

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

Project: Extraordinary Times

Organisation: Plymouth Music Zone

Region: South West

Designed for: residential care, mental health units, domestic abuse refuge, schools, bereavement groups (including hospice partnership), children with disabilities and sensory impairments, older adults with sight loss, the wider Plymouth community and other arts and health organisations

“If Dave hadn’t been phoning, I would have just given up. I love PMZ so much, particularly as you reach out to people who wouldn’t otherwise get a chance.”

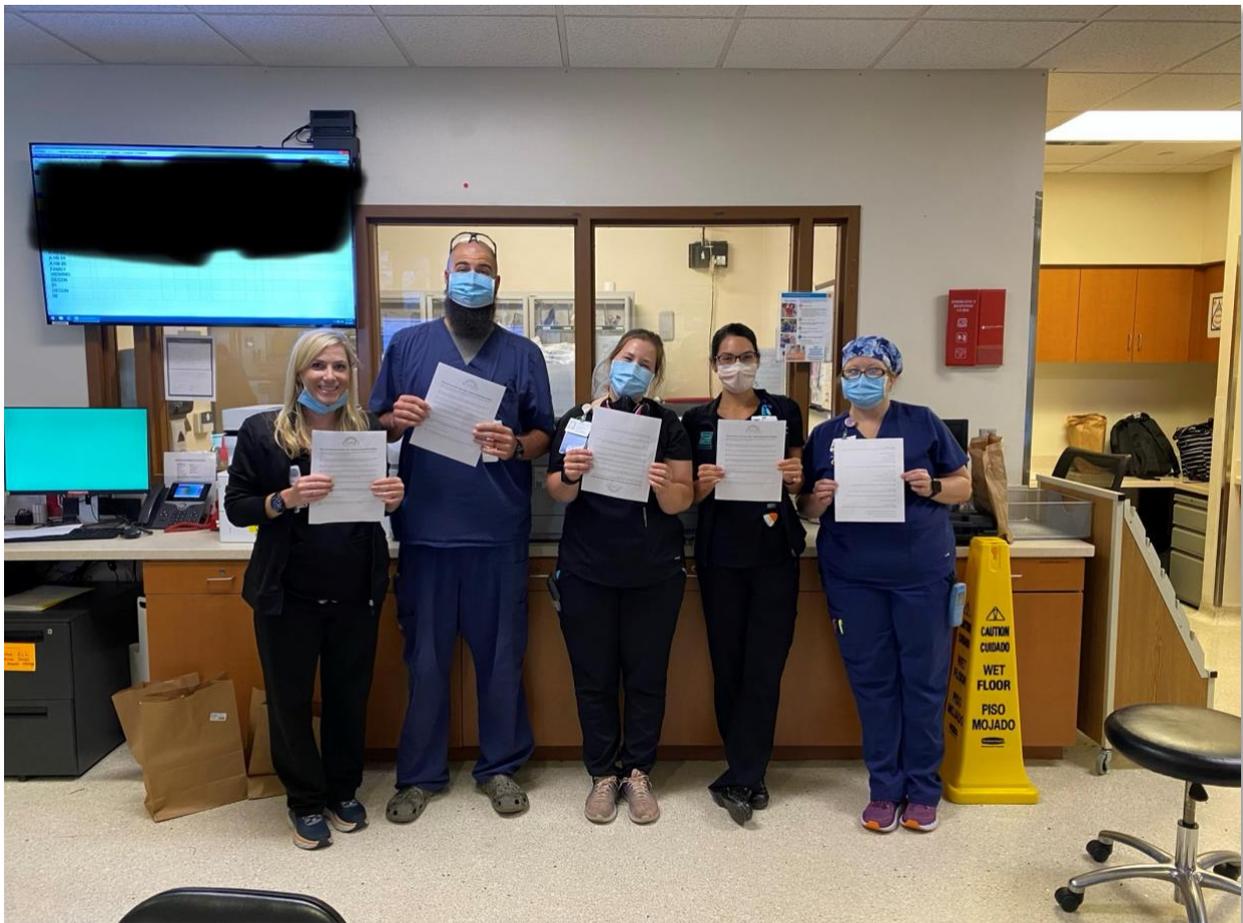


Photo: A&E Team members from Baylor Hospital, Dallas, Texas USA hold their quiz copies (An unexpected outcome as our Plymouth Music Zone weekly quiz goes international!) Photo by Lindsey.

