *(Carer: interview)*

Face to face was magical, got to do a lot of karaoke style stuff, people could drop guard and blend in. But because we had to do it online, it was sort of a necessity to them to have that time. Was really important for them to meet every week. *(Music leader: interview)*

One important factor with creating ongoing connection and friendship was through the WhatsApp / WeChat groups that were set up by MAC / Chinese Community Centre. These informal conversations became a forum for sharing between the sessions – whether this was general chat, voice recordings,

pictures, links of interest, talk about what had happened or what would be happening in the sessions.

The communication that's kept outside the sessions through WhatsApp groups [has been effective]. Shows they want to be involved. *(Partner organisation: interview)*

With regard to social isolation it was good to see the women making friends in the session, but those friendships were bought outside of the sessions as well. Helped that we had WhatsApp group for the women, so there was daily use of that sharing ideas, songs, how are we all doing today. Had a huge positive impact on the social isolation aspect. *(Partner organisation: interview)*

They interacted well, will share things on the WhatsApp group.. sharing music, sharing interests, everyone values what everyone contributes, people take the time to listen to the piece of music, follow the links. A lot of our parents lose their friends, so this became a friendship support group. *(Partner organisation: interview)*

Quite evident they are keen to keep up the relationships even outside of the sessions. They have a very active WeChat group. Even after the music sessions end they want to still do something together on Tuesday nights. *(Music leader: interview)*

Damilola's story

(Pages 10/11: Portrait booklet)

Dami cares for her six year old son. She is from Nigeria and likes to sing, compose and meet new people. Before Hidden Voices she used to write her own songs, but Hidden Voices has helped increase her confidence to do more. Hidden Voices for Dami was a way that she could connect with others from Nigeria as well as from other communities.

"Hidden Voices project is actually a platform whereby you can help yourself more to develop your voices.

Meeting people, seeing new faces, and you know – a lot of people, it's always a lovely time you know. During that period everybody's happy, everybody's laughing. There is a way we communicate that feels like home, it feels like that is your family as of that moment. It's not like when there is a physical gathering, but on Zoom we still feel connected together.

Meeting people is something that is lovely, especially when they come from my country, my tribe. So one thing about meeting – that is one of the lovely thing about meeting people – when they are from the same place that you come from. And with Hidden Voices it was so amazing because they gave you that platform to be able to share your song with everybody if it's in your dialect. So there's no language barrier at all, so that is really amazing because everybody is one."

Combatting loneliness

Lockdown forced everyone into isolation, and this had a particularly drastic impact on those carers who were shielding vulnerable family members, or who were shielding themselves. Loneliness is a state of sadness or depression caused from feeling alone, and in some of the carers cases even though they were in a home with others, they still felt lonely and isolated.

In the lockdown sometimes you feel so alone so it was a good thing when I came on there and meet all you lovely ladies and sing some songs together, it was amazing. The music and the people talking, it kind of relieves your tension, not going in stressed or feel alone anymore cause you think oh we've got Wednesday. We're all women and we're standing together and we're not alone. (*Carer: interview*)

During the discussion about the songs I could see how spending time with the group has helped them to find a place of joy and not be lonely. [One participant said] 'We don't feel lonely during this time because we have each other'. (*Music leader: reflective diary*)

Partner organisations and music leaders noted visible improvements in carers when they saw each other and knowing that others are there. This was particularly noted at the beginning of each lockdown.

When we started the project... a lot of the parents were feeling really anxious, frustrated, lonely, isolated, they weren't getting a break, [they were] exhausted. That's when we started WhatsApp groups...sending craft packs for the parents... The first few sessions were just about talking through what had happened, and people sharing. For them to feel like they weren't alone and were able to share. (*Partner organisation: interview*)

P has been a regular attender since before lockdown, happy logging on, but going into Christmas we saw her mental health deteriorate, she would say how much she was struggling, she had dodgy internet connection and we would sometimes lose her. P would speak about her life was empty, no weddings, no going to the mosque together, no sharing of food... But you could visibly see her mood lift when she saw one of her friends join. She got much more vocal, slowly started including her songs on the playlist. (*Music leader: interview*)

Encouraging carers to share openly, to guide each session without any particular pressure, and to gently create and make music together led to a safe environment where carers felt they could be open about their feelings. This helped with reducing feelings of loneliness.

Discussion around mental health of participant – sharing concerns and worries around the pandemic and family life and for the community around her. Having space to talk about her feelings and worries and grief reduced her sense of loneliness and isolation. She is really glad to be making new friends (*Music leader: reflective diary*)

It was great to have activities otherwise I would feel lonely/mad. (*Carer: interview*)

This music leader noted how Zoom may have lent itself better than face-to-face for having this time and space to share and be open:

It did help their loneliness because we did far more talking online than we would have done in person. In person we would have gone straight into music. Online it slowed the musical process down but it allowed the conversation. Loneliness helped by identifying similarities. It wasn't about their caring roles, we just wanted them to share if they wanted to. I think we made it a place for them rather than about being a carer, and putting labels on them. (*Music leader: interview*)

For some carers the Hidden Voices sessions represented one of their few social outlets during the lockdown:

P told me that because she looks after her older son who has additional needs, she doesn't talk to anyone else throughout the week. Lives on her own, feels really isolated. Coming to Hidden Voices gave her something to look forward to, if it wasn't for that she wouldn't have spoken to anyone all week. *(Music leader: interview)*

A few of the woman noted how hard the lockdown feels this time round, and how important it is for them to get these sessions to supply them with space and interaction with people when normally they spend their time facilitating that for their children. It is clear the women are very aware of their isolation and feeling the lack of opportunities to connect with people. *(Music leader: reflective diary)*

Wendy's story

(Pages 22/23: Portrait booklet)

Wendy is a carer for her elderly mother. She talked about how Hidden Voices helped her to relax, introduced her to singing, and encouraged her to make some new friends.

