



SoundWaves Network South West

2021 – 2025

An Early Childhood Music Education Project

Final Report

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The Take Art Early Years project team

ABBREVIATIONS

CC or C	County Council or Council
CIC	Community Interest Company
CME:EC	Certificate for Music Educators: Early Childhood
CREC	Centre for Research in Early Childhood
ECME	Early Childhood Music Educator
SW	South West
SWNSW	SoundWaves Network South West

INTRODUCTION

'It's re-excited us. We were both a bit like, music – it's a specialist thing – but now rather than having a slot of music we're now weaving it in all the time.'
(Lead teacher, early years unit, Somerset)

The four year project (2021-25) SoundWaves Network South West (SWNSW) continued Take Art's established and successful SoundWaves model of early years music education practice, expanding it across the South West (SW) region in partnership with regional Music Education Hubs.

The start of the project coincided with the post-pandemic period when the early childhood and music education sectors were recovering and fragile. In its final two years the project coincided with the major transition for Music Education Hubs as they re-formed into fewer and larger Music Hubs (see Appendix 1). Both unpredictable factors affected the project's implementation and its potential effects and have highlighted how Take Art, as an independent cultural organisation, is able to be agile and responsive to changing contexts.

The expectation that evaluation will focus on internal, immediate and short-term effects of a project, at the level of children, practice and settings, can draw attention away from the larger scale issues. There is, however, a pressing need to understand how and why change occurs and this pulls the focus on to the wider contexts within which the SoundWaves project sought to create change. This is an important time to be taking a wide-angled view. The Music Hubs are settling into their new structures and a recently elected Labour government is introducing policy changes that will affect early childhood education. This evaluation therefore looked not only at the processes within the project, but also for what learning might be extrapolated to have wider applicability in the future, both within the SW region and nationally.

This evaluation has 5 'take-away' messages:

- 1 Regional disadvantage. The SW region presents a particular set of distinctive, regional challenges. The usual templates for disadvantage that inform the cultural sector nationally don't fit the SW region well and that misfit may hamper the ability of Take Art to design work that can ameliorate regional disadvantage.
- 2 Cross-sector work. Independent arts organisations such as Take Art can respond adaptively, creatively and expertly to the constant churn of policy and local area factors. As such they are key partners in cross-sectorial work with county education staff, early years practice hubs, music hub organisations and early years settings.
- 3 Expertise: The SoundWaves project has highlighted the need for expert early childhood music education professionals, to provide leadership at all levels.
- 4 Skills and Knowledge: Early childhood music education skills and knowledge and pedagogical coaching skills are key to the success of the practical work in placements.
- 5 Beliefs and Assumptions: There is a need to change beliefs and assumptions towards early childhood music among professionals at all levels, but particularly among those in positions of authority.

SUMMARY

- SoundWaves Network South West (SWNSW) was a regional network led by Take Art in partnership with 8 Music Education Hubs and partner organisations across the SW region, 17 early years settings and their staff, and the University of Plymouth. Initially funded for 3 years (2021-24) it received an extension grant to continue for 2024-25. The project placed Early Childhood Music Educators (ECME) in selected settings for an average of 10 visits (per setting).
- SWNSW continued an approach evolved over previous SoundWaves programmes. Take Art have achieved continuity from 2013 by linking together separate projects funded from varied sources.
- Take Art's long term strategic plan for the SoundWaves projects has been to establish and coordinate a shared vision of quality early childhood music practice across its network of regional partnerships.
- Take Art is flexible and creative in its project planning, so can manoeuvre in response to policy churn and the short-termism that results. Independent arts organisations are well placed to promote long-term, strategic thinking and provide expertise to external partners.
- Raising the quality of early childhood music education is a long-standing challenge which requires co-ordination between different organisations (Music Hubs, Education advisory teams, private early childhood providers, arts organisations, parent groups) if improvements are to be achieved.
- The improvements are greater from a 'slow burn', consistent approach that Take Art has been achieving in comparison with short-term or one-off projects. However, Take Art has been restricted by funding opportunities to projects that can be delivered in a relatively short time frame and this limitation rules out more ambitious interventions that could have greater impact in the longer term. Moreover, project funders typically call for innovation, which has had to be creatively accommodated while maintaining continuity.
- Take Art has evolved a 'signature' SoundWaves model of practice that is now widely recognised and is influencing practice across the SW region. It is based on a strong ideology of child-centric practice which defines its goals and expectations and guides the practical work in settings.
- The focus of the approach is on disseminating a non-specialist pedagogical model of embedded, everyday practice which early childhood practitioners can take over and continue.
- Music projects are presented to settings within the context of current Early Years practice and how it links to wider EY frameworks in order to increase perception of relevance, usefulness and commitment.
- This model of practice offers a core set of principles but is flexible to the needs and existing strengths of individual settings, music hubs and regional music leaders. The approach is attentive to the detail of implementation which helps to bolster its success. However, the Take Art team can only communicate and advocate, they have no authority to insist on changes and uptake, although working in partnership with regional education teams and/or music hub staff (as in some regions) can sometimes lend authority.

- The lead Take Art music educator, Jane Parker has been in position since 2018. Her long-term experience and knowledge of the programme and how it is implemented are crucial to its success.
- Defined expectations of the participating settings and early childhood practitioners increased commitment, helps to consolidate the professional learning and increases the chances of sustainability. Considerable care is taken to select settings which have the capacity to host the project.
- Expertise and leadership for early childhood music education within each SW Music Hub region is increased through the involvement of local trainee music leaders, referred to as Emerging Early Childhood Music Educators (ECME).
- Close links with the Certificate for Music Educators (CME) programme raise standards of practice. A majority of the Emerging ECME undertake the CME course, many supported by bursaries.
- The field of early childhood music is in need of more expertly trained early childhood music practitioners, and so to include Emerging ECMEs builds capacity for future work. However, it should be recognised that the inclusion of trainees adds to demands on the Lead ECMEs and project leader.
- The online 6 week training programme runs alongside the placements and consolidates learning for the setting practitioners while also reaching a greater number of practitioners across the region.
- The overall SWNSW programme is strongly led by the Take Art music lead supported by the manager. The progress of work in the settings is closely monitored. Well-judged, timely interventions and adjustments are made if necessary. All administrative detail is ably managed so that the project operates effectively. There is an ethos of efficiency and competence that instills confidence for all involved of a project well run.
- The worthwhile aim to cover the SW region meant that the project was spread thinly, moving between regions for annual periods rather than continuing through the 3 years of the project. The frequent changes in location create logistical and organisational demands.
- The continuity of investment in workforce development at all levels is building a network of skilled and qualified workforce across the SW region. This workforce has some resilience to sustain its activities in spite of the instability of both the early childhood and music education sectors. Regional early childhood music education leaders are the most effective when they have secure positions in Music Hub lead organisations.
- An early childhood education intervention is most effective when delivered by well qualified music educators to well qualified teachers as an extension of good practice, not as a substitute for initial training. Place-based integrated professional development through coaching – the mainstay of the SoundWaves approach - continues to be the most effective at producing long term change in practice, although it is also the most costly and time-consuming.

SECTION 1 – APPROACH TO THE EVALUATION

Evaluation has most value if it:

- moves beyond numbers and outcomes, to focus on the process
- moves beyond description of what took place to analysis that can inform future work
- has relevance and usefulness to a wider readership – beyond those directly involved.

It is not enough to know whether a programme has met its intended outcomes (Oancea, 2013). It is important to ask deeper questions about the problems, purposes, processes, and the wider context, taking a systems view (see next section). This evaluation has been concerned to understand how change might come about – what works, for whom and in what situations. A systems theory approach does not arrive at a simple linear thinking of inputs and outcomes but allows for more elements from the real world and wider context to be explored and included, together with a focus on change processes rather than end-points. In my view it is important that the cultural sector, hand-in-hand with the education sector, sees evaluation as an opportunity for learning rather than merely a tool of accountability.

The SoundWaves practice model has been refined over previous iterations of the project since 2013 and as an in-situ model of professional development has been demonstrated to be effective in developing the practice of the setting staff. The previous evaluation report detailed the effectiveness of the model in promoting the musical learning of young children (Barnes for Take Art, 2021). A parallel research study into SWNSW by Karen Wickett interviewed Music Hub leads and explored their current views and situations with respect to early years music together with their understanding of higher education training routes and opportunities (Wickett, 2024; Wickett & Parker, 2024). It would have been unproductive to merely repeat what has already been thoroughly evaluated and reported in prior and parallel documents.

So, this report aims to fulfil the role of evaluation in that it is based on a clear-eyed analysis of the project work but also aims to have something useful to say for future work. Moreover, this approach seemed particularly relevant and important at a time when the Music Hubs have been reorganised and changes in policies are being issued by a recently elected Labour Government that will affect the early years sector.

It is also my view – a view widely shared by others in the arts and cultural sector (see for example resources on *The Centre for Cultural Value* website) – that an evaluation should normalise the acknowledgement of complexity and not provide a tidy story of successes that smooths out or hides the complexities (Jancovich & Stevenson, 2023). Effortful, hard and committed work, with clear aims and purposes will always come up against barriers, challenges and constraints – as well potentials, possibilities and unexpected successes. Complexity is the reality.

The project has been carefully tracked and monitored. Throughout its 4-year lifespan a copious quantity of information has been gathered and collated including:

- annual interim progress reports
- an extensive research project with report written by Karen Wickett (2024)
- final notes and interviews with setting staff collated by Jane Parker
- powerpoint presentations by setting staff
- plans and notes by visiting musicians
- 5 field visits to settings to observe work in action by Susan Young
- steering group agendas, presentations & minutes collated by Jennie Loader
- emails between project manager, leader and evaluator collated by Susan Young

It should also be pointed out that monitoring approaches were built into the delivery and the Project Lead kept a close eye on quality of practice and the progress of each placement. End-of-project conversations served to consolidate the learning and gather information for Take Art's internal monitoring purposes and inform the regular meetings of the steering group. In addition, practitioners in the settings were required to give a final presentation, and this served as a way to ensure their commitment to the learning, to evaluate that learning and thus, by inference, to judge the level of quality of musical experiences and learning received by the children.

