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Delivering Social Outcomes as well as High Quality Art for its Own Sake – Royal Liverpool Philharmonic

Classical music isn’t just for grand concert halls. When Liverpool Philharmonic moved out into the community, they showed just how much music could benefit those on the path to mental wellbeing.

Liverpool Philharmonic is now commissioned by Mersey Care NHS Trust to provide resident musicians across the trust. These services include a low and medium secure service for those with complex mental health issues, brain injury, learning disability, dementia, community mental health services, and the high security Ashworth Hospital.

However, the work started from small beginnings: in November 2008, Mersey Care began a pilot collaboration with Liverpool Philharmonic on two trust sites: the low secure unit and Stoddart House, an acute mental health unit providing assessment and treatment for people experiencing mental health difficulties. The project, entitled Musician in Residence, provided weekly music sessions to service users in such settings. Mersey Care began the project as part of a wider programme of work with cultural organisations in the context of Liverpool city’s status as European Capital of Culture 2008.

Says Berenice Gibson, Programme Support Manager for Creativity and Wellbeing at Mersey Care, “Our aim was to give people who were inpatients the opportunity to enjoy cultural activities. We believe creativity supports wellbeing.” She continues, “Our service users and patients should have access to all the things that make us human beings. If you are in a mental health hospital and you can’t go out to a concert, an art gallery, or a dance club, it could be a real struggle to get better.”

For Mersey Care, creativity is a key part of humanity, and therefore wellbeing. The trust has observed this through the work of other commissioned projects such as those with Tate Liverpool, Liverpool Institute of Performing Arts (LIPA), and community artists.

Open and flexible

Mental health was a new area for Liverpool Philharmonic, so flexibility was key. Judith Agnew, Head of Learning at Liverpool Philharmonic, explains that Mersey Care, as well as her own team, were open and experimental from the outset.
Says Judith, “There was a lot of discussion, and this helped to avoid teething problems. Outlining very clearly at the start where the artist’s and the setting staff’s respective roles start and finish was very important.”

It was also important to select the right artists. As Judith explains, orchestral musicians are used to working in a very organised manner, to tight schedules, whereas the work in mental health settings demanded people that could adapt and be flexible. She says, “Because it wasn’t a programme that we’d ever delivered before, we had to find musicians that had the right skills and experience to go into those settings. We selected two musicians to go in at first. We were very clear that we were taking an experimental approach, and that we all had to be flexible and open about it.”

Key commissioning facts

Project: Musician in Residence programme

Provider: Liverpool Philharmonic

Commissioner: Mersey Care NHS Trust

Location: Merseyside

Timing: Pilot collaboration initiated in November 2008, then gradually rolled out across all the trust’s key services.

Scale: In the last three years, 2100 workshops have been delivered across 19 Mersey Care sites, reaching over 3000 service users.

Expanding

Although the programme started small, Mersey Care was quick to take note of the initial successes and the Musician in Residence model was soon rolled-out. Berenice explains that the expansion was an organic process. “Once one set of staff have witnessed for themselves the success of the programme, they talk to their colleagues, and then we get the phone call asking, “Could we have a musician on our ward?” So it has developed in that way, organically.”

An anecdote from a session observed by Berenice helps to show why staff who hear about the effect of the programme wish to see it expanded: “I was in a group with two service users that had started off in separate parts of the room working independently, and by the end of the session, with the help of the musician, they were making a piece of music together, and the staff were just staggered! One of
these two individuals doesn’t normally cooperate or join in anything. This was the first time staff had seen him join in an activity with anybody else.” Concludes Berenice, “anybody who sees a musician in residence in action would find it difficult to say that the activities aren’t improving the lives of people in the group.”

Tailoring and adapting

Musicians have learnt to tailor their repertoires according to the needs of the patients and to the mood they wish to create in each ward. As well as making and composing music, many patients are also encouraged in their journey back into the wider community through supported visits to Royal Liverpool Philharmonic Orchestra rehearsals and concerts.

In each setting, the clinicians, as well as the service users, are expected to take part. This puts setting staff and service users on equal footing, which has particular benefits in a mental health setting. Judith explains, “Through taking part in a session where they have to sing or explain how they feel about music, setting staff can better appreciate how service users feel when they have to open up about other things. It also gives staff something else to talk about with service users. It can give them a new angle to engage with a service user who is particularly resistant to talking about something.”