"I can't relax. Because you know every day I do [things]...so I can't get the time there. So everybody to – dancing – and laughing, so I really enjoy it, and I guess I relax there.

I don't care, I'm me, is the singing good or not? But I can sing. I can sing now! Before I not, before a long time I didn't sing it. So [it was] really hard when I started, so now I don't mind me singing ok. I don't care is it good or not. So I'm happy then. I get some new friends. Because now I get a lot of friends there. So, with the friends there I get a lot. So in this time, my life, got a little bit wider."

OUTCOME 3: Self-esteem of the participants is increased

In session observations where songs were being shared and celebrated, there was a noticeable sense of pride from the carers about what they had created together. They were smiling while their songs were being shared, and wanted to talk about what they had done.

Yes I feel a bit proud because these songs, they're going to be there forever. It's going to be out there and it will be an inspiration to all those other people, because all of those songs have meaning. *(Carer: interview)*

I don't have the confidence to speak in English, first of all, because my English isn't good. It was so hard for me to sing and record my voice and send it to someone but I did it and now I'm very proud of myself that I did this thing. *(Carer: interview)*

Skills in singing, feelings of accomplishment, sense of pride of writing lyrics. You could see the pride in people's faces. *(Music leader: interview)*

For the first time I have recorded my voice and that has made me feel proud. *(Carer feedback noted in Music leader reflective diary)*

Some carers expressed how they have shared songs they created with their families, and that they feel proud of themselves for learning new musical skills and knowledge, and for being more confident.

When we write lyrics, I never knew I could write. I like writing poetry and things but I've learned a lot of things like how to rhyme them and brainstorm them and then the pride in that when we put it to music and when Peter did the music last week to our last one it was just brilliant. It was a lot of pride. I sent it to my parents so they could listen to it. I feel quite proud of what we do in the sessions. *(Carer: interview)*

We made a song! We did and we sung it! I've been telling people, including my children and they've been like "really"?! It really has helped with self-esteem greatly I think. *Carer: interview)*

My proudest moments have been that understanding of electronic music and totally reconnecting with my synthesiser. The fact that it still works and I can still remember how to use it, that was my proudest moment....*(Carer: interview)*

Carers were able to make a positive contribution to the sessions, at whatever level they felt comfortable. There was clearly some anxiety at first around singing (in general and in front of other people) but it appeared by the end of the project all were comfortable with contributing to some extent.

At the beginning when you ask people to sing on their own not everyone was - there was a little bit of anxiety - if you never did this before, I would get nervous! But now, I feel, they are waiting for their turn. And if anyone missed, they would say hey I haven't sung! *(Partner organisation: interview)*

At the final session a lot of people wanted to sing on their own, to sing their songs. Making a video of the song that a couple of women wrote, others have contributed to it - using videos from other sessions. They have managed to achieve that - that was a skill barrier, but quite a few people did it. People who did it - really pushed themselves to do it. *(Music leader: interview)*

One lady, used to be half her face off camera, especially if we go round and do singing, but then she was happy to join in, show her face, correct people... I noticed that, she started to say more things.. Willingness to participate and feeling comfortable to do that. *(Music leader: interview)*

While the collective process of creation was the focus, all groups produced some form of musical output that they felt proud of. They could see and hear themselves in the music that was created, even though they acknowledge the professional input of the music leaders.

You actually produce something. That's the thing about this. Although you're on Zoom, it's also practical. You've got an end result. *(Carer: interview)*

ML and ML have done an awful lot of work behind the scenes pulling it all together and making it into something but I can still see our words and remember the conversations we had when we were developing it and how we felt and what we thought, so that's really nice. *(Carer: interview)*

Some partner organisations expressed surprise at the willingness of carers to contribute in the way that they did:

All of a sudden [they] found their voice and started writing lyrics to do spoken word that meant something to them. Then they started doing things like rhyming to it, sing to it. I've known these for six years and I've never seen that before. *(Partner organisation: interview)*

Omowunmi's story

(Pages 18/19: Portrait booklet)

Omo is a full time mother to two young children. She is from Nigeria, and has been in the UK for 9 years. Hidden Voices was a way of her connecting with others in her community and helped with the isolation she was feeling.

"Hidden Voices is a good project I can say, because it gives women the chance to speak their mind. So we get to know each other, we get to know what everybody is facing, what you see around you in your community especially, how people relate to you, you tend to know them, they get to know you, and it gives you the opportunity to meet other people..... There's someone to talk to, there's someone to relate to your problems. What is going on around you, what is going on in your community, especially someone in your home. Someone to speak to.

I love music, and I love dancing. But I don't really know how to make song. But, before we could get to a song, you know, in the project that I know to make music is not easy. I want to say 'my name is Omowunmi, look at the music'. I have to practice and practice. And practice. If you keep on practising anybody can – can you just give us a voice and see what it is like.