If documentary evidence is required to validate outcomes, it can be produced from these accumulated sources of information.

Evaluation Method

'Deep hanging out'

Trained in anthropology I engage in what is often referred to as 'deep hanging out' (see Clifford, 1996). This is a field research method that involves informal immersion in a setting to gain a deeper understanding of the activity and context. It involves sometimes participating, sometimes observing and sometimes asking questions, much like being a member of the group while also retaining a critical distance. Thus I match my visit to a setting to arrive with the music educators. I may help unload the boot of their car, carry stuff in and set up. I watch the children and families arrive. I notice the locality and its housing. I look at the setting environment and the buildings, read what is posted on the walls, look at what is set out for the children to play with. I observe and chat with the staff and play with the children. All the time I make jottings in a field notebook, of anything and everything, facts and impressions.

Systems Theory Approach

From my background in education theory I approach evaluation from a systems theory view. Systems theory understands that projects in education take place within a broader context that spans all levels from policy to practice. This context is made up of a series of 'interconnected moving parts' that ideally need to function together. A systems theory approach aims to be a realistic, respectful and viable method for carrying out evaluation since it attempts to understand the issues and problems that characterise the whole project system. Taking account of and trying to understand the complexity of the system is essential in analysing the process; the 'how' a project is working.

The SWNSW project brought together a network of organisations and stakeholders:

- the early years settings (maintained, voluntary/charity or private)
- county early years education services
- music [education] hubs and their many partner organisations
- arts organisations

Importantly a systems theory approach recognises that these organisations bring contrasting philosophies, agendas, purposes and practices that must co-exist and may work together or may compete.

This type of analysis is not only a method for developing an understanding of the whole system, it tries to look at the different levels and identify where change at one level of the system – maybe an enthusiastic, capable practitioner or a national change in policy – can have a dynamic influence on other levels. It thus avoids the mistaken idea that change is linear; that change in practice at a local scale can scale up and diffuse at higher levels, or vice-versa, that a change in policy will simply cascade downwards.

What has become apparent through SWNSW is that the most promising opportunities for change are then best met through an entrepreneurial outlook and flexibility. Arts organisations are well suited to entrepreneurialism in project design and implementation since they are agile and independent, not tied, or at least less tied, to national policy or regulation. Take Art is a small, organisation with a core set of staff, with long experience in planning creative approaches and strategies and in working cross-sectorially. A good example of the flexibility of local independent arts organisations was in evidence when Take Art collaborated with SoundStorm – another small arts organisation working locally in Bournemouth - to extend the Sound Waves model in the final year of the project.

A systems theory approach also calls for critical thinking about the contextual conditions (the system) that influence the project, the motivations and contributions of those involved and the different interpretations and assumptions about early childhood music. In that respect, the changing of beliefs and assumptions towards early childhood music is a constant and ongoing task (see Case Study: ‘the penny drops’). Among all those involved there needs to be a constant dialogue reflecting on the purposes and values that underpin early childhood music and which may involve making more explicit the attitudes and assumptions that can be a barrier to longer-term and embedded change.

Literature and Policy Review

This evaluation was also informed by a detailed reading of current policy documents, grey literature and research literature which is referenced where relevant.

SECTION 2 – STRUCTURES & CONTEXTS

The Project Structure

Key to the SoundWaves model is that music educators work as mentors to the practitioners in a setting, not as specialist music leaders. Their aim is to hand over a model of generalist music education practice which is integrated into the existing culture and practice of the setting.

Each placement followed this structure and sequence:

- Introduction: Initial communications by Take Art manager, launch meetings and launch CPD sessions with staff.
- 10 half day visits by the Lead Early Childhood Music Educator (Lead ECME) and Emerging Early Childhood Music Educator (Emerging ECME).
- An identified Music Champion in each setting worked alongside the Lead ECME
- The Lead ECME coached both visiting Emerging ECME and the setting staff in a model of integrated non-specialist music education
- Each half day visit concluded with a half-hour reflection and discussion between all involved professionals
- The Take Art project lead monitored the progress of the project, making occasional visits.
- The Music Champion, other setting staff, and the Emerging ECME shared their learning in a concluding presentation event (online) supported by the Lead ECME and project lead.

The project structure was interwoven with professional training opportunities:

- Many of the Emerging ECMEs undertook the Certificate in Music Education (Early Childhood) course, concurrently with the project placement
- The Setting staff could participate in the online 6 week training module: Building Confidence using Music in Early Childhood
- The Setting staff could participate in regional CPD sessions run at the beginning and end of each project placement

Contexts: The early years music ecosystem

The early years sector

I discovered that there is no single, readily available statistic for the exact number of early childhood settings in the SW of England (Government survey of the early childhood sector, 2024; see Appendix 3). However, in common with all regions, the early childhood education and care sector is made up of a patchwork of highly

fragmented and different types of provision in terms of size, scale and purpose. Some early childhood settings are run by local schools or multi-academy trusts; some are private businesses which operate to make a profit; some provision is offered on a charitable basis or offered by local volunteers; and there are individual childminders operating as sole traders. Across the rural SW, there is a higher proportion of small, private and voluntary settings than in urbanized areas - and they are widely dispersed. A high proportion of the sector is run on a 'for profit' basis (Appendix 3) and in a privatised system cost-cutting is typically prioritised. Recent evidence has shown that profit-driven settings offer less good care and education and the staff are less well paid, less stable and less well qualified than in maintained, school-based settings (Stephens, 2023).

The well publicised funding and staffing challenges, coupled with chronic underfunding faced by the early years sector mean that early years settings are increasingly forced to hire unqualified staff ((Early Years Alliance, 2023. DfE, 2025). Therefore, the role of professional development in equipping the workforce with the skills and knowledge to support the learning and development of young children is crucial – particularly in addressing the continuing achievement gap between children from disadvantaged backgrounds and children from more affluent backgrounds (Education Policy institute, 2024; also Welch, 2021).

The problem

Michelle James: Blog (2023). How often do we embark on a new plan or strategy with goodish-sounding headlines, objectives, goals, what-have-you, without really questioning what problem or problems we are trying to solve? . . . really digging into the minute detail of the identified problem. Understanding it deeply, all the nuances of why it exists, what the contributory factors have been, how the problem may have evolved over time, who is affected by it, who or what contributes to it. Because it is only through a deep understanding of the problem that we'll be able to develop really effective solutions.

Stating the problem in plain terms - the overall standard of music education in the early childhood care and education sector is low (Bautista, *et al*, 2002).

The reasons why are complex and involve many factors. The Early Years Alliance report (2023) outlines some of the major factors:

- weaknesses in early childhood care and education policy and in the curriculum guidelines
- acute shortage of funding for early years education
- a crisis in recruitment and retention of staff (Gibson, 2023)
- low levels of qualification among staff (exacerbated by the recruitment crisis)
- music is not a priority at any level of training
- the 'school readiness' agenda
- shortage of specialist early years music educators
- privatisation of a majority of settings in the early childhood sector (see Appendix 3) and early childhood music provision

- falling birthrate combined with financial difficulties contributing to the closing of early childhood places in the SW and increased competition between providers

The core aim of SoundWaves, since its inception, has been to address this problem of low standards by interventions at all levels:

- place-based practice – through in-depth work in settings with children and alongside early childhood practitioners
- local area practice – by developing the practice of Lead ECMEs and Emerging ECME within SW localities and influencing setting managers
- regional strategy – by influencing the decision-making of Music Hub lead organisations and their partner organisations

Professional development is most effective if it is place-based, long-term and integrated into practice. Yet this direct intervention can only be provided for a very small number of settings, and moreover only those settings with the capacity to host the project. Therefore, the greatest challenge is how to provide effective professional development across the SW region given the large number of widely dispersed, small providers. The challenge is increased because of the instability of staffing and the low qualification levels of the majority of staff.

Context: The early years music education ecosystem

It is important, however, to avoid a sense of fatalism in which problems are seen as intractable and efforts to change as unlikely to make a difference. A systems approach encourages strategic thinking about how different parts of the whole interconnecting system interact and influence one another and where interventions may be the most effective. The **active** components of the system comprise:

- The quality and usefulness of the model of music practice
- The receptiveness and capacity of settings to adopt the music work
- The presence of influencers and key intermediaries who can ‘make things happen’
- The mechanisms of pedagogical coaching and professional development to incorporate music into practice
- The broader institutional contexts within which settings operate – policy, inspection systems, economics and marketing - which may create leverage
- The influence of parents in a highly privatised early childhood sector
- Media messages, local and national, that can influence attitudes and assumptions

There are, however, many separate organisations within this system that may not work in a coordinated way (e.g. music hubs, early years education teams, early years stronger practice hubs, cultural organisations, arts council) and lack of coordination can result in gaps, duplication or working at cross-purposes. For example, one SW

Stronger Practice Hub is buying in to national ECME programme, by-passing and thus not taking advantage of the SoundWaves work happening on its doorstep.

The following sections offer an analysis of the processes within the SWNSW project and this analysis also suggests what might feed forward into future work.

Power dynamics: a systems theory perspective seeks to identify the power dynamics at play within a system and how they have influence:

- subject power – music and its value in the education of young children is generally viewed positively by practitioners, even if it tends to be pushed aside by the school readiness agenda
- individuals with leadership power – there are some key, committed individuals who can drive change, particularly in Music Hub Lead and partner organisations.
- accreditation power – training in early years music that carries certification or qualification can encourage take-up by practitioners
- parent power – in an early years sector that is driven by market forces privatised providers need to attract parents as purchasers. A visiting music project can have ‘parent appeal’.
- policy power – the revised NPME (2022) called for early childhood to be included and there was a noticeable increase in attention from Music Hub Leaders.