Introduction

Plymouth Music Zone is an award winning music charity that believes passionately in the power of music to reach out and help transform the lives and improve wellbeing of some of the most vulnerable and marginalised children, young people and adults across Plymouth and beyond.

PMZ has provided high quality, meaningful musical experiences for over 21 years in response to needs of the community. We work with people of all ages, backgrounds and abilities, celebrating diversity and creativity.

We place reflective and person-centred practice at the heart of the organisation, sharing our work through independent evaluations and research.

Following lockdown, we collapsed our existing programme and designed one named 'Extraordinary Times' to reflect the new world where nothing was 'ordinary'. We continued developing this skeleton project over the coming months, finding new and creative ways to respond to the situation. We were particularly keen to reach people who were digitally excluded.

All face-to-face and outreach delivery ceased and has generally not yet resumed. Residential settings and hospices closed their doors to visitors and practitioners (many still are).

Most staff still operate mainly from home, but our premises have been repurposed to safely accommodate small groups / individuals and for online broadcasting. (We took our PMZ van off the road as it can't go anywhere!)

Our activity and outputs (not exclusive to institutions) have included:

Bespoke singing and instrumental videos

- Creation of CDs and listening materials
- Nora's 100th birthday lockdown celebration film!
- 'Walking videos' with soundtracks by PMZ participants, helping people experience outdoors who couldn't go out
- Poetry project – including contributions from residents
- Weekly Music Quiz
- Virtual Summer Jam Event (August 2020) – A week-long online celebration of past and present, reminiscing on what is normally held in Devonport Park with hundreds of participants, including residential settings and institutions.

Funders

Primary funders:

- ACE (Arts Council England) NPO funding
- Youth Music
- Big Lottery Community Fund
- Other trusts and foundations

Partners

Our work is often delivered in partnership with other organisations. During this period, these have included (not only institutions):

- Plymouth City College (16+)
- University of Plymouth (Knowledge Exchange project)
- NSPCC
- The Orchestra of the Age of Enlightenment
- The Rise (Residential Extra-Care Housing for people with sight loss)
- Devonport Views (Extra-Care / Assisted Living Housing)
- Astor Court (Extra-care housing)
- St Barnabas Court (as above)
- Runnymede Court (as above)
- St Paul's Court (as above)

- Runnymede Court (as above)
- Highbury Trust (respite support for people with learning disabilities)
- Stoke Damerel Pre-School
- Well Connected SW (<https://wellconnecteduk.org/>)

Who is it for?

We were aiming to reach our participants and groups in the following: residential care, mental health units, domestic abuse refuge, schools, bereavement groups (including hospice partnership), children with disabilities and sensory impairments, older adults with sight loss, the wider Plymouth community and other arts and health organisations. Not all have been possible to continue for logistical and other reasons.

- St Luke's Hospice (In The Zone) bereavement support music group
- Brighter Skies (PMZ-based) bereavement support group
- NSPCC children in care online songwriting project about sexual consent
- 6 extra-care housing settings (listed elsewhere in this document)
- Plymbridge Tier 4 mental health facility for teenage age group (not possible to continue this work)
- Highbury Trust (respite and support for people with a learning disability)
- Domestic Abuse Refuge – unable to reach (staffing and safety), but alerting staff to online content for families to access
- In addition we were trying to reach our participants isolated in their own homes or with family (stroke and brain injury survivors, Parkinson's group, special schools, early years settings (Stoke Damerel Pre-School and others)
- 'Moving Sounds' members - (movement and music for people with disabilities), Sensory Sounds (children with profound disabilities) – often spending time in institutions when not with us (i.e. hospitals, children's hospice, special schools) and now full-time at home.
- Our Digital Orchestra members (including many who rely on 24-hour individual care and support, but not necessarily within an institution) who have a disability / mental health conditions / acquired brain injuries etc.

