



**‘HAPPY TOGETHER’
OLDER CARERS PROJECT WITH NEWINGTON
DAY CENTRE**

EXTERNAL EVALUATION



August 2025

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INTRODUCTION

This document represents the final report for the Happy Together Project (the Project), commissioned by Oh Yeah Music Centre Belfast and produced by Victoria Nicol Consulting.

Oh Yeah Music Centre was successful with an application to the Kingsbridge Foundation for a music project supporting older carers. The project was led by Oh Yeah Music Centre Belfast in partnership with Newington Day Care Centre.

This report will initially provide some background to the Project, what it has sought to achieve as well as what the Kingsbridge Foundation's Fund aims are. This will be followed by presenting an overall evaluation of the project, with particular focus on the following key areas:

1. The capturing of stories from sessions through recording of podcasts and through photography;
2. The participatory elements used to help people engage, through songwriting, singing, instrument playing and open discussion;
3. The production of original songs from material extracted from reminiscence workshops and spoken word recordings; and
4. The initial impact of the Happy Together project for its participants.



PROJECT BACKGROUND

This Section will provide background information setting the context for the report, including details on Oh Yeah Music Centre, Newington Day Care Centre, on the Happy Together Project as well as the Kingsbridge Foundation Fund that has supported it.

Oh Yeah Music Centre Belfast

Oh Yeah Music Centre is a dedicated music centre located in Belfast's Cathedral Quarter. Established in 2007, the Centre is committed to providing a supportive platform for local musicians, both emerging and established, to showcase their talents and take their music to the next level by providing help and promotion, technical equipment for rehearsing, recording, gigs and event organisation, performing space and releases of band compilations. It runs several major festivals including Women's Work and Sound of Belfast which features the NI Music Prize. Their goal is to create a vibrant and inclusive community where local musicians and music-lovers can connect, collaborate, and grow.

To date, the Centre has received a number of accolades in recognition of its contribution to the Northern Irish music scene. In May 2024, it made history by being the first venue in Northern Ireland to win the 'Grassroots Venue: Spirit of the Scene' award as part of the annual Music Week Awards in London supported by the Music Venue Trust. Furthermore, a Social Impact report carried out in 2024 found that for every £1 spent there is a social value return of £4.18.

The Centre offers a variety of services and resources, and has developed strong programmes supporting youth and older people through music. Their older people into music programmes involve specific workshops encompassing reminiscence and celebratory work with talks, presentations, gigs, shared stories and experiences, including participation, performance and production. A key motivation of the programme is to support older people by reducing isolation, providing better access, encouraging participation, and increasing re-engagement into music.

Newington Day Care Centre

Oh Yeah Music Centre has been working with Newington Day Care Centre for over 9 years. The Centre is based in North Belfast, in an area which is well-documented as having some of the worst health outcomes and challenging socio-economic issues in Greater Belfast and Northern Ireland. The Centre plays a vital role in the provision of services targeted at addressing the expressed needs of older people who wish to remain in their own homes, their families and carers in the North Belfast area. This includes the provision of day care to its members, respite provision for carers, volunteering opportunities and the development of life skills through activities delivered. Newington offers 250 day-care places (50 each weekday) to members, more than half of whom have dementia, and who present with a range of care and dietary needs.

Previous projects with Newington Day Care Centre have included;

- **Make Me Smile:** this project worked with two groups of 30 members from the Day Care Centre over 7 and 8 weeks (the majority of whom have a diagnosis of dementia, some have Parkinson's, others brain injury and stroke). Each session

featured a themed music quiz to aid gentle reminiscence and “story telling”, followed by live music with participants encouraged to sing and dance along to the musicians. Stories heard during the sessions were recorded through spoken word and through photography;