Traction: a systems theory approach looks for where an intervention may have had greatest influence on its core aim (raising the quality of early childhood music education):

- continuing to promote the generalist model of music education practice (see Case Study 1)
- working with early years provision located in primary schools – offered easier access and higher qualified and more stable staff than PVI settings
- working with the whole setting team – the SoundWaves model became part of the whole setting culture
- supporting the committed, experienced and knowledgeable individuals within Music Hub leadership organisation and partner organisations (e.g. working closely with Early Years Music leads in Devon and Cornwall)
- integrating early childhood generalist music education model into training and qualification structures (Plymouth University integrating music placements into its qualifications)
- providing content – written and visual - for displays of projects to other staff, other settings and for parents and social media (important to private providers in a competitive environment)

Barriers: Identifying barriers to change and approaches to navigating them:

- competing priorities for early childhood settings and lack of capacity, particularly staff shortages (recognising that only settings with the capacity to commit and release staff can make best use of the placement opportunity)

- ‘cultural norms’ within a setting that block changes in practice (identifying these early on, working around them or addressing them)
- managers of settings who act as gatekeepers and define the culture (initial communications carefully tailored to managers’ priorities)
- music as a low priority in the ‘schoolification’ of early childhood education (aligning early childhood music with current policy parameters e.g. changes to NPME, ACE creativity agenda and ‘levelling up for culture’ or media and communications campaigns [but without over-hyping the ‘benefits’ of music messages])

These traction factors and barriers can then be viewed within the whole system to understand how key policy and system interdependencies, power structures and stakeholder relationships would need to shift, to be joined up and aligned in order to positively impact on children’s musical learning and experiences.

Multi-layered change: Looking for all possibilities:

- Changing attitudes and beliefs towards music and the culture of music practice in the setting through clear, consistent and ‘drip-feed’ communication – naming the work, finding distinct terminology (e.g. music play, vocal doodling)
- Changing the practice of the practitioners in the setting through modelling, co-planning, coaching and handing-over
- Developing the practice of the music educators as pedagogical coaches – both Lead ECME and Emerging ECME
- Developing practice within the region through online training course & conference days (in combination with place-based professional development)
- Influencing the approach to early years music within the SW Music Hubs – changing attitudes, ensuring hub leaders understand the model of generalist music practice and the early childhood sector and are singing from the same hymn sheet. Working with the new Lead Music Primary Schools
- Designing approaches to change that accommodate the particular challenges of the SW region and defining those challenges for national funders
- Responding to national contexts and the need for flexibility. Systems are not only internally dynamic they are also constantly shifting in response to external factors – e.g. 2021/2022: post pandemic, funding and staffing crises in EY sector, 2023/2024 hub re-organisation and policy changes.

Context: Policy Changes 2025

The current Labour government is issuing a number of policy changes for early childhood, mainly set out in the July 2025 policy The Best Start for Life. These changes suggest possibilities for early years music education initiatives.

- Increasing the government funded hours of childcare and creating more school-based nursery places.

- Returning to the principle of every early years setting have an early years qualified teacher because more highly qualified staff leads to greater outcomes for children.
- Returning to the principle of Family Hubs (akin to the earlier Sure Start model)

The severe challenges within the early years at a national level are exacerbated by local challenges and barriers that exist within the South-West peninsula region specifically. This next section discusses these challenges. From the systems perspective adopted in this evaluation, this wider context is an essential dimension, particularly because, as I will explain, it is often the most overlooked dimension.

Context: The South West Region

Fewer than half (46%) of infants eligible for Free School Meals in the South West reached expected levels of development at age 5 – the lowest proportion in the country. (South West Social Mobility Commission (SWSMC), August 2024)

To many outside the SW, life in the region is filtered through the rose-tinted lens of beach holidays, moorland treks, music festivals and alternative lifestyles. Yet for those who make their lives in the SW, the picture is very different.

. . . the social reality, hidden behind this romance, is quite stark. At age 11, the children of the South-West are the furthest behind of any English region. (SWSMC, 2023: 2).

The challenges to life in the SW are distinctive in comparison with any other region. An analysis by the Institute for Fiscal Studies (IFS) (quoted in Institute for Government, 2023) found that the UK was one of the ‘most geographically unequal countries in the developed world’ and that regional inequalities in the UK are ‘deep-rooted and complex’. What is understood as disadvantage in other regions, their root causes and possible remedies – particularly in the major urban regions where most charities, funders and policymakers are based – does not transfer to the SW (Durrer, Gilmore & Stevenson, 2019; SWSMC, 2023). The template for regional disadvantage is based on the North-South divide and the former manufacturing communities of northern cities. This template does not map on to the rural SW. The SW is often viewed as part of an affluent, well-connected southern England or else forgotten altogether. In addition, a template for reducing inequality focuses on racial and cultural diversity and inclusion, but this obscures the recognition that the major causes of inequality in the SW are due to social class, geographic isolation and lack of opportunities (Mullen, 2024; SWSMC, 2023; The Prince’s Responsible Business Network, 2023). Gaps remain in centralised funders’ understanding of which policies are most effective in tackling disadvantage and reducing inequality across the SW region (SWSMC, August 2024). The imposition of templates for disadvantage by national organisations which do ‘fit’ the SW, and overlook the regionally unique factors can divert, dilute and even obstruct efforts among SW Arts organisations to work towards overcoming disadvantage.

The SW is the largest, most rural, most coastal and least densely populated English region. It is characterised by:

- Poor connectivity - both in terms of transport (road and rail infrastructure) and digital infrastructure (internet and mobile phone signal)
- Social isolation
- A double coastline and demise of traditional coastal industries (fishing, boat building, traditional seaside holiday trade)
- High levels of working poor. There are higher levels of overall employment but more unskilled workers than other parts of the country leading to above average levels of child poverty.
- Low levels of aspiration, low progression rates in education and lack of opportunities (Mullen, 2024)
- Higher nursery closure rates than any other region (Gaunt, 2021).

There are also differences within the region. Cornwall and Devon are consistently worse on a number of metrics than better off areas towards Wiltshire and Gloucestershire.

I have driven for more than an hour after leaving the M5 to visit a west Somerset nursery - along a winding minor A road with tall hedges on both sides, up-hill and down dale, through villages with ancient names and past outlying farms. It's difficult to grasp and convey the level of isolation in such communities. And I have a car. As I park on a side road, I notice a couple of mothers pushing buggies, with older children walking alongside arriving at the school. I ask them if there is a bus service in the village. They think there's one a day, to Taunton, and that it takes over an hour. They tell me they don't use the bus and they don't have cars. (SY fieldnotes)

While a Levelling up White Paper was delivered by the previous, Conservative Government (2022), it is as yet unclear how the Labour Government plan to address the challenges. From reading a number of online sources, commentators have pointed out that the most recent funding plans prioritise big urban projects in the north, completely missing the hidden deprivation in SW rural and coastal areas (e.g. James-Wright.org, 2024). A South West Social Mobility Commission was formed in 2023 with the aim of coordinating efforts at remediating social disadvantage across the region (see documents in the references list).

Context: Music Hubs

'So it's about the support process rather than the doing. And bringing partners in who do have expertise in EY so that we can share – and that to me is the whole concept of doing more, without actually doing it yourself'. (Music Hub Lead)

The primary objective of SWNSW was to expand the successful SoundWaves model in partnership with more Music Education Hubs (now referred to, since reorganisation, as Music Hubs) across the SW region. Therefore, this strand of the evaluation is central. However, this evaluation objective was complicated, first by the post-pandemic period of instability and recovery at the start of the project and second by the profound reorganisation of Music [Education] Hubs since 2022 which has put much work on hold (see list of new SW Music Hubs, Appendix 1). The reality for Music Hubs therefore has been an uncertain policy environment which has resulted in short-term planning and diverted their energies into the bureaucracy required by reorganisation. The takeaway message here is that Music Hubs are unstable organisations, highly susceptible to unpredictable changes from 'below' (e.g. the pandemic) or 'above' (e.g. ACE and centralised policy changes).

The Music Hubs' role in coordinating a range of organisations within their area is an ambiguous one and the extent to which they can influence the work of partner organisations within their hub area is variable (Burke & Whatmore, 2022; Spain, 2022). Partner organisations will have mixed agendas, varied funding streams and different stakeholders. A common approach – or at least a coordinated approach - to early childhood music education practice within a Music Hub area may be difficult to achieve. Independent individuals or organisations with a strong profile for early childhood music may play a key role in leading and developing early childhood music education within their area. However, they are likely to hold varying ideas about what constitutes quality early childhood music education. Moreover, they may be more interested in promoting models of specialist music education – motivated by creating buy-in for their services and products - rather than developing generalist and child-centred approaches which can be adopted and continued by practitioners and become embedded in setting practice.

Context: Early Years in the 2022 National Plan for Music Education

The new version of the National Plan for Music Education (NPME) released in 2022 now includes early years within the Music Hub remit, although, inevitably, without providing any extra funding (Huband-Thompson & Dawson, February 2025). This has resulted in a greater interest among Music Hub lead and partner organisations in developing early years music provision. The SoundWaves project was already underway when the revised NPME was issued and so was well placed to influence or become incorporated into Music Hub planning.

Overall, there is a sense that while the inclusion of early years in the NPME is a positive development, there is concern about how to put this requirement into practice. Music Hubs are expected to develop a sustainable local system for music education, including support for early years settings. As part of their annual reporting, hubs will need to demonstrate how they are meeting this goal and this requirement is creating some pressure to develop early years music work.