Are these people you have worked with before, or new participants?

Our aim was to retain and maintain a level of contact with groups and individuals we already work with, but we have reached some new people (unexpected outcomes) through online presence and sharing. This has also happened as awareness of our work has increased by what we have offered people in their own homes – their families and networks have gained more exposure to the work.

One such unexpected connection: An A & E department in Dallas, Texas have a connection with a participant in our Parkinson's Singing group. They had been sharing one of our weekly music quizzes that was being emailed to participants. They have since been using their breaks to answer questions and sent a lovely photo of them doing this very thing. Wellbeing indeed for those trying to look after others in another country.

How many people took/are taking part?

Difficult to give exact numbers as the project is ongoing, but direct delivery has drastically reduced this. It's also difficult to measure the growing number of 'connections' that are not direct delivery related.

However, a recent count = 379 people (not including any social media stats)

Where is it happening?

Plymouth / South West England primarily

For how long has it been happening?

PMZ is now in its 21st year, and we were immersed in programmes funded by ACE, Youth Music and The National Lottery Community Fund as we entered lockdown in March 2020. Its work is ongoing (depending on future funding).

The project is multi-faceted, based both in a building in Devonport, Plymouth as well as across the city in a wide variety of settings.

Prior to lockdown there was a weekly programme of up to 40 different workshops taking place across the city (not all institution-based).

Our NPO Arts Council and Youth Music funding will take us forward into a further two years.

We are entirely dependent on the success (or not) of funding from other sources (including trusts and foundations) in response to the Covid-19 crisis. We have not been eligible for emergency funding due to a stable base / reserves, but this is rapidly depleting.

We feel that the work is more needed than ever and are seeking as many different options as possible to maintain and develop our work.

What were/are the main outputs?

- YouTube channel of videos (see website link)
- Bespoke webpage for Sensory Sounds (individual logins for disabled children and their families, with music leaders offering them tailored videos and materials) – practical packs sent out also, including song-books, CDs etc.
- Poetry exhibition (on our website)
- PMZ Postcards (with poem from a participant)
- Ongoing Extraordinary Times weekly programme of social media outputs / sharing on Facebook and Twitter (at least 7 posts weekly)
- Weekly Makaton and BSL simple signing videos (emotions, household, musical instruments etc) with demo videos of musicians, including some participants
- Blogs and reflection pieces
- Recordings and individual contributions from participants
- Project with NSPCC resulted in a recorded song / lyrics written in conjunction with young people in care (one session prior to lockdown, the remainder of the project conducted online)
- Weekly music quizzes (via email)
- Monthly music quiz / newsletters (printed for digitally excluded participants) for residential settings with messages
- Phone-call check-ins
- One-to-one piano lessons with blind 87 (?) year-old pianist, delivered remotely using low-tech use of two pianos, a music leader and landline speakerphone (see blog!)
- Instruments (sanitised!) on loan to Highbury Trust

What outcomes were/are you aiming for?

Throughout this time we were aiming to reach people who were engaging with us because they were already experiencing levels of social isolation for a wide variety of reasons. Additionally, we wanted to ensure that we could retain our highly trained specialist workforce, several of whom identify as disabled or living with long-term health condition / chronic illness (and are continuing to do so).

We are continuing to challenge the current emerging political narratives that arts are secondary to other sectors. We believe our team holds irreplaceable skills and are doing everything we can to keep

them safe and well, financially and emotionally supported throughout this difficult time. Our own CEO, for example has been off sick for many months suffering debilitating consequences of long-Covid. Several of our sessional staff are shielding and their safety and wellbeing is highest on our agenda.

We wanted to offer activities to engage people's thinking, creative skills, to try something new, to exchange ideas with others (even separately) and to offer some respite from the relentlessness of being isolated.

One size doesn't fit all. Our ethos pre-Covid has not changed and we were aiming to continue to work with what people said they found helpful.

