

## Case studies: How have culture and creativity been supporting people in health, care and other institutions during the Covid-19 pandemic?

Project: Choirs Beating Time

Organisation: Beating Time

Region: West Midlands, South East

This project has been made possible by the skills and versatility of our music directors; existing relationships with prison staff which enabled us to discuss, agree and implement alternative services in necessarily very restrictive regimes; the drive of our Insider in HMP Birmingham (and Co-Director of Inside Job) to keep Inside Job going and help his fellow prisoners even when he couldn't leave his cell; the flexibility and support of our funders to repurpose funds; and HMPPS who allowed flexible/mitigating services to be provided under their contracts and continued to pay suppliers.

What we have done we have been able to do as well as we could in the circumstances but it is clearly not ideal and not enough for people who have been spending in many cases up to 23 hours a day in a cell for prolonged periods.

### Introduction

Beating Time is a charity which works with people serving sentences in prison. Our aim is to improve their mental health and social inclusion and to help find or create employment on release. We do this using a combination of a weekly, year-round group singing programme (Choirs Beating Time) and two practical work support programmes: UpStart – creative self-employment and Inside Job – peer-led job matching). We also provide through-the-gate and post-release support to our programme participants including a small in-community music project in Birmingham (Free Spiritz). We are delighted to be 2020's holder of the Robin Corbett Award for Prisoner Reintegration.

### Choirs Beating Time: In-cell music provision:

- CD and songbook: produced songbook with 10 songs popular with our choirs teaching lyrics, simple harmonies, musical arrangements and guitar chords. Sent with an accompanying demo CD recorded by our MDs, to all our choir participants: 85 packs to 6 prisons.
- Remote songwriting: run via 'Email a Prisoner'. Choir participants send us their lyrics/song ideas together with directions for the music. MDs worked with these to develop suitable music then record the songs. Released former choir members performed on the recordings. CDs were sent back into the prisoners. We have just started to trial an in-person follow up to this in one prison
- Videos for in-cell TV. MDs produced music videos to be shown in their respective prisons.
- Programme/interview broadcast on National Prison Radio
- UpStart: We have sent in 45 workbooks to 3 prisons for in-cell work for those interested in running their own business.
- Inside Job: Remote job search support - working with our Insider (via email a prisoner and weekly calls) and prison staff, identifying suitable candidates looking for work on release.

Building our employer network. Providing remote post-release support. Launching project in one further prison.

## Funders

HMPPS

G4S

People's Postcode Trust

Colyer-Fergusson Charitable Trust

Berkeley Foundation

Bromley Trust

Brook Trust

Henry Oldfield Trust

The Clothworkers' Company

## Partners

Our Inside Job work is in collaboration with CIC, A Fairer Chance.

Also, during Covid we have been supporting the provision of Phil Martin's book *How to Get a Great Job When You Have a Criminal Record* into every prison. Phil has lived experience and founded Ex-Seed a recruitment network for ex-offenders and like us is a member of the Corbett Network ([www.thecorbettnetwork.com](http://www.thecorbettnetwork.com)).

The UpStart workbook has been produced with CIC, Enterprise Exchange.

## Who is it for?

All our work is aimed at people serving sentences.

- We were aiming to reach as many of our singers as possible in the prisons where we run our singing projects.
- We also hoped to reach others through the videos/prison radio programme which would have been broadcast more widely among the prison population.
- The remote song-writing project also enabled us to work with two of our former participants who have been released but are struggling to manage their mental health in Covid times (both had pre-existing mental health issues)
- The Inside Job Covid-adapted project has been intended to reach any prisoner in one of our prisons who is coming up for release and who is ready and able to work.

## How many people took/are taking part?

c.100 (We have not included numbers who may have been reached through videos shown on in-cell TV or the National Prison Radio programme.)

## Where is it happening?

Midlands (HMP Birmingham, HMP Featherstone and HMP YO1 Brinsford (both nr Wolverhampton), HMP Rye Hill, HMP Stafford)

South East (HMP Maidstone and HMP YO1 East Sutton Park)

## For how long has it been happening?

Ongoing

### What were/are the main outputs?

CDs for use by our participants. Original songs. Musical development: we have also been providing some musical instrument instruction via Email A Prisoner where a participant has requested this and has an instrument in-cell (in one prison we have sent in guitars).

Job candidates. Improved CVs. Jobs on release.

### What outcomes were/are you aiming for?

Meaningful in-cell activity. Maintaining personal contact with our singers (many of whom we have known for a number of years) – keeping links and some emotional support. Contributing a little to supporting mental health.

Support for staff who are also facing challenging times and want to help the people in their charge.

### Have you adapted existing work to make this happen? If so, how?

All work is being done remotely. The core of our usual work is Choirs Beating Time – weekly singing groups which take place year-round. No group work is permitted in prison at the moment and restrictions on visits are only just lifting and in most of our prisons have not lifted at all to allow delivery of any activity.

People in prison are not permitted access to the internet or regular phone calls. This means alternative group delivery being utilised by other organisations in the community – eg Zoom – is not available to us.

All services are being provided through correspondence, either post or via “Email a Prisoner” a web-based communication service which can be used where the prisoner’s name and prison number is known (it is designed primarily for use by family and friends). Staff support has also been vital to get approvals to send CDs etc in to an establishment. Some limited phone calls are taking place where a participant has received permission to include us on their permitted contacts list.