Some Music Hub lead organisations have a designated role for early years music. Where this was the case, the project connected and collaborated with these leaders who conceive their role to be one of developing the music education competences of

the early years workforce. The directors of some partner organisations may have prior experience and substantial understanding of early years music work (e.g. SoundStorm, Bournemouth) and so are not only committed but recognise the value of place-based professional development and recruit organisations, such as Take Art, to provide that model of practice. Other partner organisations, as mentioned earlier, may wish to create buy-in for their specialist-led model of practice.

An earlier analysis of early years music education provision within the recently formed Music Education Hubs had found that where there was existing provision for early years, typically led by an individual or small organisation within a fairly small locality (e.g. Swindon, North East Somerset, Bournemouth) then that provision had usually weathered the Music Hub changes and was sustained. However, following the original NPME issued in 2011 those Music Education Hubs that had no history of early years provision had not expanded their remit to include early years because it was not a requirement.

Organisations coordinated within a Music Hub region, often dominated by the descendants of former instrumental music services, work with primary schools in offering the Wider Opportunities programme and curriculum support. They may already include reception classes in that work. Given that an increasing number of preschool units are now based in primary schools there is scope for Music Hub organisations to reach school-based early years settings. The government proposition that, with the falling birthrate, preschool provision may be accommodated in spare classrooms (Whittaker, 2024) suggests that the number of school-based preschool units is likely to increase. Some may accommodate children as young as two-years if they take advantage of the increased childcare hours available from 2025. Therefore, given the limitations of capacity and the near impossibility of reaching the patchwork of different forms of early years provision (particularly in rural areas), Music Hub organisations may choose to restrict their reach to school-based settings. This would be a pragmatic decision given that preschool provision in schools is likely to increase and school-based settings tend to be more accessible. This strategy would, however, continue to neglect the numerous private, voluntary and charity run preschool settings which are attended by a majority of 2-4 year-olds and, moreover, where there are the greatest concerns about low standards of provision.

The question remains, however, whether the Music Hub lead organisations have a genuine willingness to tackle the poor state of early childhood music education and to allocate sufficient funding for this purpose, which may require diverting funds from other already established activity – and, also, how much can they influence their partner organisations? **Delivering long-term, real change** may require some ruthless decision-making about priorities and budgets.

Lead Schools for Music Education

Primary lead schools for music education had been identified within each Music Hub region during the academic year 2024-25. Their role is to champion music education within the music hub region and to offer professional development and support. From a quick online search, several of these lead schools in the SW region also have early years units. I also notice that Lead Schools have been identified within the historical Music Education Hub regions, which in some Hub areas has resulted in uneven geographical distribution.

However, given their remit for professional development, there is scope for Take Art to work in partnership with Lead Schools to offer a model of early years music professional development.

Potential Barriers:

- Lack of designated funding in Music Hub budgets for early years may perpetuate the current lack of provision. There are costs and capacity challenges associated if early years music is to be prioritised.
- The lack of expert music educators is a national issue – and is particularly acute in the early years where there are no formal qualification and employment routes.
- Lack of recognition of the specific skills and knowledge required to develop music effectively with 2-4 year-olds.
- ‘Make-do’ approaches – such as giving existing instrumental staff a quick introduction to early years music and expanding their activity to reception classes and perhaps early years units where these are housed within schools. This approach perpetuates the lack of understanding of the specialist skills and knowledge required to develop quality early years music.
- Selling specialist provision to early years in order to raise funds (under the new requirements Music Hubs are committed to raising at least 50% of their income from external sources) rather than promoting and training setting staff in a generalist model of practice which can be sustained in a setting.
- Purchasing resources for early years music – using the capital fund – but 1) designated suppliers do not provide a full range of appropriate EY resources and 2) hub lead purchasers lack knowledge of what to purchase or how resources may be effectively integrated into early childhood practice.
- A music hub’s geography will impact on its ability to expand its early years provision. Some of the new music hub regions are rural and very large – e.g. Somerset and Dorset. These rural areas have a high number of small, scattered settings that are difficult to access.
- In the absence of a statutory requirement for early years settings to make contact with their Music Hubs, the onus to contact and communicate falls to Music Hubs and creates yet another challenge.
- Reporting requirements placed on Music Hubs by Arts Council England (ACE) do not currently recognise the complexities of the early years sector. Therefore, current ACE reporting templates do not allow evidencing nor making visible the breadth and complexity of early years music education being undertaken.
- Neither the Model Music Curriculum and the request for primary schools to have a School Music Development Plan include the Foundation Stage (nor are they statutory), so there is no traction in either of these documents. It should be acknowledged, however, that in the case of the MMC with its formal, conservative view of music education, the omission may be a blessing in disguise.
- Funding sources, in general, look favourably on providing support for early childhood music and so, because Music Hubs are required to raise an additional 50% in funding, early childhood may benefit from the pressure on

Music Hubs to raise funds. However, such grants are typically short-term and require a disproportionate amount of monitoring and evaluation and thus incurring further administrative costs.

Examples of Continuation

There is 'no one size fits all solution' to how Music Hubs may fulfil their remit to support early years music education. Place-based strategies allow different areas to define their specific challenges and identify locally relevant approaches.

Devon Music Education Hub (Hub Lead Organisation)

Responding to the Department for Education's National Plan for Music Education, Devon Music Education Hub are offering a range of support for EYFS settings and early childhood practitioners including in person and online sessions. It demonstrates strong, practice-based leadership.

- Strategic Lead for Early Years Music in post (completed the Certificate for Music Educators: Early Childhood)
- Online sessions will help to reach Devon's large rural area.
- Certificate for Music Educators: Early Childhood training. Devon Music Education Hub invests in specialist early years music training via this Level 4 qualification through bursaries for practitioners within the region.

SoundStorm Music Education Agency (South Coast Music Partnership; Hub Lead Organisation: Southampton and IoW Music) SoundStorm serves Bournemouth, Christchurch and Poole (BCP)

The Director has a long-standing experience of coordinating, leading and designing early years music education project work. SoundStorm partnered with Take Art in hosting two placements in 2023/24 and then funded continuation projects on the same model in 2024/25. Further opportunities, funded by SoundStorm are planned for 2026.

The Director, is committed to sourcing funding, creating opportunities and has adopted the workforce development and practice models of SoundWaves to expand the work within the BCP area. While not an early years practitioner, he is knowledgeable about the sector and understands the educational value of the SoundWaves model of practice.

Certificate for Music Educators: Early Childhood training. SoundStorm invests in specialist early years music training via this Level 4 qualification through bursaries for practitioners within the region.

Cornwall Music Service Trust and ASONE (Hub Lead Organisation, Cornwall)

Cornwall Music Service Trust (CMST): Employs a dedicated Early Years Music Education Lead who has been in place for a number of years. This lead completed the CME:EC and is leading on early years work across Cornwall, adopting and adapting models of practice from SoundWaves. Certificate for Music Educators: Early Childhood training. CMST invests in specialist early years music training via this Level 4 qualification through bursaries for practitioners within the region.

ASONE offer Sing and Play (EYFS & KS1): which was formerly named KS1 Inspiration. This is now promoted as an introduction to singing and instruments, and whole class music teaching. Existing provision for KS1 is being extended to include EYFS in response to the changes to the NPME.

These three examples illustrate:

Devon: County-wide consistency – SoundWaves adding to and extending an already strong programme, blending with other approaches into a comprehensive and flexible model of practice.

South Coast Partnership: Mixed consistency within one music hub area. SoundStorm (Bournemouth, Christchurch and Poole), offers an early years music programme led by strong, informed Director. However, this localised work is taking place alongside different approaches in other areas served by music hub partner organisations.

Cornwall: Inconsistency of models, with two key organisations offering different models within one county: CMST offering a model based on learning through specific early years music training and experience and **ASONE** offering a 'top down' whole class approach extended downwards into EYFS provided by a partner organisation offering services to the county.

SECTION 3 – PRACTICE & PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT

The SoundWaves Model of Practice

The Knotty Issue of Quality

‘what constitutes a good education, and not just an effective education?’ Gert Biesta (2020)

There is little consensus about what makes for a quality early years music education. There are distinctive methods (e.g. Kodaly, Voices Foundation, Dalcroze, Gordon method, Sounds of Intent) and a wide range of approaches rooted in purposes and philosophies from education; community music; therapy; performance arts; parenting programmes and so on. These versions are set against a backdrop of:

- music franchises which promote distinctive music education products within a competitive, marketised environment
- individual freelance early childhood music educators seeking employment opportunities
- arts organisations offering one-off performance events
- independent charitable organisations offering a range of distinctive music provisions, often targeting specific groups such as parent-child sessions, or special needs

As a result of this patchwork of provision there are many competing voices with strong ideas about what makes for ‘quality’ music in early childhood. The lack of strong curriculum directives for music in early childhood (there are only broad, vague indicators in the Foundation Stage curriculum) and the absence of any requirement for qualifications to work in early childhood music (for comparison, secondary music education requires a degree and PGCE) mean that this variety of approaches proliferates with no overarching regulation or minimum benchmarks of quality. Building a shared understanding about what a ‘good early years music education’ looks and sounds like has been part of the SoundWaves mission. Video clips and other documentation on the website, together with the online training and conference presentations help to communicate this understanding.

Certainly, it can be a strength to have inter-disciplinary approaches and cross-fertilisation between them. However, the strength of conviction behind many of the approaches (mine is the one right way!), coupled in many cases by market competitiveness, can lead to inflexibility and an emphasis on distinctiveness and separation rather than commonality and collaboration. Moreover, one type of practice experience, for example in running private parent-child sessions, or in music therapy, does not necessarily provide sufficient knowledge and expertise to practise in educational settings. This was one of the challenges encountered in this project. Specific skills and knowledge are required to work successfully in educational settings,

particularly settings which are led by qualified teachers, most typically in school-based early years units.

