

## Engaging 'hard to reach' families with young children through music

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Soundcastle and Creative Futures are two organisations that use music to reach and connect communities. Here we explore our learning from recent projects on how to access and engage families who fall within the often-cited and hugely diverse 'hard to reach' category.

### What do we mean by 'hard to reach'?

The National Foundation for Youth Music commissioned a detailed report<sup>i</sup> into Early Years music-making with 'hard to reach' families in 2013, which gives a good insight into the wide array of definitions of 'hard to reach', ranging from those from specific ethnic or socio-economic groups to those whose voice is not heard or who prefer to remain unheard. It is a term used frequently to categorise groups of the population, often with targeted funding or interventions attached – for example by local authorities or Ofsted.

For arts organisations such as Creative Futures and Soundcastle, 'hard to reach' is a broad term too, often meaning different things in the context of different projects. Within both organisations' Early Years programmes there are multiple definitions, for example families that face barriers to accessing musical and artistic activities, whether financial, linguistic, location based, or to do with the day to day challenges of caring for a large family; families who engage little or not at all with any type of pre-school activity with other children; and families who self-identify with a number of descriptions such as 'lack of support', 'low income', 'children with learning difficulties', 'feeling lonely or isolated', 'finding it difficult to cope day to day' and 'feeling that I am an inadequate parent'. Perhaps, put simply, we define 'hard to reach' families in the context of Early Years as those who need a bit of help.

Projects delivered by Creative Futures and Soundcastle often hope to attract these groups in particular – but are never defined by them or restricted to them, partly because 'hard to reach' is a term with little or no meaning to those it labels (how many families would describe themselves in this way?), but more importantly because both organisations prefer to open the doors of their programmes to anyone from the community in which the activity is taking place, providing inclusive music opportunities which attract families representative of the localities in which they operate.

### What projects have we devised for these groups?

There are pockets of London such as the East End, no doubt mirrored in other urban centres across the country, that are reported to have low levels of community wellbeing (EECF Vital Signs Report 2015<sup>ii</sup>) suggesting that there is a need to reach communities who may feel disconnected or socially and culturally isolated.

One of the projects developed by Soundcastle to answer this need is 'Musical Beacons', a creative family music project, supported by Youth Music and using public funding by the National Lottery through Arts Council England. The project currently operates in two models. The first, in Tower Hamlets, is based around locality and community space. We have partnered with a housing association to host a weekly project in a community centre that is part of a social housing estate. The session is timed so that families can come straight from school and take some time to relax, have refreshments and socialise before an hour of structured music-making activities. The project runs in ten week phases, with an informal sharing at the end, and a CD to take home of all the music that has been made. The project is open access, and the only restriction is that children must attend with a parent or carer.

The second model, in Greenwich, is hosted within a primary school and follows a slightly different time frame. During each half term break we hold a half-day workshop for families with children of all ages. Following this there are weekly sessions for the second half of the school term. Each week there is a session for nursery children and parents or carers during the last hour of the school day, and then an after-school club for all other children and families. Again each phase ends with a sharing, a CD and some written resources of activities to take home.

Creative Futures delivers a number of projects which aim to attract hard to reach families, and this article focuses on two of these. One is a long established music and movement drop-in at a Children's Centre in Hackney for which we provide a music leader every week. Children's Centres are judged by Ofsted on their ability to engage with families it considers hard to reach, and for the Centre this is reflected in a focus on particular housing estates and super output areas. We have found that the music sessions tend to be a draw for families who have not attended the Children's Centre before, and often provide their first access point to the other services it offers. For this reason the music sessions are seen as an important part of the outreach work of the Centre, which aims to engage 100% of families from its target localities.

The other programme, Queen's Park Families (QPF), is a community drop-in run by Creative Futures in partnership with Paddington Development Trust (PDT). QPF grew out of a government initiative called Neighbourhood Community Budget (later renamed 'Our Place') which engaged local residents in shaping local services. In Queen's Park, where Creative Futures is based, residents decided Early Years should be the focus of the initiative due to a multiplicity of identified needs in the area: low engagement by families with any pre-school activity with their children especially among families from some specific ethnic groups; low take-up of free nursery places; low levels of school readiness; and a lack of provision for babies and children under 2 years. Creative Futures took a supporting role in delivering a successful pilot of QPF as part of that scheme in 2013 and then successfully attracted funding from the People's Health Trust (Health Lottery funds) and the local Community Council to continue the programme weekly all year-round from spring 2014. The project attracts people from across the community, and is highly valued locally. It is often held up as a beacon of community-led good practice by the local authority (which conveniently forgets that it still needs resourcing!)