We would also reflect that all of us have had a taste of what isolation feels like, even if we haven't experienced it before. For many of our participants that is a reality they were living before Covid-19 came along. We have certainly developed a much better understanding and empathy for those people.

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

Yes. Very much so. We took an overview of the entire programme, contacting all partners at the start of lockdown (before, during, and continuing) to assess possibilities for engagement and where possible, find alternatives to our traditional modes of delivery.

We re-named this adapted programme 'Extraordinary Times' and began rolling this out in late March. It is continuing currently, with the addition of some socially distanced sparse face:face delivery with less vulnerable participants (in line with government Covid restrictions). *Please see attached photo of residents from Astor Court (prior to number restrictions) in a local park with their music leader, Simon Hackworthy.

We had been planning to develop the digital and technological aspects of our work prior to Covid-19 and this process was propelled to the forefront within a week in March. Our online delivery consists of some group Zoom sessions (Moving Sounds, PPV (Plymouth Proud Voices) LGBT+ singing group,

Does your work support people who identify with one or more of the protected characteristics¹?

Team: Several of our team / board of trustees identify as having a disability or chronic illness. Their wellbeing has been paramount throughout this time and we have done what we can to help them to continue to do their work where possible and make adaptations to working hours among other things. Aside from this, we have done our best and are continuing to protect and support those on sick leave (short and longer term).

We have representation from the LGBT+ community on our board / professional staff team

Participants: Approximately 90% of our participants identify as disabled / in the vulnerable category hence most if not all our face-to-face delivery has had to stop during this period.

Although this is not specific to working with institutions during this time, I note here that we have been running online sessions for our LGBT+ singing group (Plymouth Proud Voices) community (without wanting to bring this particular group to attention specifically forward here in isolation from our other activities). They have told us that the opportunity to connect with one another during this time has been extremely important. The group is one of our newer parts of the programme, but has quickly established as highly valued by its members). The group is led by an LGBT+ music leader.

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

Evaluation & Feedback

Consistent checking in with participants in diverse formats informs us and also enables us to tailor our varied delivery. We have conducted interviews, no questionnaires yet, questions of partners/stakeholders as well as direct questioning in all formats of participants and their families/carers.

Feedback about written materials shared to support digitally excluded residents in care homes:

“What PMZ is providing for the residents via newsletter content / quiz is helping general wellbeing and morale” (Mark Badham, Devonport Views)

“Gets the Grey matter going” (M, Devonport Views)

“Brilliant content, love all of it especially the Music facts and quiz!” (P, Devonport Views)

“Great Fun and interesting” (A, Devonport Views)

Something creative that speaks directly from one of the groups...

Chorus from ‘Home Comforts’ original collaborative song by members of St Luke’s Hospice ‘In the Zone’ bereavement support group (2020!):

*We find comfort in the ordinary things,
Skyping and typing and Zooming and growing our hair
We find comfort in extraordinary things,
And the people out there, are the people who care.*

Music Leader:

“It’s been like a kind of grieving of its own kind, being without our participants all this time. The body language and non-verbal cues that we look for in our day-to-day work in order to try and make those connections with one another aren’t there in the space with us. We’ve gone from 3D to 2D and mostly inside monitors and screens and pretty much everything we would go out of our way to avoid before this.

There’s latency and delay issues, difficulties with communication verbal and non-verbal, musically so much of this time has been frustrating and yet sometimes liberating...(like finding new ways to record things!)

Everything we try to do as musicians when communicating without words has been thrown on its head, had its wings cut off and new ones sewn on that have flown into new corners.

All the adjustments to everything we know and what we’ve trained for and experienced all these years has brought so much frustration and opportunity all at the same time.” (Anna Batson, Creativity and Learning Director / Music Leader)

Response to music poem project:

“It was a lovely surprise to get a ring at the doorbell today and find it on the doorstep; it really brightened up this dark, drizzly morning and lifted my spirits.” (JM)

Practitioner Quotes:

Simon Hackworthy, music leader (Astor court extra care setting) from his blog:

“Most of [the participants] state how they have missed the sessions but one theme also seems to be prominent – this is a time when our work is the most important and needed most”.