- **Keep on the Sunnyside:** a group of female carers who playfully dubbed themselves as The Wrinkly Rappers took part in this Arts and Older People’s project centred around positivity, creating music and creating community through music. As a result of the project, The Wrinkly Rappers wrote and recorded two new songs as well as forming close friendships with one another;
- **Hearth and Home:** this 15 week project worked with Carers. The project featured reminiscence on people’s first home, discussions around music people love, song deconstruction, song writing and recording both songs and a Podcast. Work was showcased at a live music gig at Oh Yeah Music Centre. Two original songs were produced from the project called ‘Sunshine Days ’ and ‘Just The Same Old School Days’; and
- **Reeling in The Years:** this 15 week programme worked with members of the Day Care Centre. Each session featured a different aspect of life in Belfast in the 1960’s and 70’s from transport to cinemas and film. Several cues including pictures, live music and products were used to evoke memories in participants, prompt interest and engagement. Participants collaborated with musicians to write two original songs about their collective memories of going out on a Saturday night and how to light a coal fire! Others recorded personal stories as part of a podcast. All participants shared a sense of pride, knowing that their contribution was valued.



Happy Together (the Project)

The Happy Together project worked with a group of 11 older female carers (aged 55 and over) for a period of 15 weeks, commencing in May 2025 and completing in August 2025. Some of the carers have been with the Centre for over 5 years and have participated in previous projects with Oh Yeah Music Centre.

The overall objectives of the Project are to:

- Provide a safe space for personal growth;
- Create new friends and community;
- Build confidence and new skills through podcast making, songwriting and recording;
- Reduce isolation and loneliness;
- Build a legacy with recorded songs and Podcasts; and
- Help maintain group cohesion for lasting relationships going forwards.

Kingsbridge Foundation

The Kingsbridge Foundation is the charitable arm of the Kingsbridge Healthcare Group, raising money for the NI community through charitable work, fundraising and local initiatives. The Kingsbridge Foundation fund is managed and supported by The Community Foundation for Northern Ireland, alongside an advisory board of Kingsbridge staff from across their hospitals and clinics in Belfast and Ballykelly. The purpose of the fund is:

- To support local charities and focus on any particular causes which warrant a “helping hand”;
- To provide a platform to demonstrate the Group’s role in the community as a leading company which cares for local needs and wishes to play its full part in addressing those needs;
- To serve as a channel to centralise the many requests it receives daily for charitable donations; and
- To create a lasting ‘Legacy’ 10 years on from opening their first private hospital; thus continuing its over-riding ethos of “care” being at the centre of everything they do.

The Kingsbridge Foundation is funded through ongoing fundraiser events, staff and Consultant monthly contributions and all payments made via their car park located at the King's Hall are directly donated to the fund.

CONTEXT FOR THE PROJECT

This Section provides an overview of the current state of caring in the UK, drawing out the key issues emerging that are relevant to this Project. Information has been drawn primarily from the annual research results published by Carers UK, with particular reference made to Northern Ireland where this information is available. Consideration has also been given to providing an overview of some of the research relating to the use of music as a therapy to improve mental well-being for both carers and the cared for.

The Impact of Caring

Across the UK today 5.8 million people are carers – supporting a loved one who is older, disabled, has an illness or long-term health condition. This support could be a few hours a week, or it could be round the clock care. The most recent Census 2021 found that there are 222,000 unpaid carers in Northern Ireland. The economic value of the support provided by these carers is an estimated £5.8 billion per year.

Most people will become carers at some point in their lives. The Centre for Care research in 2019, found that people in the UK have a 65% chance of providing care in their adult life. Many people find themselves in the role of a carer without choice, support or understanding of what has happened to a loved one and where they will get help to cope with this new role.

Women are more likely to provide care than men. In Northern Ireland, the Census found that 130,000 carers are women (59%), and 92,000 are men (41%).

Caring can come with high personal costs. Over time, the pressure of caring for someone with illnesses such as dementia, on top of other commitments, can take its toll on family and carers. Carers often face intense financial, emotional and physical demands which can lead to poor physical and mental health.

- Recent research by the Joseph Rowntree Foundation in 2025 found that informal carers are much more likely than those with no caring responsibilities to be living in poverty (28% compared with 20%).
- Carers Week research in 2025 found that 43% of current and former carers said they had a mental or physical health condition develop or become worse since caring.
- Many carers feel overwhelmed because they are unable to take a break from caring. Many carers find that their friendships and relationships are impacted, with less time to spend with family and friends. Carers can become lonely, isolated and depressed. They stop going out, failing to maintain friendships and often finding a social life just too difficult. The State of Caring 2023 found that 50% of carers felt lonely.