The issue of quality is compounded by the fact that there can be a reticence among some early childhood music individuals and organisations to strongly identify with *educational* purposes, aims and pedagogies. 'Education' can be equated with overly structured, disciplined, adult-led approaches that are viewed as in conflict with the ethos and ideologies of those who align with therapy, community music or creative arts work. The result is that important 'babies are tipped out with bathwater', and essential skills and knowledge to work in early childhood education are neglected.

Educational knowledge and expertise includes skills in:

- interpreting curriculum documents
- using educational terminology and linking with curriculum requirements when appropriate
- identifying learning aims and objectives
- planning and using planning formats
- managing groups of children and managing their participation (e.g. sharing resources, taking turns, behaviour management)
- communicating with children and using language effectively to foster and extend their thinking
- adapting activities to be appropriate for the children's ages and developmental abilities

If the visiting Lead ECME did not have that full range of skills, they had to lean on the setting staff to supply them, sometimes unawares of how groups or individual children were being managed on their behalf. Equally, these were the skills that Emerging ECME needed to learn and to practice.

SoundWaves Model of Integrated Practice

As already explained, SoundWaves is based on a generalist model of practice which can be delivered by the setting practitioners. The work in settings aims to be both child-centred and practitioner-centred. The model is child-centred in that it emphasises play-based musical activity that is integrated into the ongoing, 'everyday' curriculum. It is practitioner-centred in that it emphasises the musicality that everyone possesses and seeks to build the confidence and knowledge of the setting practitioners. An effective SoundWaves Lead ECME thus expects to become redundant.

Take Art's philosophy and principles of early years creative work are rooted in the pedagogy of the municipal nurseries of Reggio Emilia, Italy, through its close links in the past with the Bristol-Bath based 5X5X5 Project inspired by Reggio pedagogy.

It is important to recognise that a child-centred focus does not exclude an adult-led, whole group session. The SoundWaves approach is best understood as a spectrum in which the adult or the child may be the leader with many shades of dialogic

interaction spanning across the two ends of the spectrum. A typical morning visit to a setting includes a whole group circle time session – the mainstay of early childhood music in early childhood education. Importantly the group work is based on unaccompanied singing of developmentally appropriate songs (not using recorded versions of songs) into which movement and game activities are incorporated for the purpose of reinforcing musical learning. A typical morning visit includes:

- Circle time – 20 mins average (depending on the age and numbers of the children)
- Music play – usually based on a provocation such as a set-up of instruments, or other sound-makers
- Reflective discussion involving lead musician, trainee, and setting practitioner (the music champion)

In order to model child-centred music play, the musicians introduce play set-ups with the intention of encouraging certain types of music play which they then observe, join in with and extend as appropriate.

The evidence collected, in particular the concluding presentations, illustrate changes in the practitioners' (and the Emerging ECMEs') pedagogical planning and style over the period of the musicians' visits. The practitioners' language had become reflective and their practice incorporated a range of approaches and materials. There was evidence of child-led activities and unstructured play opportunities.

Context for Change

From analysis of all the collected data I identified 6 factors or processes that are crucial for change at the level of the setting:

- Capacity of the setting (stable staffing & capacity to release staff for reflective discussions)
- Clarity of initial communications about the aims and purpose of the work
- Motivation of the Music Champion (who did not need to be the most qualified or experienced member of staff)
- Clarity and consistency of expectations for the Music Champion
- Quality and type of music input from the Lead ECME (educational experience)
- Coaching skills of the music leader combined with an understanding of professional development processes

While all factors were present in the most effective placements, some factors emerged as being more important than others. The educational experience of the music leader, their coaching skills and the quality of the music provision were central. The Lead ECME's ability to provide pedagogical coaching and structure the Music Champion's professional development were the most important factors.

To ascertain sustainability of changes in practice in the setting beyond the end of the placement would require longer-term tracking and revisiting the settings at a later stage – an expensive, and time-consuming process that was not built into this project evaluation. A 'best guess' is that some changes would be enduring. A key factor is whether the changes in practice are embedded in the culture of the setting, and

handed on to new practitioners, or whether they remained part of the practice of one practitioner. Where there was a 'whole setting' commitment and involvement, change can be predicted to be enduring. While the identification of a Music Champion ensures commitment and release time, enduring change needs to be embedded in the whole setting culture at the level of planning, management, purchasing decisions and professional development decisions.

One model, many placements

Because the placement structure was repeated in different locations with different settings, there could be continual adjustments and fine-tuning made based on experience combined with the need to be flexible to the different regional partners.

Barrier: Competing with the school readiness agenda

A boy is clutching some short sticks and marching along, singing a brief, made up chant – 'sticks, sticks, sticks, sticks'.

'How many sticks have you got?' Asks the practitioner.

The boy stops his marching and chanting. 'Um, 3 sticks,' he says. The practitioner holds up 3 fingers and then manipulates the little boys' fingers, making him awkwardly clutch the sticks in one hand, so that he can also hold up 3 fingers. The small song is completely lost in this focus on number. (SY fieldnotes)

Increasing academic expectations for number and literacy are placed on children to ensure they meet the 'ready for school' agenda. The 'starting strong V' (OECD, 2017) report warned that a focus on more formal outcomes – such as maths and literacy – would see a shift away from specific pedagogical approaches considered to be appropriate for young children such as play-based, creative and constructivist. It has also seen a shift to formal subject learning and away from arts and imaginative learning. The result is a steer back to more formal learning methods to ensure learning outcomes are met. At the same time, music (and other arts domains) risk not only being squeezed out, but also being high-jacked to fulfil the literacy and numbers learning outcomes – as in the small observation above.

As I often recorded in my field notes, early years practitioners are increasingly expected to document and record children's attainment. This 'datafication' of early years practice is increasingly visible in 'policy intensive' early years environments where charts and recording forms are pinned to classroom walls. With little formal training – either initial training or continuing professional development - early years practitioners are given simple, formulaic approaches to fulfilling these requirements in early number and language – as in the observation above, for example, by encouraging children to count objects on their fingers.

Digital technology

Although not a specific aim of the project, the incorporation of digital technologies, as an enhancement of direct practice with the children and indirect practice in forms of observation, documentation and communication of their practice, was a secondary outcome. The use of technologies directly in practice was uneven across the different placements. One setting, for example, purchased digital sound recording buttons as introduced during the online training and incorporated them into their practice. The use of technology to support the process of professional development within the project was consistent across all the placements due to the defined expectations on ECMEs and setting practitioners to document and log their practice, and to use online platforms. The expectation that the practitioners would present their project work at the conclusion of a placement created demands for the documentation of work using digital means and the creation and online delivery of powerpoint presentations. For some practitioners this required the rapid acquisition of a new set of skills.

Professional Development

The SoundWaves model is centred on the professional development of early childhood practitioners in order to hand-over and embed music in the setting practice. In some of the SWNSW placements, the Lead and Emerging ECME visited weekly, usually during one term, and in some placements the musicians visited every 2 or 3 weeks, over a couple of terms. Irrespective of the spacing of visits, longer term programmes are more effective than one-off visits, or other short-term approaches to CPD. Effective CPD requires the modelling, follow-up, practice and support that the SoundWaves placements provided. It also enables the input to be relevant and adapted to the everyday work of the practitioners which also increased the likelihood of it being sustained beyond the conclusion of the visits.

Professional development was most effective when it was well tailored to the setting and its needs and was ideally supported by leaders – setting managers and/or lead early years educator. The Lead ECME had to identify and select priorities and gradually hand over so that the musical activities would be implemented and embedded. It was particularly important for openness to specific challenges within particular contexts so that these could be discussed and explored.

While identifying a music champion assured a dedicated member of staff to work with the visiting musicians, the involvement of an entire nursery team helped to establish a shared language, vision, and commitment to implementing new practices and approaches. In a small Dorset village nursery, for example, all the staff team were involved on equal footing, with the two lead practitioners enthusiastically supporting one another. They purchased new resources and documented the children's spontaneous musical singing between musician visits. In a preschool attached to a small village primary school, the lead teacher in the early years unit was also the deputy head of the school and thus had the authority to ensure that all the other staff members in the unit were actively participating in the project work.

Traction: Pedagogical Coaching

The crucial factor of the SoundWaves model is the role of the Lead ECME. This role includes the pedagogical coaching of both an Emerging ECME and a staff member (the Music Champion) from the setting. The role therefore involved a 'balancing act' in providing appropriate coaching to support the learning of two professionals (or more if more members of the setting team participated) who have different roles within the setting and different professional development needs.

Pedagogical coaching and place-based professional development contrasts with the one-off, 'inspire and forget' training session. The SoundWaves Coaching focused on practice in context and was individualised, time intensive and sustained over the course of a term or, in some placements, a longer period. Research has shown that music mentoring by music specialists helps teachers acquire discipline-specific knowledge, teaching strategies and raises their confidence (see Barrett, Zhukov & Welch, 2019 who cite further literature in their article; also Poulter & Cook, 2020). The coaching was tailored to a specific setting and focused on discrete **skills**. The most expert Lead ECMEs were able to diagnose, identify what needed to be learnt, structure activities and provide feedback. Coaching thus incorporated the four components for all learning: modelling, deliberate practice, feedback and reflection (Lofthouse, Leat & Towler, 2010).

It was also important that the Lead ECME provided **knowledge** – not just the what and how, but the why. Knowledge is important because it enables practitioners to adapt their practice. If practitioners just learn a technique or skill, they may have a kind of routine expertise but are not able to adapt and apply to different children and different situations.