Simon’s blog about this work: <https://plymouthmusiczone.org.uk/music-residential-homes/>

Full text for the blog about the work with Pat by Dave England and Anna Batson: “Hope and a Piano” about working with Pat who lives in extra-care accommodation and is registered blind. She is also an ambassador for PMZ: <https://plymouthmusiczone.org.uk/hope-and-a-piano-2020/>

Participants:

"It's great to sing all these songs again. I've really missed this and really missed being able to get together with people." B (Resident, Astor Court)

"Out of all of our activities, this is the one I've missed the most." S (Resident, Astor Court)

"Our session in the park was great fun. Exactly what we needed to lift our spirits." M (Resident, Astor Court)

"It doesn't seem right without our weekly sing, it's always the highlight of our week." D (Resident, St Barnabas)

"We appreciate everything that happens on these days. We love the music and we love you." P (Resident, Astor Court)

"If Dave hadn't been phoning, I would have just given up. I love PMZ so much, particularly as you reach out to people who wouldn't otherwise get a chance."
Pat Tansell (Participant)

Unexpected outcome quote (going international!) from the dissemination of our weekly music quizzes. This one travelled via one of our participants to his friend who works in a USA hospital:

"I left one at each station - we have 5 stations in the ER. One of the nurses asked her care team of nurses a question each hour for the 12 hour shift. She said it was a fun way to get the staff to relax for a minute each hour". (Lindsey – E.R. department at Baylor Hospital, Dallas, Texas USA)

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

The main challenge has been that for a long time we didn't know what was working. Who were we reaching and how meaningfully?

The successes have been the little answerphone messages, notes and cards arriving at the building, email responses and gratefulness of staff and participants in the organisations we've been able to reconnect with.

Another big challenge within the work is that by the very nature of those we work with, several of our participants have died since March 2020. As part of the Compassionate Cities network, we are accustomed to open and supportive conversations about death and dying. We are unable to be as directly supportive of our staff team as we'd wish to be (as in in person), but have continued to be available to one another. We have been needed as support for families and individuals as well as for one another.

Our own staff have described how much it means to share positive stories of work that is going well across the organisation. The challenge has been communicating this in a way that fairly represents all the hard work that has been going on in the background (and foreground!) to make it happen.

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

We are reaching fewer people in person due to cancellation of most direct delivery and restrictions on the numbers that we are able to work with / what our own building can accommodate or the restrictions on the setups in each individual setting. Most of the residential settings have restrictions on visitors and most still have their communal areas closed, including dining areas, lounges and even outdoor spaces.

We were due to perform and take part in the 'Change the AGE-nda' conference at the Tate Modern, London in April 2020. This was to celebrate art and ageing. We were invited to be part of this by Flourishing Lives organisation and Tate Exchange. We were hoping to reach many people and raise awareness of our work and the creativity of our older musicians. We have retained connection with the project and hope to contribute to a digital project in 2021.

We have reached new people online (via social media) who are starting to engage more with our posts and stories, particularly if they relate to a family member (e.g. The family of Pat Tansell who live on the other side of the country and have got to know more about PMZ and how Pat has been developing herself musically too).

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

We have had to set up new safeguarding policies and procedures to protect our participants and ourselves whilst navigating new ways of working.

Technology has been embraced across the organisation, including those who were previously the least confident to do so.

Our team have had to quickly adapt to completely new working conditions. Office-based work / administrative and leadership has been through using new 'virtual' workspaces, such as Slack, Zoom and project management tools. Remote working has made the best of existing IT equipment and built on peoples' skills along with their willingness to give things a go.

Workshop leaders have had to completely rework their practice, providing things such as audio recordings and videos, live-streaming and virtual workshop rooms. We have repurposed a space in our physical building in Plymouth as a broadcast studio, with green-screens and a computer / camera and audio setup to make the best of our existing equipment and a few new essential bits of kit to enable this.