I can remember the last music, I sang for the last time, the last one that we sang – what is the chorus again – I think it was one that bring the voice out – P – she was the one who bring the beat. There wasn't a beat before, we was just singing, but she just brought out the beat – it was lovely. What I want to do, is let me hear the music and I want to dance to it."

Feeling confident

For many carers their confidence increased during the project, both in music making/creating and confidence about themselves personally. Examples given of this included: showing more of themselves on camera, unmuting themselves and singing along, being more willing to share musical ideas.

They are engaging in creative music making and leading how the song comes alive, and are very keen for it to reflect their culture. As they do this over the weeks it is great to see some of the quieter members of the group come forward with their contrasting ideas and want to be involved too. *(Music leader: reflective diary)*

The ladies are increasing in confidence with singing, and it was lovely that P was teaching us the Arabic lyrics, and despite being shy about it, singing the lyrics too. It feels like the women are growing in confidence from week to week, both in chats and also in participation with the activities, and willingness to open us. *(Music leader: reflective diary)*

Many referred to the growth in confidence over time – albeit slowly for some – and the personal journeys that participants went on.

At first I wasn't so confident in myself, but ML and ML give you this confidence boost. When I first joined I was umming and ahing because of my low confidence but after the first session I was like 'ooh okay'. I did feel confident but I think it's grown slowly and surely through the sessions. *(Carer: interview)*

When I first started everybody [was] on mute, a lot off camera. As we've got to know each other seen them send own videos, voice memos of them singing. All now on camera. Carers are more than confident to do that, for me that shows increase in self-esteem. (*Partner organisation: interview*)

Pretty much all of the participants that I had interaction with all visibly grew in confidence throughout the sessions, even in their body language. P started with her camera only showing the top of her head, over a few weeks she came out of her shell more, and was more happy to engage and be more present in the space. (*Music leader: interview*)

P is one of our most bubbly carers. But when she started she wouldn't talk because she was nervous. Seeing her settle down, calm down and just be in the session was a good sign of her confidence. Feel that she is coming out of herself, able to express herself more clearly than before. Often she would mention things out of context, out of time. Sometimes this is nerves. (*Music leader: interview*)

You could see the growth in confidence across the sessions. Some of the women had been quite reluctant to share ideas in the initial couple of sessions... As time went on, definitely confidence and self-esteem. It was clear there was a correlation with the project, improvement in confidence. (*Partner organisation: interview*)

This music leaders identified a fluctuation in carers' confidence due to the pressures and challenges of going in and out of lockdown:

Before Covid P was one of the more vocal ones.. Didn't see her for a long time, and when she signed on it was like seeing a different person. Had caved in on herself, has four children at home, her quote was 'I just feel like I'm in prison, is horrendous'. She was really different - no energy. Before Christmas, came out of her shell again, started unmuting, and her and P would unmute together. (*Music leader: interview*)

An increase in knowledge and understanding of music, and of how to sing, play and create potentially led to an increase in confidence:

Feel better, confident – feel have done something good because [I] let something out of myself. I feel good, happy, it brightens my knowledge and gives me more confidence. (*Carer: interview*)

I recognise that I've learnt some musical input and it's actually really improved my confidence and my self-esteem. (*Carer: interview*)

P is becoming more independent with her song writing, we also discussed her finding rhythms she liked. She is more confident now with taking part in the course and she was happy her questions were answered. (*Music leader: reflective diary*)

The ladies shared about how this has increased their confidence to try new things. (*Music leader: reflective diary*)

Sarah's story*

(Pages 4/5: Portrait booklet)

Sarah is a mother of two adult children, and a grandmother. She cares for her adult daughter. She found Hidden Voices on the Midland Mencap website and decided she would try and give it a go because she had an interest in music.

“I was told at school that I was tone deaf and my confidence when I first started the Hidden Voices was quite low. And I thought it would be a good way to increase my self-esteem and my confidence, and meet different people, and put myself out of my comfort zone

I was so surprised how quickly I felt comfortable in my Hidden Voices group... I also found a talent that I feel I never realised I had, which was writing lyrics. And this really increased my confidence over the weeks. Through Hidden Voices I feel my voice as a carer has – how can I say – increased in confidence, and that I have found a voice.

As a lifelong survivor of domestic violence I’ve never really done... so I think this has actually helped me in other areas of my life to project my voice a bit more, even to the people closest to me, that I have been able to do that.”

Since participating she has gone onto other projects to do with music, including the Quench Arts training.

**Name has been changed*

There was some evidence that Hidden Voices supported carers in other areas of their life, particularly with feeling good about themselves in general, and recognising that they have an important voice.

The manager of [the] service spoke to me of concern about depression of the carer. But now she became part of the group, was a massive positive of the group - initially someone we were really concerned about their wellbeing, and then it's come to a point where they don't necessarily need us. *(Partner organisation: interview)*

It has been fun for them and it has greatly helped them to stay well as much as possible. *(Partner organisation: interview)*

For others it affirmed the greatness of women, and being around other women. It was one way of sharing more about their own identities and what is important to them.