Queen's Park Families

### How have the activities in the projects engaged people?

We often hear people say that they love music but that they are not “musical”, and some people feel intimidated by the expectations of skills that come with certain musical activities. Many of the families we work with have low levels of confidence and self-esteem, and so this belief is a common theme. However there is a strong evidence base to show that music can have huge benefits on connectedness and wellbeing. Professor Susan Hallam comments in her research synthesis *The Power of Music* that ‘people from a range of different backgrounds can experience benefits to their emotional and physical well-being from making music with an increased sense of self-worth, enhanced social skills and wider social networks.’<sup>iii</sup> This is explained further by scientists looking at music and the brain:

*‘Music Making is an activity involving several social functions. . . .The ability and the need to practise these social functions is part of what makes us human, and emotional effects of engaging in these functions include experiences of reward, joy and happiness.’<sup>iv</sup>*

Soundcastle aims to engage people in music-making in a way that is safe, inclusive and allows people to explore and discover their own creativity without any sense of getting things “right” or “wrong”. This can mean using other avenues to arrive at a musical output, such as sharing thoughts and ideas, looking up local history, creating stories or playing games. These activities can lead to writing words which can lead gently into song-writing, for example. Or we may take these ideas to inspire exploration of some musical instruments; looking for a musical soundtrack to our stories from a freer and more abstract perspective than the idea of learning the correct notes.

Creative Futures also creates a safe and welcoming environment by promoting free play as part of its QPF drop-in. Musical instruments sit alongside books and toys and are available for the children to pick up and explore in any way they want to. Here too there is no right or wrong way and we often observe children being hugely creative with the instruments at their fingertips, embedding music into their play and in their interaction with others.

Musical Beacons sessions involve some activities in a large group, connecting everyone through singing and playing together, and creating a positive and welcoming group dynamic. There are also focussed creative tasks in smaller groups, supported by facilitators. This allows everyone to be closely supported as well as allowing for a variety of engagement. Families with very young children may work in a separate group exploring creative play or singing and movement, while those with slightly older children could work on more advanced composition with instruments, for example. Thematic content is always drawn from the people we are working with, the place we are in and the moment in time; it always comes from the group's own ideas, thoughts and opinions. We use these to guide people towards writing their own music which is reflective of their individual and collective identities. In this way adults and children discover their own creativity, and feel a sense of pride and ownership in what they create.

Often parents expect to sit back, and assume the sessions are primarily for the children. However our intention is to engage everyone on an equal basis, and to encourage families to explore and learn together. We look to equip them with the skills to make their own music, interacting creatively between them, so that the processes can extend into their homes and daily lives. We reinforce this with the CD and resources that are produced at the end of each project phase, so that families can sing the songs they have written and reproduce the creative activities that they have taken part in.



*Musical Beacons Tower Hamlets*

Within both Soundcastle and Creative Futures' projects, the social aspect of music sessions is hugely important. Allowing sufficient time before or after structured activity where

people unwind and chat has proved invaluable to the success of these projects. Providing refreshments for the adults and drawing materials or other play activities for the children helps build the social element, and also creates safe time when families can talk to the facilitators and to each other, voice any concerns (about the project or about anything else), or make suggestions, all of which help ensure they feel integral to the project.

Creative Futures' QPF project takes this a step further by defining itself as a 'community drop-in' rather than as a music project, although music and musical free play are an important part of it and each of the weekly sessions includes group music-making. Key to the project's success in attracting and retaining its participants has been ensuring that the atmosphere of the session is right, and to do that we have focussed on the parents: making them tea, giving them cake, ensuring they have someone to talk to (especially if they are new), introducing them to people who live nearby or have a child the same age. The sessions are structured loosely in two parts: the first is for parents with children under 12 months old; and the second for all children up to 4 years (thus enabling those with more than one child of different ages to be included). There is a focus on free play, with most of the toys being musical or made of natural materials (e.g. wooden/cloth blocks and lots of bells, shakers, claves etc.) A constant source of fascination is the large gathering drum which almost a dozen children can engage with at once: it can be struck, patted, hit and stroked; it can have toy animals placed on it which then go for a walk as the drum is played; it can form the centrepiece of an activity; and it can even be sat on (although we don't encourage this!)