Much of the professional development centred around high quality **professional conversations** – often termed reflective practice. Professional conversations were structured to enable the early years professionals to review, reflect on, and develop their practice. In the SoundWaves model these conversations took place between the practitioners, the Lead ECME and the Emerging ECME, at the end of every visit. The coaching conversations included:

- reflecting on observations, (video-recorded, written notes or from memory)
- discussion after modelling a new approach (e.g. how to lead a song)
- planning and suggesting tasks for the week(s) until the next visit
- providing relevant information and new knowledge

The reflection meetings aimed to empower mentees to think critically about their practice and provision. In order to move beyond change in practice as purely a technical process of acquiring skills and knowledge there was, in the most effective conversations, also a focus on challenging deeply held **beliefs and assumptions** about music and what it is for children to learn and develop musically.

When most effective the pedagogical coaching was delivered through:

- A clear framework within which the aims of the project and the relationships between the different professional roles were understood by all
- Respectful relationships between all involved: horizontal professional collaborations
- Modelling of both the circle time approach and the music play approach
- Written plans with defined learning aims
- Gradual and structured hand-over to trainee and to the practitioner in which there were progressive expectations for professional development
- Introduction and provision of good quality and appropriate resources and demonstration of how to use them
- Reflective discussions in which feedback was given which was supportive but also set out targets to work towards
- Preparation and delivery of a final presentation by practitioners and trainee to consolidate their learning, supported by lead musician

There were **potential risks** in placing a dual coaching responsibility on the Lead ECME and while most managed the two-sided aspect of their role successfully, some found it challenging. In those cases, the project leader provided extra support to fulfil some aspects of the modelling and coaching role. When the Lead ECME had prior experience and confidence in pedagogical coaching and in particular was conversant with educational practice, the professional development of their mentees was enhanced.

The project has highlighted the shortage of expert early years musicians across the SW region who can take on such a role and also the logistical challenges in placing Lead ECMEs in isolated rural settings. For example, one experienced ECME had a long car journey to her Dorset placement. But the evidence from this project, also highlighted in other studies (e.g. Richter et al, 2013) suggests that the coaching ability of the Lead ECME is a key factor, and therefore overcoming logistical challenges in large rural areas may be important. It also suggests that funders should allow for budgets to include the extra travel and accommodation costs that can be incurred in rural regions.

An initial project aim, to bring the lead musicians together in order to create a community of practice and to support them in the aspects of their key role, was not achievable due to the logistical and capacity constraints. While the most experienced music leaders were able to fulfil this expectation, it may benefit from more structure and being defined as a specific skillset that the Lead ECMEs receive as training at the start of a project. Kraft and colleagues (2018) have highlighted the challenges for recruiting effective coaches in all educational domains. It is, therefore, a widely recognised problem.

From this project, (as also evidenced in research literature cited in the paragraphs above) the qualities of the most effective Lead ECMEs included music specific aspects such as strong subject knowledge, good musicianship, and a philosophy of music education compatible with the project and the setting. These combined with more general qualities such as being organised, personable, empathetic, enthusiastic, professional and a good listener. The capacity to observe, analyse and decide on what targeted input or feedback was required was also a key quality.

Pedagogical Coaching: Pros and Cons

While one-to-one coaching by an expert working with willing practitioners and committed settings is one of the most effective ways to improve practice (Blazar & Kraft, 2015; Kraft *et al*, 2018), the obvious problems are: the high cost of such intensive programmes, the limited reach and the shortage of expert coaches.

It is noteworthy that two of the most effective placements were smaller settings where staff worked closely together. In these settings staff formed what were, in effect, small self-coaching teams – meeting together with the Lead ECME for discussions and then working together between visits. This finding suggests that a model of **Music Coaching Teams** might have some advantages.

In a Coaching Team, the practitioners coach each other, focusing explicitly on their classroom practice and their individual challenges. Input to the team by a Lead ECME can be more structured, perhaps less frequent and more intensive. Video recording could support the process of observation and sharing of good practice approaches. Certain key skills are identified and deliberately practised (e.g. how to sing at a correct pitch for young children's voices, how to incorporate a new song, how to set out a music play area). The advantages are:

- A structured professional development approach, continued between visits
- Practice is developed and consolidated among setting staff, rather than one individual
- The social aspect can be motivating
- The expert coach can reach more settings
- More cost-effective

This could become a model of professional development delivered in partnership with **Music Hub Lead Primary Schools**.

Traction: Certificate for Music Educators: Early Childhood

Seven students (at the time of writing) have completed the CME:EC from the SW region. 12 have received support from Take Art (between 2021-2025), with music hubs providing part and whole funding for students.

At the inception of the CME Early Childhood programme in partnership with the Centre for Research in Early Childhood (CREC), Take Art was visionary in incorporating the Music Lead's role into the CME programme. Jane Parker now co-directs this national programme in partnership with CREC. This blending of roles has continued to gradually build the SW workforce to the benefit of the SWNSW project and the regional Music Hubs.

Case Study 1: Draycott and Rodney Stoke Church of England Primary School

Integrated music practice: ‘the penny drops’

EYFS Lead/Deputy Head/SWNSW school project lead:

‘.. it's reaffirmed things. It's reminded me of things. My perception of early childhood music in terms of its value and importance hasn't changed. But the kind of implementation side of my perception of it has dramatically changed because we're doing it so much more with better understanding. So I suppose my perception of it is I can explain why we're doing the things that we're doing better.’

Nursery Unit: 22 children, 3-5 yrs (preschool and Reception)

Draycott village sits on the Southern slope of the Mendips, between Cheddar and Wells. The school is typical of many small village schools with 67 children on role. It has a small preschool unit which can take children from 2 yrs 9 mths to 4 yrs. The reception age children are included in the preschool unit. The unit is accommodated in a medium sized room with a number of bay areas, including outdoor areas.

<https://www.drfirstschool.co.uk/pre-school/>

Lead ECME has over 20 years' experience as a music leader, specialising in music with the 0-5s and West African drum and dance. She has trained in both Kodaly and Dalcroze and is currently studying for an MA in music therapy.

The EYFS Lead/Deputy Head in post at the time of the project was a qualified teacher, assisted by staff with early years qualifications. He has since gone on to become an Early Years Advisory Teacher for Bath and North East Somerset Council.

Music Play: The shruti Box and Chime Bars.

Two children are playing with the shruti box, exploring how it works, squeezing slowly and rhythmically. As it starts to sound the ECME quickly adjusts the tuning to create a drone note for the 3 chime bars she has also set out. Another child is improvising on the chime bars. The two sounds – the drone note and triadic chime bars, although played by children seemingly independently of one another, create a pleasing harmonious sound. I note how the provision of musical play resources benefits from careful prior thought about musical qualities and skillful adjustments. (SY fieldnotes)

‘Vocal doodling, yes, I could be a bit ‘shushy’ about that, but now we are not shushing it, we allow it and recognising it made me realise what was happening. (SWNSW School Project Lead comment, SY fieldnotes)

In his concluding interview the SWNSW School Project Lead commented on:

- The inclusiveness of the practice – that the informal nature of the practice is more inclusive because children can engage on their terms

- The ability of all the staff to notice spontaneous musical behaviours – e.g. vocal doodling, rhythmic movements
- A child who was an elective mute when in preschool, but had been joining in a call and response singing activity

Key factors:

- A qualified teacher who was also the deputy head with a high level of prior early childhood experience and who was directly involved in the work. He had the authority to involve the other staff members as a team involved in the project. The impact of an early years teacher goes further than just establishing more meaningful interactions with children directly. He was able to share his skills, understanding and expertise with other practitioners in their setting, leading curriculum planning and improving daily practice for all staff.
- An experienced teacher was able to re-interpret the music work through the prism of child-centred, play-based educational pedagogy
- A Lead ECME attentive to the musical quality of the provision set out for musical play and the sonic environment it creates

What could be learned?

- A Music Champion who is also the early years lead has the authority to bring all members of staff into the professional development processes
- Should a group music session be pre-planned using a given format? – and to what extent should it adopt ‘education’ speak? Is a priority to develop music education practice (and not community music or therapy etc.)

Case Study 2: Dartington Church of England Primary School

Music circle time: ‘listening to the children’s singing’

‘I’ve realised I wasn’t properly listening to how the children were singing – I just took it for granted - but now I do that, it’s changed how I sing to them – if that makes sense?’ (EY Practitioner comment, SY fieldnotes)

Nursery with some reception children (3-5 yrs):

7X 3yrs

6X 4yrs

5X 5yrs (free flow with Reception classroom next door)

This Dartington Primary school incorporated an early years unit and reception class adjacent to one another and there was some mixing of children between the two rooms during free play periods. The school is medium sized, in newly renovated buildings. The nursery occupied a large room with big central carpet space – and easy access through double open doors to a spacious, well equipped outdoor area.

The Lead ECME is a very experienced early years music educator is also Strategic Lead for Early Years Music for Devon Music Hub (Devon, Plymouth and Torbay). Given the high level of her experience, the Take Art project enabled her to take a strong leadership role in how the project would be delivered within the school. For example, the project musicians visited less frequently over a longer period of time in keeping with her preferred schedule of visits.

The Emerging ECME is a qualified primary school teacher who works with reception age children and studying the CME:EC.

Group Music Time

There were 17/18 children – quite a large number of children seated in a circle, with 3 other adults participating. The room was spacious enough to accommodate this size of group.

The setting early years practitioner was leading the session, with confidence, and singing well. The songs were appropriate to the age range, having been introduced gradually over the course of the visits by Lead EMCE. There were movement activities and other games, some involving toys and children's choices.