I feel great to be a woman. It's been a great time, great moments with great people. I feel great knowing this - discovering yourself as a woman and the true qualities you possess. I look forward to each session. I did enjoy myself. *(Carer: interview)*

Reham's story

(Pages 16/17: Portrait booklet)

Reham is a carer for her two young sons. Her eldest son has been diagnosed with autism, ADHD and sensory processing disorder, and her other son has undiagnosed learning difficulties. She is originally from Yemen. She found that Hidden Voices was a way of her having some time to herself, and to connect with others facing similar challenges and caring responsibilities.

“The most thing I like about it [Hidden Voices] is to have that time for myself. Even if it's just an hour, to have it just for me, and also... when you have a [child with] special [educational] needs it's

very hard to have a social life, really hard to have friends, really hard to go outside like a normal mum holding your kids.

So when I joined the session of Hidden Voices I made some new friends, and we are still until now contacting each other on WhatsApp, and that was very good to see new faces, to talk with new people you don't know."

She particularly enjoyed some of the breathing exercises that they did in the sessions, and uses these during challenging moments in her daily life.

"I like also the exercise that we did for breathing, the meditation, that was my favourite part in Hidden Voices cause I really liked when ML did that exercise, and I continued to do it, even when I feel like I'm so stressed and I can't breathe. I woke up in the morning and because ML shared also us some videos for meditation, so I just have a look at the videos and continue to do the same exercise for breathing."

She acknowledges that her self-esteem and confidence grew during the project, as music was something new to her.

"Actually, it first of all, it was the first experience for me and you know when you try new things and you find it good, and feel proud of yourself, and what was first time on my life to sing a song and record it and send it to someone else. So it was, at the time I tried to sing a song and thought my voice is not good, and ML encouraged us to record our voice and just send it to them and it was also nice to sing it together.

I think music has really helped us as a mother as a better mum, as a carer, to release our stress and relax, and it's good also to have something for ourself."

Since Hidden Voices she has joined the Quench Arts training, and is now learning the guitar.

Helping and supporting others

There were many ways in which carers helped and supported each other through the sessions, which often leads to an increased feeling of self-worth. Examples were given of carers welcoming and encouraging one another, listening and hearing other carers' stories, helping each other with tasks, and supporting with interpreting. Across the groups, the carers' willingness and natural instinct to help one another, even though they were all dealing with their own challenging circumstances, was profound.

Second lockdown, lots of anxieties, someone had Covid, they became a support for each other.. they felt appreciated. *(Partner organisation: interview)*

Really was important for their wellbeing to come together and support each other. *(Music leader: interview)*

I take my mind off me by helping others. *(Carer feedback noted in Music leader reflective diary)*

P and P are Spanish-speakers although they hadn't met before. P found it hard to understand some of the things we were talking about and P acted as translator for her – which felt really positive and empowering for both women. *(Music leader: reflective diary)*

There was some evidence of carers helping each other with creating the music:

P and P both shared how their weeks are going, and were very open about how they were struggling with different things amidst lockdown and Covid changing things. They were really compassionate, both towards each other, but also in thinking about the rest of the group and how to get them involved and feeling ownership over the song too. They very much led the direction of today's session, and are very open about the benefits these sessions have on their well-being and the enjoyment they get from them. *(Music leader: reflective diary)*

P then taught us how to pronounce the words for the part of the chorus which we tried to learn. We finished by listening to Dil Bechara, a suggestion from P on our playlist who shared why she chose it. *(Music leader: reflective diary)*

For some the sessions were affirmative, enabling carers to recognise how much they have to give to others and to society, which was a way of increasing their self-esteem.

Not just in terms of music, self-esteem as women, as people who can contribute to the society they live in, a lot of them have jobs or want jobs, want to contribute. There is something really soul enhancing about being in the group where everyone is encouraging of others. Really helped people's self-esteem within unusual circumstance. *(Music leader: interview)*

P has been embracing her skill and been nurturing everyone else. *(Music leader: reflective diary)*

P is also volunteering for NHS at a Covid vaccination centre. I think this is amazing, given all the things she is going through. Wish this could be a media headline. She cannot as an asylum seeker work but she is volunteering. Amazing! *(Music leader: reflective diary)*

[They] support each other's self-esteem. When somebody does something everyone applauds and encourages. People talking and sharing songs and stories. Has helped them being able to be themselves and be listened to. I'm not sure if we would have got the same effect in a physical group, being behind a screen a bit of a protection. *(Partner organisation: interview)*

Saeeda's story

(Pages 6/7: Portrait booklet)

Saeeda is the founder of Balsall Heath CATS, one of the partner organisations in the Hidden Voices project. She is a parent of four children and carer for her daughter who has a learning disability.

Hidden Voices was a way of learning new skills and supporting her wellbeing when things got particularly challenging during lockdown.

"From the Hidden Voices what we've gained is confidence and knowing that we can do things that we assumed we wouldn't be able to do. Like writing a song, I never thought in my life that I would be sitting there trying to write a song. And also, it came at the time when you know, with lockdown, and not seeing people, it's just building friendships and breaking down barriers. The majority of our parents feel isolated and excluded from day to day life, and because of their children's needs they don't seem to interact with other people because life is very hard, and caring.

I was going through a phase of feeling low, depressed, down – being a person who is always out and about, doing things, and being isolating and away from people, and personally... I don't think I can live without people, and communicating with people. So that was my link to the outside world and the community.