### Does your work support people who identify with one or more of the protected characteristics<sup>1</sup>?

The adapted work was not specifically designed to reach a particular grouping of people. However, since people from BAME backgrounds make up a greater proportion of the prison population than in wider society this is reflected in part in our choirs – although not true across the board. The prisons we work in are also very varied. By virtue of this we do focus in particular establishments on people who have some of these characteristics:

HMP YOI East Sutton Park – women

HMP Maidstone – foreign nationals

HMP Rye Hill – people convicted for sexual offences on longer term sentences, these choir members are usually much older and regularly include 1 or 2 who identify as non-binary or as a different gender to the one assigned at birth.

HMP YOI Brinsford – a male prison for people aged 18-21.

### Evaluation & Feedback

Our work during Covid has been conducted almost entirely through correspondence which has allowed us to collate a large body of letters which tell us how people are responding to the feedback they are getting. It is clear that just maintaining contact has been appreciated.

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<sup>1</sup> Protected characteristics are age, disability, gender reassignment, marriage and civil partnership, pregnancy and maternity, race, religion or belief, sex, sexual orientation (Equalities Act 2010).

We will also be carrying out a short survey during November to capture views on the song-writing project.

We have also liaised with prison staff throughout to informally gauge responses/alternative ways to reach participants.

We have not set up a formal evaluation of the adapted project and have not liaised with any external evaluators.

We are just about to embark on a review of the work to date, reviewing correspondence for common themes and will be sending out a short survey if appropriate to do so. We are conscious that much of the correspondence received has been written in a personal capacity and should be treated both sensitively and with real circumspection about what and how we use any content to share for feedback purposes.

### What is your own impression of how it has worked? What have been the challenges and successes for you?

It is clear from the correspondence received and the conversations which we have had (where able to do so), that having familiar people staying in touch has been hugely valued during a time when visits have been very limited and there are no or very few activities.

Music and being able to continue to take part in music while in isolation in a cell has been very beneficial. However, it is clearly a very restricted way of working and for us not what we regard as the best way to deliver the full benefit of our services – we use group singing to deliver our aims and neither group work or singing are currently permitted. What we have done we have been able to do as well as we could in the circumstances but it is clearly not ideal and not enough for people who have been spending in many cases up to 23 hours a day in a cell for prolonged periods.

Challenges have mainly been practical ones:

- obtaining permission from prisons to send the songbook packs in. Some did not permit CDs for all participants.
- the collaborative songwriting project could be further improved if there was some way of participants being able to communicate melody as well as written words (e.g. through authorised phone calls or even visits)
- identifying members of prison staff with capacity to assist with facilitating the projects. They are overstretched and have had their work cut out managing the crisis within the prisons without taking on extra work.
- Delays in communicating with participants/Inside Job candidates with limited access via Email a Prisoner. Even in an “open” prison where there are more communication options, the residents only have access to personal email once a week and restricted phone times making turn around in advice and job hunting very slow.
- patchy and often outdated (or non-existent) media technology in the various prisons we work in.

### Are you reaching more people/fewer people/different people?

We are reaching far fewer people and having a reduced impact.

- Many participants have been released as lockdown has continued and we are not able to effectively promote for new members in the usual way or stay in contact with those who have been released.
- Of those we can contact in prison we can only do so by writing at the moment. We have written to all our members but it is often one-way. Many have barriers to writing – whether

literacy limitations or physical disability. In Maidstone (foreign nationals) many participants do not read or write English well (singing in person is done by ear). Writing materials are also scarce. The Email a Prisoner system is fantastic and allows you to tick an option for an extra page of A4 to be provided with your letter so that the correspondent can reply. Understandably many use it to write to family/friends or otherwise.

- Phone calls are subject to strictly prescribed times and permitted callers these precious places often go, rightly, to others higher up our participants' priority list.

This is also true of our Inside Job programme. It relies on both staff and more importantly our peer-prisoner lead ("Insider") being able to access and meet with other residents to assess job-readiness, needs, etc. There is little or no movement in prison and no mixing between wings. Post-release support difficulties are exacerbated where we have not been able to meet (or speak) to build a rapport.

### What new skills have you or your colleagues had to develop to deliver this work?

Generally – ways of working to keep our small team together and maintain morale and motivation when we are working in isolation/remotely. We use regular video calls, weekly update emails, personal phone calls to individual team members, achievable target setting – and an open channel to contact management on a personal basis with anxieties and other issues.

Project work - our musicians have been adept at finding ways of working to deliver alternative services which go some way to deliver the Charity's mission (and satisfy their own). Some have also been able to further develop their recording, editing/mixing and filming skills (others were already very able in this area as part of their other professional work).

### What would you say has made this project possible?

This project has been made possible by:

- The skills and versatility of our music directors
- The existing relationships we had with prison staff which enabled us to discuss, agree and implement alternative services in necessarily very restrictive regimes
- The drive of our Insider in HMP Birmingham (and Co-Director of Inside Job) to keep Inside Job going and help his fellow prisoners even when he couldn't leave his cell
- The flexibility and support of our funders to repurpose funds
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### What would have made it easier?

Being able to go in to prison

Prisons having access to internet services, e.g. Zoom, allowing remote group delivery

Participants having regular, far less/unrestricted access to phones

### Further information

[www.beatingtime.org](http://www.beatingtime.org)