Musical Play session

A djembe set out in the middle of the large floor area. Play with the djembe was dominated by boys first of all. The adult played interactively with the boys – echoing patterns. The boys start to bicker over possession of the djembe and Emerging EMCE, with reception teacher skills, quickly distracted the bickering and managed the boys' participation. He copy-played Djembe drumming and modelled new musical ideas in order to generate more varied activity with the children. With just one relatively small drum and both players (child and adult) sharing the drum surface to play – there was less potential for interactive play. When, later on, the boys drifted away, a girl came over to play the drum, but by that time the adults had also moved away and didn't notice her. She drifted back to playing in the kitchen, singing 'Daisy, Daisy' to its well-known melody.

What could be learned?

- If one early years practitioner in a setting is the motivated person to lead and develop the music, and is clearly competent and confident, their practice can develop rapidly. Can that practice be disseminated among all the staff? (How can the model of practice become embedded in the culture of the setting?)
- Visiting musicians with educational experience and skills can manage children's behaviour and participation effectively.
- If settings have quite a lot of equipment which may be suitable – but is uncared for – can visiting musicians make an inventory of existing equipment, perhaps motivating a tidy and clean-up? Can they make recommendations for future purchases and/or loans from Music Hub resources?
- Music play sessions can tend to drift if there is not enough structure or sufficient instrumental resources to sustain interest and create variety.

SECTION 4 - LEARNING

Factors for success

1 Vision-Led Strategy

Take Art is committed to consolidating best practice, rather than providing short-term or one-off interventions which are unlikely to sustain. Take Art has maintained a progressive trajectory in early years music development since 2013, despite relying for its early years music initiatives on the disjointed and uncertain nature of external funding sources. Within the short time-frames of funded projects it is challenging to maintain a long-term, vision-led strategy and promote positive change.

Take Art brings together a team of artist-practitioners with early years expertise, experienced manager/leaders to coordinate and clear-sighted, values-led leadership from the Executive Director.

2 Building a strong early years music education workforce

A strong early years music education workforce is the foundation of high-quality music education. SoundWaves has prioritised workforce development by including training at all levels. Men are especially underrepresented in the workforce and Take Art has made special efforts to recruit male early childhood workers.

3 Child-centred practice

A child-centred approach has always been fundamental to the SoundWaves approach. It **gives voice** to the children's funds of knowledge and identities.

4 Model of embedded practice

At the heart of the SoundWaves approach is the model of integrated music education practice that is embedded in everyday, play-based early childhood practice. Importantly the model does not rely on a specialist music educator to deliver it but aims to equip practitioners to incorporate music into generalist practice. Its legacy is therefore longer-term, aiming to become part of the setting's culture of practice, shared by all practitioners.

5 Advocating for the importance of Early Years

Preschool music provision is, on the whole, not taken as seriously as primary and secondary education. This does not just apply to policy and curriculum makers or those in positions of authority in Music Hubs, but to society at large, which does not see early years education as 'proper' or 'serious' education. It underpins the widespread assumptions that professionals working in this sector do not require the same level of qualification as other sectors, that to work with young children is 'easy' and does not require specialised skills and knowledge. Moreover, it is noticeable that while positive rhetoric about the importance of early years as the foundation of music learning is often heard at all levels - from policy to practice - the rhetoric is rarely backed up by allocation of funding, resources, time and personnel. Working to change attitudes and priorities is an ongoing task.

Suggestions and Recommendations

- To continue to hold ambitious goals to improve early childhood music education (combined with the creativity agenda), taking every opportunity to bring these to public attention and change attitudes
- To advocate for the SW Region at the National Level, calling up evidence such as that assembled by the South West Social Mobility Task Force (2023, 2024, 2025)
- To advocate for early childhood music education among Hub Lead organisations and their partner organisations
- To emphasise an approach which is both place-based (distinctive to the SW) and cross-sector (identifying all the early years and music education organisations) in approaches to improving early childhood music education
- To emphasise that early childhood music education is a defined age phase and that early childhood educational practice requires distinct professional skills and knowledge (that while there are overlaps, are not the same as community music, therapy or parent-child music)
- To identify the 'traction' points and barriers to change at all levels from setting to policy, working out what change strategies have the most effect (combined with cost-benefit analyses)
- To continue to horizon scan and be tactical in connecting with existing and new initiatives e.g. the current ACE focus on creativity, the Curriculum and Assessment Review, the emphasis on holistic development and wellbeing, the 2025 policy changes in Early Years Education (Giving every child the best start in life, see Appendix 2), the planned Enrichment Framework, the planned National Centre for Arts and Music Education, a report from the Digital, AI and Technology Task Group, the emphasis on sustainability, the South West Social Mobility commission and its planned Early Years Action Groups.
- To make an argument to funders for 'fairer funding' which recognises that coastal and rural areas create greater difficulties for travel and time (e.g. by enabling project bids to include higher costs for non-contact travel time, overnight stays and subsistence). This would support project workers in accessing those areas where provision is often the weakest and disadvantage the greatest.
- To continue to build local leadership, capacity and capability in early years music. The success of the project has created pressure on capacity at leadership levels and so the training of the Lead ECMEs is a priority, perhaps coordinated through the new Music Hub Lead Primary Schools.
- To consider a model of 'Team Music Coaching' as having certain practical and cost-benefit advantages
- To continually advocate for an early years qualified music teacher role (0-7 years) that covers a portfolio of skills in working directly with young children, pedagogical coaching, and parent-child work. If, as new policy is recommending more preschools are located in school settings and more qualified teachers working in early years, the need for early years music education skills and knowledge is likely to increase.
- To continue online provision for training, particularly to reach isolated parts of the region. This provision is demanding for those who deliver and relies on

technical support; however its benefits are high relative to cost and it can generate income. This online provision could be connected with regional Early Years Learning Hubs and/or Lead Music Primary Schools.

- To consider dividing the region into SW South (Cornwall, Devon, Somerset and Dorset) and SW North (Bristol, BANES, South Glos, Gloucestershire, Wiltshire) for planning and coordination purposes and to reflect the regional differences. Consider setting up a SW South Region Early Years Music Hub (or a SW South Region EY Creativity Hub)
- To consider a post-16 young musicians in early years education work experience programme, supported by Music Hub organisations and/or local early years training providers (and connecting with their requirement to offer progression routes into employment opportunities). This would include an 'introduction to EY music', some basic training in how to use their instrument in activities with young children, short placements and a certificate. A similar programme might be devised for instrumental staff currently providing whole class tuition in primary schools who are likely to be asked to expand their work to reception classes and school-based preschool settings.

The SoundWaves Network SW could transform into an established Regional Early Years Music Network – which disseminates a consistent regional approach to EY music (i.e. an integrated practice model) and raises the profile of EY music regionally. It could also provide consistent training across the region, capitalising on the current handful of early years expert music leaders and offering to work with the Lead Music Primary Schools. This could be further divided into a South SW Region and a North SW Region and reflect the differences between the North and South of the region.

A Regional Early Years Music Network could make links with and coordinate the activities of:

- Music Hubs and their partner organisations
- Family Hubs (to be known as Best Start in Life Family Hubs)
- Early Years Stronger Practice Hubs
- Orchestras and music organisations
- Local authority early years education staff
- Museum and library services
- Private providers of both music and childcare/nursery education

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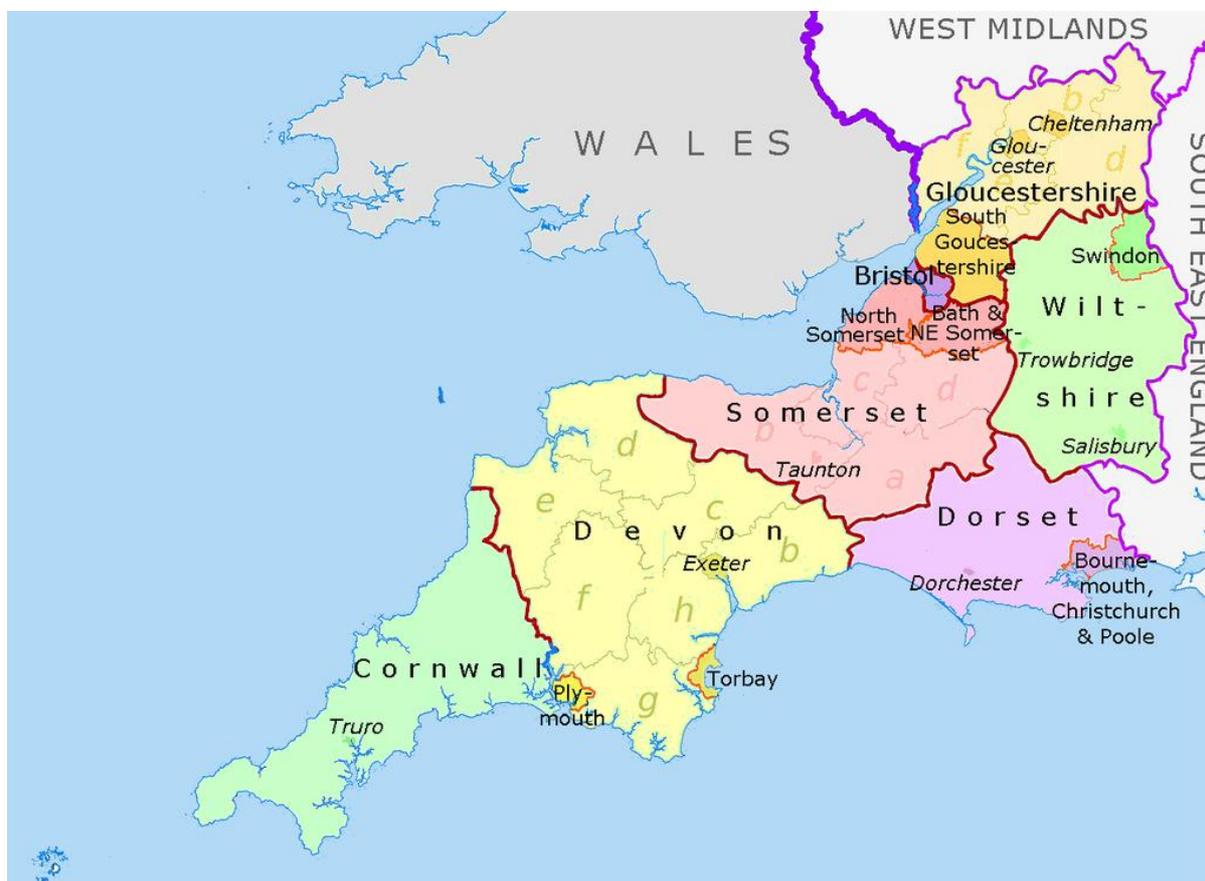
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APPENDICES