[The music] relaxed you, it took you out of your zone – comfort zone really – and put you in a situation where I don't think I would ever have sat there to sing...It didn't feel like 'I feel a bit stupid', it was like with people who I knew so we were all in the same boat. And you can mute! So the best bit was you can mute!

In the end we wrote our own song and it was one of the parents who had the initial idea to say Alhamdulillah, and Alhamdulillah means being thankful. So we did, and really, it was all our work that went into that song.

I know I chair Cats, and I know a lot of the parents but I've never really had that personal connection with them. Through this I did, and I got to know them, and we've become friends more and we can really talk to each other, approach each other, and I know – one of the parents and myself we started going on walks. Because she knew I wasn't in a good place, so she rang me and said 'oh let's go for a walk' and so we did. And you know, it's having that network and that support group there. And it breaks down barriers and it really builds up those relationships."

Overall effectiveness of the programme

Hidden Voices has evidently met the intended outcomes for participants, despite the challenges posed to its implementation by the COVID-19 pandemic.

An important part of this programme's aims and intention was the way in which it advocated to the arts and cultural sector for working with carers, as well as considering how a programme of this scale can be sustained beyond the Spirit of 2012 funding.

The importance of partnerships

This was a complex programme with a number of different partners involved. Spirit of 2012 had a guiding and strategic role, implementing an evaluation framework across 10 programmes in England. MAC were the recipients of the funding, with the strategic and operational oversight, and Midland Mencap and Quench Arts had core roles with supporting aspects of programme delivery and recruiting carers. The grassroots community organisations involved – Balsall Heath Cats; Birmingham Mind; ASIRT; Home Group and the Chinese Community Centre – had critically important roles with bringing carers on board. Members of staff from these organisations were present at most sessions, and took an active role in supporting carers to participate. The charity Resource for Autism signposted carers to the activity.

I'd say it's enabled MAC to build links with different carer groups, particularly female groups, different cultural backgrounds. Making the partner organisations more aware of the benefits of music making. (*Partner organisation: interview*)

For many, the partnerships element of the project was reported as effective – having bridge organisations in place who have the local expertise, and with MAC and Quench Arts bringing musical expertise and insight.

The programme did face challenges at a strategic and management level. There was administrative support for the programme throughout, and this was invaluable particularly at the point where the sessions moved online and increased communication and support for the carers was needed (see below). However, senior staffing changes, staff being on furlough, and gaps in overall programme management meant that aspects of Hidden Voices that were reliant on being driven by someone strategically (partnership development, advocacy, sustainability for example) weren't as effective as they could have been.

This was an exceptional time, with unforeseen circumstances that were difficult to plan for, however it does raise the need to have a staffing contingency plan in place for a project of this size with multiple partners to ensure continuity and consistency.

Despite these internal challenges, much was shared about the important, caring and nurturing role that MAC took when the project could resume.

MAC listened to us as a partner organisation - we know our families, they worked with us, asked us, that's really important, that's why the project worked...For the MAC to value us as a partner, listen to our ideas about how to engage with the families. *(Partner organisation: interview)*

I think that the fact...that MAC could find a Chinese speaking musician was a success, was a very good doing, that was important. That was a big factor of the success. *(Partner organisation: interview)*

Some of the carers shared how the personal and regular communication from the project administrator played an important role in making them feel included.

All of those little things are really really important to somebody like me. Even to get an email from O like 'hi 'P', just a reminder that this is the link...' because it makes you feel like you're part of something, gives you that connection and it also makes you feel like people involved are actually... How well organised it is. It's almost like you get this feeling of the connection is that you belong to something so it's a bit of an identity feeling. *(Carer: interview)*

In some cases, partners explained that because of the positive impact on the wellbeing of the carers, it eased their workload with the mental health support they needed to offer:

There were a few carers we were calling on a weekly basis before [Hidden Voices]. We were doing a wellbeing course. The minute the groups started and we were seeing them in the groups, we decided that they didn't need a weekly call anymore as they had something now to fill an hour. There is the hour attending and then the messages throughout the week. So we reduced weekly calls because they felt they are connected now. *(Partner organisation: interview)*

One partner talked about how Hidden Voices has been a positive catalyst for working more closely with other organisations:

Since I've been doing HV, we've also been working alongside Midland Mencap who were introduced to us - have made several referrals within each others service for support. Also collaborated on own Facebook pages, showing how important music is, how important having this respite is, where it has been passed onto our commissioners, they have seen

importance of group like this. I now have really good connection with people at the Mac. Everyone involved is getting something positive. *(Partner organisation: interview)*

Sustainability of the programme

The majority of those involved - carers, music leaders and partner organisations - expressed a wish for the project to continue.

I hope MAC take it on as an organisation, I hope they think about ways to work with carers, women particularly that isn't directly aimed at their children. *(Music leader: interview)*

If you're asking would we want this to be sustained and developed: absolutely. Should harness and enable that. In the end families need that space, and a safe space to do stuff in the community. All of the social value that is created by projects like this are incredible. If it can bring people together, raise awareness of the issues, and enable some fun and enjoyment. *(Partner organisation: interview)*

I feel there is a huge demand for [Hidden Voices], particularly for the women we work with. The group we've just been through are interested and keen to continue, we could recruit new women interested in singing and the musical aspect. *(Partner organisation: interview)*

Some measures were put in place to support carers to be able to continue with music making beyond the programme – web-based resources and tools created by the music leaders, and for some being able to attend a training programme with Quench Arts to help to cascade musical skills (see below). However resourcing for sustainability was an issue. MAC distributed 10 tablets loaded with three months of data to some of the carers, as well as some percussion instruments and ukuleles. However, the tablets didn't reach the carers until towards the end of the project, and will need to be returned.