We have had to learn to be 'presenters' of video material and recordings. We have had to get used to and move past our own insecurities about being filmed.

As mentioned elsewhere in this document, one such example of reflexive and reflective practice at PMZ comes from a music leader who has maintained his one-to-one work since March. This has been achieved using a landline / speakerphone to deliver weekly music mentoring sessions on piano with an 85 year-old lady who is registered completely blind. There has been genuine musical progression and learning and a mutual importance placed on this regular contact (see [this blog](#)). These positive stories have fed the whole team's spirit and kept us striving to connect with more individuals wherever we can make that possible.

We've learned the importance of pulling together as a team, even without our normal leadership in place due to the direct impact of Covid-19. We have not wavered from our values and hope to keep learning and growing from all this.

What would you say has made this project possible?

A passionate, committed team have enabled us to find ways to adapt our work and still make meaningful connections between us and our participants.

Our key funders have been flexible and supportive at this time when we have needed it most.

The pre-existing depth of connection we have with our participants and community has enabled us to communicate openly about what they would find most useful during this time. We have been on the phones, email, social media and 'snail mail' and asked for feedback where possible. Participants re-

stating the value of the work / expression of need for our services has kept us motivated and centred around doing as much as possible to continue to reach them.

We have also strongly reflected on [our previous research](#), which speaks of ‘networks of intimacy’ and the 360-degree picture of connections and considerations that surround us all as humans.

Having moved from a world of 3D experiences - the fuller picture, we have been constrained, restrained, reframed and placed very much in a 2D existence. This conflicts and contracts around what we learned about ourselves and others through the research. We have learnt to push to the edges of these new parameters and continue to seek human connection through music.

Quite simply, Music itself has made this project possible and for so many people it has provided comfort, a sense of global connection and togetherness.

We have drawn upon the creativity and innovation of the team to find new ways of working. One person’s struggles can often be someone else’s inspiration or answer to a question.

Developments in our use of technology and using it differently for communication has been of high value. We have been open and transparent with one another to help reduce certain anxieties. Sessional employees have been paid for all their anticipated hours, although their outputs have had to be adapted. When so many are working musicians having lost huge chunks of their regular income, this has been hugely valued. It has also enabled us to retain our team.

What would have made it easier?

We had some minor challenges early on setting up successful remote working. We have needed to update our equipment, particularly that which enables broadcasting / reducing latency when doing online music, but with little or no funding to do this, we have done the best with what we have got. This has probably taken up more time in the long run – finding our way, but lots of learning despite this. (Plymouth and the SW, particularly rural areas and staff living and working in these areas still have some connectivity issues, but it is improving).

Our CEO has been off sick since May until the present with what we understand to be long Covid. We are still uncertain about what will happen in the future. We have been operating without a Development Manager who left for a new job early in the year before lockdown. Recruitment for a new DM has been postponed due to Covid-19. Our fundraising capacity has been severely limited by staff moving onto other work and therefore our uncertainty of what lies ahead for the project has been pronounced. In addition to this, competition for funding is more challenging than ever, particularly in the arts. We are doing some of our most difficult work in the most uncertain of times. We are very clear that we are needed more than ever.

Further information

- Main website: www.plymouthmusiczone.org.uk
- Video content specific to ‘Extraordinary Times’ during lockdown and during Covid-19 restrictions: <https://plymouthmusiczone.org.uk/extraordinary-times-videos/>
- Extraordinary Times: Community Creations: <https://plymouthmusiczone.org.uk/category/community-creation/> (including musical poetry challenge)
- Simon Hackworthy’s music leader blog about his work in extra-care residential settings: <https://plymouthmusiczone.org.uk/music-residential-homes/>
- Research project (2017): <https://plymouthmusiczone.org.uk/beyond-words/>
- Previous (prior to Mar 20 lockdown) evaluations and research: <https://plymouthmusiczone.org.uk/evaluation/>
- Nora’s 100th Birthday – a song video by Paul White: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Wl9ZDWrMnko>