APPENDIX 1 - South West Music Hubs:

Post national reorganisation 2024

Area	Hub Lead Organisation
Cornwall & Isles of Scilly	ASONE Hub (CIC)
Devon, Plymouth & Torbay	Devon Music Education Hub (Devon CC)
Dorset & Somerset	Octagon Music Hub (Somerset C)
Bournemouth/Christchurch/Poole, Isle of White/Southampton, Portsmouth	Southampton & IOW Music (S'hampton CC)
Bath & NE Somerset, North Somerset, South Glos, City of Bristol (West of England, Avon)	Bristol Music Trust
Gloucestershire, Swindon & Wiltshire	Gloucestershire Music (Glos CC)



APPENDIX 2 - Best Start in Life Strategy

In Summer 2025 the government published its Giving Every Child the Best Start in Life paper. Key features of this strategy include plans for:

- More highly qualified staff where they are needed the most by increasing the number of early years teachers and offering financial incentives for them to teach in the most disadvantaged communities
- Sharing evidence-informed practice through doubling the number of Stronger Practice Hubs and funding partnerships between nurseries and schools
- Funding evidence-based programmes that have been proven to enhance educator's practice and improve children's development, including funding access to the EEF evaluated programme Maths Champion
- Up to 1,000 Best Start Family Hubs, ensuring there's a hub in every local authority and including professionals working across all local teams, including health and education and will work with nurseries, childminders, schools, health services, libraries, voluntary and community groups
- A Best Start digital service linked to 'my children' on the NHS app, bringing together the trusted advice and guidance all parents need in one place, and linking families to their local services.
- Establishing an evidence-informed career framework to support career progression at all levels
- Additional EYPP funding for areas in most need and working with the EEF to evaluate different approaches to using Early Years Pupil Premium funding to understand how best to maximise its impact
- Continuing to build on work begun with the EEF to build the evidence base of high-quality professional development programmes in critical areas of learning, bringing these to more settings.

The Early Years Stronger Practice Hubs programme was launched in November 2022 and is supported by the *Education Endowment Foundation* (EEF, 2023) and the *National Children's Bureau* (NCB).

The South West has two EYSPH –

- **Bristol and Beyond** serving Bristol, Bath and North East Somerset, Swindon, Wiltshire, Somerset, North Somerset, Gloucestershire, South Gloucestershire
- **Early Years South West** serving Bournemouth, Christchurch and Poole, Cornwall, Devon, Dorset, Plymouth, Torbay and the Isles of Scilly

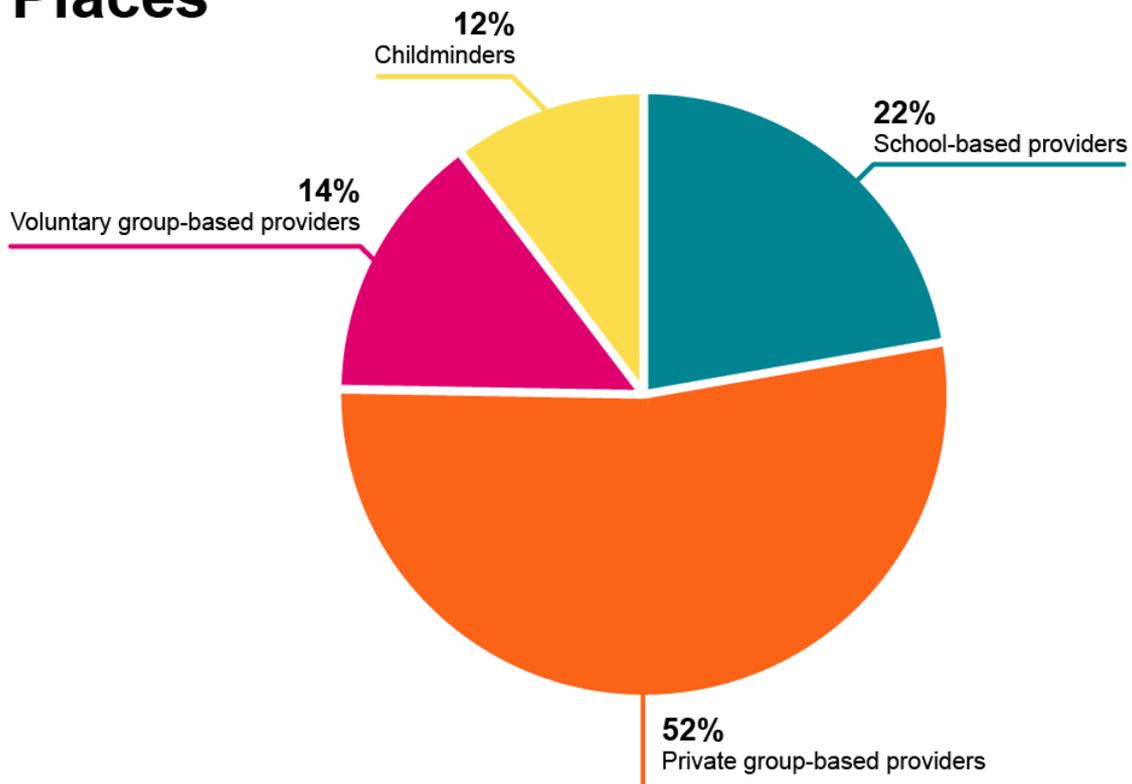
The government has confirmed that the number of Hubs will be doubled to 36 and the programme will receive funding for an additional three years, extending until March 2029.

A response to the policy document issued by CREC (Centre for Research in Early Childhood) welcomes the partnership working, the greater emphasis on families and integrated services. However, they emphasise the importance of a highly skilled workforce who work consistently within communities and have concerns about the possibility that the changes might result in low cost, short-term 'packaged', one-size-for-all, interventions delivered by a lesser skilled and lower paid workforce.

APPENDIX 3 - UK Childcare and early years provider survey 2024

Department of Education's childcare and early years provider survey
December 2024

Places



The childcare market

Private and voluntary nurseries account for the majority of early education and childcare places, including around half of free entitlement places. There are currently around 60,000 registered providers and collectively they offer over 1.5 million Ofsted registered childcare places to children aged 0-4. While there are large number of childminders, private and voluntary nurseries deliver the large majority of 0-4 places. Private and voluntary sector nurseries make up just over one third of providers (21,000), yet account for around two thirds of early years places (see Figure 1). According to the [Department for Education's childcare and early years provider survey](#) they also account for around half of three and four year old free entitlement places and the vast majority (86 per cent) of funded two-year-old places. However, their presence varies significantly by local authority and by region – from 27 per cent of all providers in the North East to **39 per cent in the South West**. National statistics state that 34% of group-based providers are part of a chain, [although I would think this is a smaller % in the South West where there are many individual private providers].

APPENDIX 4 - List of project partners, hosts and staff

Early Years Providers and Schools who hosted a project

Chacewater Community Primary School, Cornwall
Sandy Hill Academy, Cornwall
Dartington Church of England Academy, Devon
Ellacombe Church of England Academy, Devon
Riverside Community Primary School and Nursery, Plymouth
Willow Childcare, Plymouth
Maiden Newton Childcare Provision, Dorset
Wonderland Day Nursery, Dorset
Churchfield Nursery, Somerset
Draycott & Rodney Stoke Church of England First School, Somerset
Little Acorns Preschool, Stogursey, Somerset
Courthill Infant School, Poole
Lilliput Infant School, Poole
Malmesbury Park Primary School, Bournemouth
Pokesdown Community Primary School, Bournemouth
Hardmoor Early Years Centre, Southampton
Mansel Park Primary & Nursery School, Southampton

Early Childhood Music Practitioners/Educators

Alice Browning
Cathy Murray
Charlotte Gibbs
Colin Phillimore
Eliza Wylie
Emily Garrod
Emily Murphy
Hannah-Jasmine Brunskill
Hayley McDonnell
Helen Worthington
Jean Broadbent
Jude Cummins
Kate Comberti
Lucy Vines
Paul Hagan
Rachel Crane
Rosie Walton
Shelley Wood
Victoria Trevithick
Students from University of Plymouth and University of Exeter

Music Education Hubs and Organisations

Octagon Music Hub (Sound Foundation Somerset and Dorset Music Service)
SoundStorm Music Education Agency
Devon Music Education Hub (Plymouth Youth Music Service, Plymouth Music Education Hub, Devon & Torbay Music Education Hub)
Cornwall Music Service Trust
ASONE Music Education Hub
Southampton Music Hub and SoCo Music
Bristol Music Trust
University of Plymouth, Early Childhood Studies
Falmouth University

Exeter University
Somerset Council, Early Years Education
Coplestone Primary School, Devon

Funders

Youth Music
Paul Hamlyn Foundation
Music Education Hubs and Organisations

Research & Evaluation

Dr Karen Wickett
Dr Susan Young

Take Art project team

Jane Parker, Early Years Music Specialist and project lead
Jennie Loader, Early Years Project Manager
Nadine Griffiths and Ruth Copping, co-ordination and support
Ralph Lister, Executive Director



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