Funding is a major barrier to sustainability. Much advocacy is needed (see below) around the social value of this work, and the potential social return on investment through increasing wellbeing and reducing burdens on community organisations. The majority of carers involved in Hidden Voices do not have the financial capacity to pay for music activities for themselves. Therefore a combination of trusts and foundations, local authority and small amounts of funding from partner organisations could be explored if MAC strategically takes this on as a long-term community engagement programme.

One partner explained how the commissioning landscape is changing, with an emphasis on co-production and co-design with community groups. As evidenced above, Hidden Voices did just this.

[Co-production is a] new way of working, has to be managed carefully and systematically re-managing expectations but also the communications side of things when working with [vulnerable] individuals. *(Partner organisation: interview)*

This sort of project always needs someone to drive it, so without further investment it is difficult to drive it forward at the same level. But hopefully it will give people the skills and the interests. If there was the budget to provide someone to run face to face sessions could be a huge impact. *(Partner organisation: interview)*

Really need the whole team that's been involved to understand how important it is, need to push for more funding, join forces with Midland Mencap, look at carers and young carers with this absolute need for doing this specific respite. *(Partner organisation: interview)*

Training programme as a route to sustainability

As part of Hidden Voices, Quench Arts designed a training programme for carers and support workers who wanted to further develop their skills and confidence with music. This was intended to develop potential music leaders for the sessions. However the timing of the training programme was delayed by MAC, meaning that it started later on during the programme than originally planned. This was a missed opportunity as it meant that carers involved weren't able to co-lead sessions with the music leaders as intended.

The training programme, like the Hidden Voices sessions, was devised around the interests of the carers, as well as providing one-to-one mentoring, and signposting to other musical opportunities. Participants identified their own development needs, which ranged from being able to facilitate others in lyric writing, filling in gaps in own music education, learning the basics of playing instruments, music production, songwriting, developing musicianship, developing confidence, to be able to help other carers sing with their children, to develop music that connects with own culture.

There is a bit of a training project where three people from our org are getting some training on how to facilitate music workshops, one of the parents agreed to do that. Really shone, was really into music, wanted to write her own song but with the added caring responsibilities has had to give up that. The sessions have inspired her. That would be something that we would never have known about her. *(Partner organisation: interview)*

In the evaluation of this training conducted by Quench Arts, carers were asked to consider whether the training has given them the tools to help other carers in the future, and whether the training has helped to support the Hidden Voices project outcomes. 100% said the training had helped a lot to improve their mental health and wellbeing; 85.7% said that it had helped a lot to reduce isolation and loneliness; 85.7% that it had helped a lot to give them an increased sense of potential; and 85.7% that it had helped a lot to provide opportunities for increased visibility and engagement between carers and the wider arts and cultural sector.

When I first joined the training I felt really out of my depth. I do not have a musical background and have never used it within my working day. I now have the confidence to try and incorporate it into my sessions. *(Carer feedback to Quench Arts)*

It's been a pleasure to be on the course and learnt new techniques alongside that I will be using in my group activities. Of course, I am not an expert on any of it and one wouldn't think of becoming one after the course however it definitely has raised a level of awareness regarding music making and using different tools to aid in the development of it. *(Carer feedback to Quench Arts)*

With this training I have been able to gain more confidence. I also have access to a lot of things which I don't know. Things like song writing with bandlab, fender, musical instruments, warm ups, percussions and a whole lot of things also been able to teach the group song too it has also added to my confidence. *(Carer feedback to Quench Arts)*

Advocacy for the engagement with carers

The programme has served to raise awareness internally – with carers, music leaders, partners, and with MAC – of the pressures of responsibility carers have, and the urgent need for respite that music can bring. There was desire from those involved to find ways of sharing more broadly the importance of the work that carers do, and how music can support them.

I feel like carers are so overlooked... they're the ones in their houses, but still caring and looking after people... They give so much of themselves but don't give anything back. A lot of them are isolated, they are live-in carers, they are needed, they dedicate this time for other people. The carers expressing to me about appreciating the time, how much they get out of music therapy. Really need it. Even just to have that time to themselves. *(Music leader: interview)*

Carers wouldn't get social prescribing, no opportunity for respite, constantly judged by children's services, social services about whether they are doing a good job... So opportunity to participate in arts activities that are for them [are] so invaluable yet so rare. *(Music leader: interview)*

Really important to think how a project like this who can link up with organisations that not only allow them to discuss their caring responsibilities, but also use music as a way to express emotions and things you might not talk about. *(Music leader: interview)*

It has demonstrated some of the challenges of working with that group - recruiting is hard, people are busy. But when you can get them along it is hugely valuable... despite the low numbers everyone has had a positive experience. *(Music leader: interview)*

I see it being a lot more successful if it was in the physical space again. With the way things are changing, looking more positive, would be incredible to start that again. Funding always an issue but this is why it's important to explain to commissioners how relevant it has been. If there is ever a chance of getting funding to do this again, we need to carefully consider it, because it is something we need to do for their futures. I do see deterioration otherwise. *(Partner organisation: interview)*

There was a missed opportunity for advocacy activities that could have happened during the project, for example sharing learning as it emerged with the arts and cultural sector, and when social distancing restrictions lifted bringing some carers and partners together at MAC for a celebration. The musical outputs that the carers produced haven't been made available publicly, but some of the music leaders felt this would be an empowering thing to do.