Day Care Centres such as Newington play a vital role in supporting carers and in doing so supporting older people to remain in their own homes, access services and to receive appropriate care and treatment. Often people come to the Centre at a very low time in their lives, when perhaps a loved one has been diagnosed with a life-threatening illness or the onset of Alzheimer's disease. Until people experience the role of being a carer, they can fail to understand the devastating effect it can have on the carer as well as the person being cared for.

Often carers find new ways of coping and the Centre support services play an important role in providing the carers with help in caring for their loved ones.

Music and Well-Being

Much research has been done around the effect of music therapy in reducing distress and improving the well-being of those with dementia. However, music can be a powerful ally for carers as well, offering emotional, psychological, and even physical benefits. Music offers a unique and accessible way to nurture their own well-being.

Music therapy for carers offers numerous benefits in improving overall well-being, including stress reduction, emotional support, and improved communication skills. It provides a non-verbal way for carers to express themselves and connect with others, fostering a sense of community and shared experience. Additionally, music therapy can enhance the carer's overall well-being by promoting relaxation and creativity, making it a valuable tool for those who care for others.

Music isn't just entertainment. For carers, it can be a gentle reminder to pause, breathe, and reconnect with themselves.

How Music Therapy Can Improve Carers' Mental Health

Engaging in artistic activities can significantly enhance mental well-being. Creative expression offers a non-verbal medium for emotional healing, allowing individuals to process complex feelings without relying solely on words. Creative expression bridges the gap where traditional therapies may fall short. It offers a versatile and accessible approach to mental health care, making it a powerful tool for emotional healing and well-being.

Benefits for those with dementia

For carers, music is a helpful tool that can change moods, create moments of joy and points of connection with loved ones. Research published by Dementia UK in October 2023 found that for people with dementia – even those who have lost their ability to communicate or are at the end of their life – music can be a powerful way to trigger positive feelings and connect with other people. A recent report, *The Music Sounds Better With You*, published in September 2024 by Music for Dementia³ interviewed 1,000 carers of people living with dementia to gain an insight into the carer experience of using music and technology. It revealed that almost half (47%) felt that music can help reach a loved one and turn a day around.

OVERVIEW OF THE DELIVERY MODEL

The process for the delivery of the Happy Together Project has included:

- Two hour workshops facilitated by two musicians/facilitators from Oh Yeah Music Centre;
- Composing and recording of two original songs; and
- Recording of podcasts.

The sessions were two hours in length with light refreshments offered halfway through allowing participants the opportunity to relax and socialise.



The Project comprised several elements:

1. Songwriting

The group talked about songs that held personal meanings for them. They also discussed topics that were emotional to them, namely The Troubles and the Corona Virus pandemic. As a group they shared their own stories and experiences of these events, and these were collated by the facilitators along with images and phrases, forming the basis of lyrics to two original songs. The participants were able to articulate their feelings through the lyrics.



2. Instrumental Play and Improvisation

Instrumental play with drums provided a tactile and auditory experience, as well as fostering creativity and community between participants by providing an opportunity to create music together as a group. Loops were created from drum beat recordings and these were incorporated into the melody of one of the two original songs. The group improvised with different musical themes, developing melodies from other inspirational songs or from experimenting with chromatic scale bells.





3. Group Participation

Participants were seated in a circle to encourage dialogue and social interaction. The group setting created a sense of community among participants. The discussions to develop the lyrics and melodies as well as the ensemble musical performances fostered connection and shared experiences. Individual members participated in singing solo sections which built their individual confidences and capabilities.



Outputs

The Project produced two original songs, the lyrics of which can be found below:

Happy Together

Open up the door, let me walk right in,
It's great to see you, tell me how've you been,
I look around and see my friends, we all have a smile,
It's the small things in life, that make it all worthwhile.

*It doesn't take too much to make me smile,
Hope shines through, might take a while,
If darkness covers you, just take my hand,
Celebrate small victories showing love whenever we can*

Sometimes it's good to talk, just to sit and listen,
I'm never that concerned about the things I'm missing,
We've built a trust that's rare these days, a sense of freedom too,
It's good to know, that we are looking out for me and you.