Evaluating Impact

Mersey Care has carried out an evaluation of the programme focusing on the feedback of service users. The evaluation concluded that the benefits of the programme had been “transformational” for the whole trust wide service as well as for the participants. The entire inpatient experience was improved by the programme, said service users, and music was found to reach clients that didn’t otherwise engage with services.

Liverpool Philharmonic reports to Mersey Care on figures, but also undertakes its own ongoing, flexible evaluation: it has built regular reflection sessions for staff into its work. The benefits of the reflection sessions are multiple. Firstly, in busy settings where there may be a high staff turnover, the sessions help clinicians to appreciate the importance of the work. For musicians, feedback from the reflection sessions can help them to transfer good practice from an established setting to a new one. Finally, the reflection sessions are used to keep track of the programme as a whole.

Strong outcomes

The Musician in Residence programme has raised the self-esteem of service users through participation and achievement, and improved their moods and sense of wellbeing. These outcomes were highlighted by service users themselves, in the service user-led evaluation mentioned above. Says one service user, Anne, “I was an inpatient when I first started, and I was feeling really isolated and really depressed, and music gave me a way to communicate and connect with people.”
Additional outcomes are particular to each setting. For example in the high secure hospital, patients themselves say they have developed a stronger sense of empathy. Thanks to the programme, patients feel they are much more supportive of other patients, and able to notice when someone isn’t acting themselves.

**Key Outcomes**

Evaluations undertaken by Liverpool Philharmonic and Mersey Care show the following outcomes:

- service users that are otherwise hard to engage reached
- improved inpatient experience
- better relations between clinical staff and service users
- communication, empathy and connections between service users facilitated
- Self-esteem, moods and wellbeing of service users raised

The health outcomes found by Liverpool Philharmonic are underpinned by academic research. University College London researcher Sue Hallam has looked at the [power of music from a research perspective](http://example.com). She identifies the effect music can have physiologically and cognitively, on patients’ personal moods and emotional feelings, and on levels of stress and anxiety.

**Supporting artists and staff**

A need that wasn’t anticipated at the outset of the programme was a support mechanism for musicians. Now, musicians have access to a safe space to unload and unpick what has happened in a session. The type of work carried out by musicians on the programme requires a lot of emotional resilience, and so a network of support for staff is key. Explains Judith, “*Musicians, as with many other art forms, are presenting something that is so personal to them, so they can come away from the sessions very affected.*”

Berenice emphasises the importance of having regular staff with clinical knowledge in the sessions: “*This provides continuity. Having staff that are there regularly, that*”
understand how to support the group and how to encourage service users to attend is really important.”

‘Intrinsic’ or ‘instrumental’?

For Liverpool Philharmonic, there can be no compromise on the quality of the music produced. Says Judith, “Everything we deliver has to have the best quality music at its heart. We select the best musicians.” However, they do not feel constrained by an ‘intrinsic’ versus ‘instrumental’ contradiction. Great social outcomes do not come at the expense of high quality music making, because, Liverpool Philharmonic has learned, outstanding artistic work has a social impact. Indeed, the essence of Liverpool Philharmonic’s collaboration with local health services is to bring music making of the highest quality to the community’s most vulnerable citizens.

Photography courtesy of Liverpool Philharmonic

Editor’s notes:

**What is Mersey Care NHS Trust?**

It provides specialist inpatient and community mental health, learning disability and addiction services for adults in Liverpool, Sefton and Kirkby. It has a wider role too, providing medium secure services for Merseyside and Cheshire, and high secure services covering the North West of England, the West Midlands and Wales.

**Fact File**

From 2013 to 14 Mersey Care offered:

- Care, treatment and support to 36,401 service users (35,525 in local services and 876 in secure services)
- Is dispersed across over 32 sites both of its own and premises rented from others
- Had 674 inpatient beds (as of 31 March 2014)
- Had 522,757 outpatient attendances and contacts.

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For more information and resources on Cultural Commissioning visit [http://www.ncvo.org/CCProg](http://www.ncvo.org/CCProg). Text by Joanna Allan.