It would be nice to be able to - a lot of things we have done are confidential - but they're not against wanting to share their work, either with the other groups, or showcase the work. That wasn't the aim of the project, just an outcome that happened. *(Music leader: interview)*

Giving an opportunity for people who are massively marginalised and becoming more so, giving them a space for their experiences to be told and experienced as well - through music, through song, rather than just a talking heads. Something really powerful about music - getting emotionally to reach an audience which words on their own do differently. *(Music leader: interview)*

Lastly, the most important group to advocate the benefits of music making to is the carers themselves. There were challenges reported with recruiting carers, for example: over 60s not being as aware of social media; music participation being restricted in some cultures; and carers anxiety over singing and feeling that music 'isn't for them'. MAC could do more advocacy work with carers to show them the benefits, and support with removing the barriers that they faced. Partnerships that MAC had firmly established before COVID-19 undoubtedly had better engagement and success

with engaging carers in the project than those that were still being established as the pandemic began.

If we said it's a music workshop, they wouldn't have been interested. Cultural and religious side for some of them they don't sing. (*Partner organisation: interview*)

To conclude this evaluation, a suggestion from one of the carers about how they would like to be interacted with in the future is compelling and relevant.

I'm going to be honest I was a bit dubious about 'Hidden Voices'. I thought is this is a bit of a disempowering term because I thought as carers does that mean we don't have voices, or we have voices that aren't being heard, it was like analysing it a bit too much. But then I thought it is what it is, somebody obviously came up with this project title but at least it was identifying us as carers, and it could be a platform for other creative things to come. And also, I have to say, I know it's a part of some of the work the MAC does, but it's probably the only project that I've been part of that I've actually really really enjoyed. Cause per se, MAC does have, lots of arts projects but I don't think they're that inviting or affordable for some of the local community including myself. (*Carer interview*)

Recommendations

Our input as evaluators was for a short period of time, however we have been able to explore with all stakeholders the impact of Hidden Voices for the carers involved, as well as the overall effectiveness of the programme. This has enabled us to provide some recommendations for how MAC could evolve and develop the programme, and similar programmes, in the future.

Recommendation 1: Partnerships

The current partnerships with the grassroots community organisations directly working with carer groups and MAC are strong, and should be sustained and developed to explore how the work can continue. There is the potential to use the success of Hidden Voices to leverage engagement with new partners, and to explore funding models for developing the work.

The co-constructed nature of the programme with carers was a particularly effective element. How might Hidden Voices evolve in consultation with the carers, particularly some of the carers who take an active role in galvanising others in their communities? Continue to involve carers in decisions around where and how the programme takes place – i.e. at MAC, in a community setting, online, or a combination of all – as well as co-creating content during the sessions.

Recommendation 2: Social value

There was an indication from some partners that by Hidden Voices supporting the mental health of carers, there was less need for them to provide mental health support, thereby reducing strain on their services.

Consider implementing a social return on investment exercise with key stakeholders to determine the social value of Hidden Voices. It wasn't within the scope of this evaluation to do this, or within the expertise of the evaluation team, but an exercise like this could support with securing funding for the continuation of the programme. If commissioning agencies, local authorities, funders had more data and evidence around this, it could be a compelling reason for investing in music projects for carers.

Recommendation 3: Advocacy

As identified there have been some as yet unexplored opportunities with external advocacy of Hidden Voices. We recommend that the portrait series commissioned as part of this evaluation is expanded to 20 portraits, and that this forms an exhibition at MAC that carers, partner organisations and potential funders are invited to, as well as the general public. This would serve to raise the profile of the project, of the work of carers, of the value of arts and cultural organisations working with carers, and would be an empowering experience for those involved in the project. It would also visually link the project to the core of MAC by having one of its community projects exhibited in the gallery area.

Recommendation 4: Training

As evidenced in this report, so much of the success of the programme relies on the expertise, skill, and leadership shown by the music leaders, and it is important that they are adequately supported. In many cases the sessions involved music leaders listening and responding to the carers share emotional, challenging, sensitive and potentially triggering issues. There appeared to be some inconsistency in the level of training music leaders had received to prepare them for this. We recommend that training in adult mental health is provided as standard prior to any delivery of activity working with carers, and that the format of music leaders working in pairs is maintained so that they can offer each other peer support. This music leader quoted below prompted this recommendation:

As artists often we uncover grief, loss because of the people we are serving. The chance to work together rather than being on our own is so wonderful. We've had to negotiate how we work together online - been a really positive process for me. If there were difficulties, we debriefed, if you're on your own they carry on with you all day. We were able to serve women's MH and wellbeing because there were two of us. *(Music leader: interview)*

Furthermore, to consider the timing and purpose of legacy training such as the Quench Arts work. For this approach to be most successful and sustainable, it should be embedded at a much earlier point in the process.