Chorus

Sometimes you need to feel the bad, to reach the good,
There are times in life things don't turn out as they should,
Release brings us happiness, so often I've been told,
Life can be wonderful, we need to break the mould.

Chorus

Corona, Corona

Life can overwhelm us, it can easily take us down,
Greed, power, inequality, who is it that wears the crown?
Small people have been forgotten, left out in the cold,
Sometimes its really down to us for the story to be told.

The news was very shocking, unprecedented they say,
Many people lost their lives, all some could do was pray,
It was a feeling of isolation, and of not being in control,
We all needed something happy, something bright to lift our soul.

*You are not alone, be free to love and grow,
Talk away your woes, and let your demons go,
We are all in this together, support is near at hand,*

Don't worry, if sometimes, it does not go to plan.

Hindsight is 2020, we came through but at what cost?
Mental health was really high, often sanity was lost,
Always the weak and helpless who suffered oh so much,
Often ending up alone, with no one left to touch.

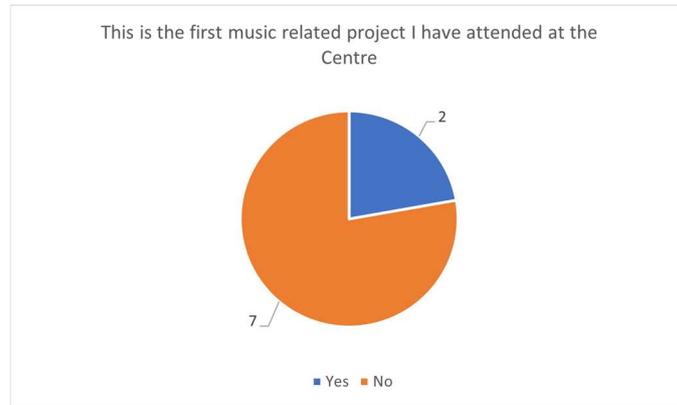
Chorus



PROJECT EVALUATION

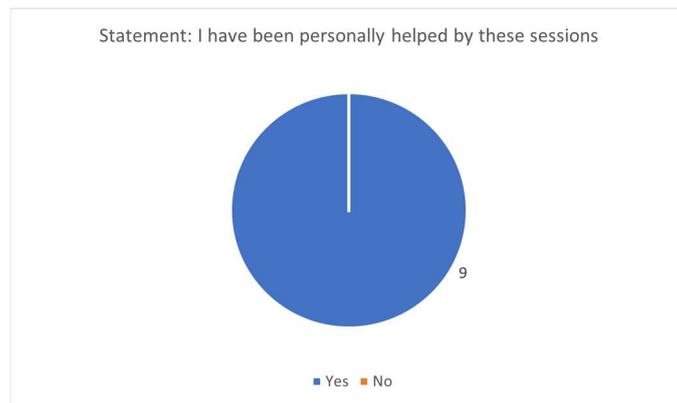
A final evaluation questionnaire was completed by each participant at the end of the project in August 2025. A total of 9 evaluations were received, representing an 82% response rate, and these were used for the purposes of the following quantitative analysis.

Figure 1: Previous attendance at music-related projects at the Centre



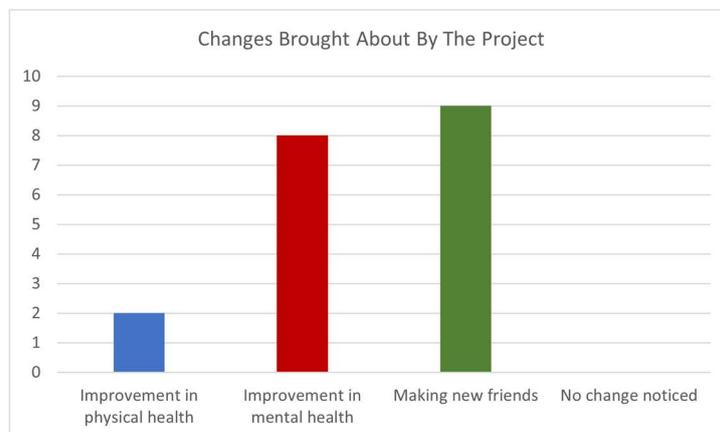
The majority (78%) of participants have attended music-related projects at the Centre prior to the Happy Together project.