Recommendation 5: Co-creation

Involvement in the evaluation and the portrait series appeared to be empowering for the carers and provided an important opportunity for reflection on their own progress. We recommend that for future projects the evaluation team is engaged much earlier, so that an evaluation framework can be co-created with carers.

Acknowledgments and End Note

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It is often difficult to capture in words the depth of impact a project or intervention can have. Taking a creative evaluation approach through combining visuals, audio and data collection gave a multidimensional perspective that enabled us to create authentic depictions of some of the carers involved. To create this, we were welcomed into peoples' homes and personal spaces, when there was still a lot of anxiety around social interaction. Each portrait took up to two hours to capture, notably because of the time we happily invested in getting to know each of the women, and building up trust and rapport in order to enable them to feel comfortable. The carers were incredibly generous about sharing aspects of their lives. The struggles that many of these women face, and the burdens they bear, are profound, yet each carer had a dignity, pride, and willingness to help others that was incredibly moving.

Conversely, carers fed back to us that they enjoyed the process, and felt empowered by having their identities captured so accurately, in ways that they were comfortable with. They engaged in learning about the technicalities of the photography, and the co-creation of how the portraits should look.

We would like to thank **all** of the women involved in this programme, not only for their generosity of spirit and their kindness with participating in this evaluation, but for keeping going, for being beacons of light in their communities and families, and for so deeply caring.

Abigail D'Amore (lead evaluator) and Emile Holba (photographer)

Evaluation team

[Sound Connections](#)

[Abigail D'Amore](#): Lead evaluator

[Emile Holba](#): Photographer

[Helen Evans \(Sound Connections\)](#): Data analysis

[Nicola McAteer](#): Assistant evaluator

Appendix – examples of song lyrics

I thank you I appreciate you
For sharing your joy and sorrow
We are together once again
We are together once again
It's a happy time, a happy time
It's a happy time, a happy time
Though it's been a difficult time,
A difficult time, a difficult time,

I've found comfort
Sisters, tell me what you have!
I have joy. Joy joy joy
Joy everlasting for evermore

Don't be depressed or disheartened about being shut in
Don't be stressed , don't look at this like a sin
Throw all your worries in the bin
Make sure you wear a daily grin
There are so many things to do
Getting messy with lots of crafts and glue
Changing the walls to the colour blue
Thinking about people close to you
Isolation is what you make of it
Don't look back for the sake of it
Move forward in your day
Keeping anguish at bay
Keeping anguish at bay
Change being part of the rat race
It's ok to be stuck in once place
Bring into your life some grace
Life can be slower but get busy
Ring your old friends and feel a happy dizzy
Re-watch a film from your younger days
Remember when you were lazy in the month of May
Making daisy chains as you lay
With the clouds passing by
Looking up to the pure blue sky

Hope, hold on to hope.
Another day. Another day, another day is coming and I'm changing the world with my smile.
Changing the world, changing the world, giving positivity to the world
Never lose hope, Another day is coming.
Hope to my country Hope to my people
Hope to the world sharing positivity with the world
We need to move on
We need to move on
Wake up to reality
There is always a way out
There is always a way out
Because we can't go on like this.

We are women in this pandemic x 3
Vaccine is here
Now we can boogie,
And party all night long
We can boogie, boogie woogie woogie!

Vaccine is here, Vaccine is here!
Now we can boogie etc.

Not 2 metres, I want to hug hug hug hug.
I am looking forward to going out, celebrating with friends, family. See them more often, in reality not on zoom or facetime.
To sing and chat together, hug hug hug
When you get out, you can't help people – if someone you pass drops something, you can't give it back. It is so sad. I want to help others, show love, show kindness to people
To go back to normal – I wish for the vaccine to work well

Spread the light,
no matter what happens,
spread the light, to everyone;
Even if the world around you is broken,
We will never get the lights go dark!
With unity we can go through,
the worse things life brings
We can get through this together
With light, hope and love
from love comes the hope and light
The thing we have inside us is love
And with love we can create everything

We want to go out – Yeah! [Marching]
We want to see our friends – Yeah! [Hand on forehead]
We're tired of staying home – Huh! [Rubbing eyes]
Can't wait for this to end – Yeah! [Tapping wrist]
We want to hold hands
We want a cuddly hug
To laugh and play with you
Kick out this ugly bug.

England is the dream
It is opportunity
In other countries people have no peace and no money
But this dream, It's not easy.
It's a fight.

It's a blessing
In every country, there is racism
But there is opportunity
In other countries, people are too scared
In many countries, you can get a job if you know the right person
The diversity here is nice
We are mixing
We don't mind
A better place to be
The right place to be
In England,
The people have the opportunity to decide their future

Democracy is very important.
God bless the country.
People here are moderate, not extremist.
In England, all is not perfect.
It is difficult to integrate with other people.
People are kind.

I want a job
And the opportunity just to work
I want a job
If you let me.
I want a job
I'll show you what I can do
I want a job
And you'll see the skills I have

Party, party, party,
We'd love to party again
Face to face, being in the same room
People bustling around like there used to be before, The exciting crowd in Birmingham
Sitting together in a park,
Friends to visit for a cup of tea
Family visiting
Taking my son out to indoor play
Seeing children play and laugh all together
I would tell them Thank God we are still alive, and we can still see each other.
Give them a big hug,
We have missed you so much,
When everything comes back to normal we are going to appreciate them more