Figure 2: Personal Benefit of the Project



All (100%) participants feel that they have been personally helped as a result of participating in the Happy Together project.

Figure 3: Summary of Changes Brought About By The Project



100% of participants have made new friends as a result of the project. 89% have noticed an improvement in their mental health and 22% have noticed an improvement in their physical health.

The impact of the project on the participants can be illustrated by the following comments from participants:

“I found the project uplifting and felt a real sense of achievement.”

“I think the name Happy Together was the key as we were all together no matter what our problems.”

“I enjoyed the company and the music. It made me get up and get out of bed!”

“I enjoyed the group togetherness, the camaraderie and the relaxed and friendly environment. I was able to speak freely and felt comfortable with the group.”

“The friendship amongst the ladies, hearing other people talk about how they cope with their caring skills have helped me personally.”

“It was great fun and very liberating. At times very emotional and this is indicated in our lyrics. It has very definitely lifted my spirits and enabled me to get on with life and support my brother and sister in our caring. It has, on a weekly basis, enabled me to laugh a lot, engage with people who have similar difficulties in their lives. I appreciate the expertise and skills of Paul and Chip, and also the care and dedication of the Newington staff.”

“The things I enjoyed most about the project were the sense of achievement and the friendship from everyone including the leaders and the staff. The sessions have personally helped me with reducing my stress and providing social interaction and enjoyment in music. There was excellent guidance, support and experience from the leaders Paul and Chip.”

A focus group was held with the participants to gather feedback as a group and to discuss themes in more detail. In particular, the group discussed the impact of the Project in helping them to talk about past traumatic experiences during The Troubles and the Corona Virus pandemic. The group members found this process to be deeply cathartic, offering a sense of closure and clarity. Many commented that it was the highlight of the Project for them.

“Verbalising these traumatic experiences was very cathartic. It allowed me to talk about them with the group and helped me realise that firstly, I was not imagining these events, and secondly that I was not alone in experiencing them.”

“Your problems are released. Things come from the back of your head to the forefront of your mind and in doing so you are able to recognise them as problems and verbalise them. And that in itself is therapy.”

The focus group also highlighted the creative aspect of the Project as being a positive outcome, with the songwriting and improvisation promoting emotional release, fostering creativity and building confidence.

“We are all coming with problems at home. Home can be quite a daunting place for most of us. The fact that the Project is called Happy Together sets the tone for the sessions. It is a distraction from all our other cares, a release. What we have produced is our own words and our own music, expertly blended by Paul and Chip but we have a sense of ownership over it and that is a great achievement.”



CONCLUSION

The feedback received from the participants evidences the impact that the Happy Together project has had for those involved. Having witnessed the delivery model first hand through attending a number of sessions, it is clear that the combination of music and reflection is an effective way to support carers, providing them with a place where they can ease the emotional burden of caring through creativity.

The facilitators, Paul and Chip, are adept at skilfully and sensitively allowing the carers to talk and share information. It is evident that the carers feel safe and comfortable sharing personal feelings in the space created for them. Paul and Chip also bring warmth, humour and an infectious enthusiasm for creating music and the sessions are dynamic and fun-filled, providing an opportunity for carers to leave their troubles at the door and enjoy being ‘happy together’. It is clear from observing the group dynamics that both new friendships have been formed and existing friendships strengthened and these are continuing post project through weekly get togethers organised by the Newington staff.

The model of working developed by Oh Yeah Music Centre and Newington Day Care Centre has proven effective and has demonstrated its success at achieving the outcomes set out in relation to supporting the needs of carers. The results achieved have highlighted the potential for music to be used as a powerful form of therapy across other day centres, and care facilities and healthcare professionals should consider incorporating these techniques into their programmes. By doing so, they can help to provide individuals with a unique and effective form of support that can make a meaningful difference to lives.