*Queen's Park Families – playing the gathering drum*

The fact that there are lots of things for the children to do is definitely a draw for people: we use a large hall with space to move and play. We bring plenty of different items for the children to be creative with: blocks for building towers together, animals to play with, books

to read or look at, instruments to explore sound through, and a huge parachute to hide under.

The musical content is carefully and sensitively introduced within this free and playful environment by the facilitator, who initiates two singing segments within the session: one with the babies, and one at the end of the second part of the session when everyone joins in. It took a while for all of the parents to join in with the singing, but gradually they felt more confident about doing so and there is now enough momentum that new families take part easily.

### Who leads the activities and what qualities are needed in the project leader?

Music has immense power to enhance connectedness and wellbeing, but only if facilitated sensitively and responsively; so the skills of the facilitators are crucial to the success of a project. Soundcastle's model has a team of five: a Lead Facilitator, responsible for content and artistic planning across the project; three supporting facilitators, who support delivery in the sessions and guide the smaller group activities; and a Project Manager, who manages the day to day running of the project and is also present in the sessions to support the needs of the families.

The key role of the facilitators (and the Project Manager) is to create a totally safe space where everyone feels supported and valued. It is crucial that everyone's voice is heard and acknowledged equally, and that everyone feels able to contribute at their comfortable level. There must be an attitude of exploration and discovery in the artistic sense, where everyone is free to try things out and nothing is regarded as "wrong". However, the music also needs to progress and develop so that people feel proud of the quality of what they have made, and achieve something beyond their imagined capabilities. This makes the role of the facilitator complex and spontaneous. They must always be aware of the dynamics of the whole group and the needs of individuals, and be able to adapt and shift the session as it unfolds, making sure everyone is supported both emotionally and artistically.

This complex mix of musical and social skills is mirrored in the role of the facilitator in Creative Futures Children's Centre music and movement session, where the pace and content of the session somehow needs to engage and motivate everyone, whether they are new to the session or an old hand, keeping regular attendees engaged with new material, whilst easing in those new to the group, reflecting different cultures and music from around the world, and enabling musical interaction and progression for both parents and children aged between 0 and 4 years.

QPF has a somewhat different structure, with two paid staff and a number of volunteers. The paid staff comprise a Music Leader and a 'Host'. The latter sets up the hall, greets everyone, makes sure people sign in, prepares healthy snacks for the children and most importantly ensures that anyone new is made welcome and introduced to people they are likely to connect with. The Music Leader is also a trained Early Years professional, and previously ran a local nursery. Both members of staff have local connections, so they know the area and many of the people, although more important are their personal qualities: they

are warm, welcoming, friendly and chatty – and possess an uncanny ability to remember the name of every child who attends! As with the other projects described, the leader's role is varied and responsive. Our Music Leader has to be able to respond creatively to child-initiated activity during the free play parts of the session, as well as leading the singing activities with the range of age groups. We regularly have more than forty children and thirty adults in the room, so encouraging them all to sing is sometimes challenging, but we have persevered with this aspect. Sometimes this means employing strategies such as subtly removing chairs, so that parents could not quietly ease themselves into them to avoid the singing circle! Now everyone joins in heartily, which in turn models this engagement to the children, encouraging them to join in more, to the extent that if the music leader is absent parents will step in and make sure the singing circle happens by leading it themselves. It is now much easier for newcomers to join in with their children. A CD was produced including some of the songs regularly sung, as well as other music, and many parents have commented that this has, in addition to the sessions themselves, helped them to do more singing at home.

Qualities in the music leader we have found to be essential include the confidence to hold the room, the ability to engage parents, adaptability (no session ever goes to plan!), a warm and friendly disposition, and quite a loud voice!

### How do we engage our target families in the projects – and how successful have we been?

Soundcastle's projects are embedded in areas where challenging circumstances are evident. Both are close to areas of social housing, and the primary school reports high numbers of children with additional needs, English as a second language and those in migrant or asylum seeker families. We have found that to keep the environment safe and welcoming, it is not appropriate to ask people for personal information about their circumstances, but by logging postcodes we know that families are coming from within 0.5 of a mile of the venue, and so they are within the immediate area that we have targeted. The locality of the project is also an important part of its identity and its power to engage the community. Building an experience that is on people's doorstep, easy to access and on familiar ground allows the project to become part of the local community, and means that friendships formed will strengthen people's immediate social networks, reducing social isolation and disconnectedness.

There are certain measures that both organisations feel are important to ensure target families are able to access the projects. They are always free of charge and open to anyone with children within the prescribed age-bracket who is interested in coming. We welcome older or younger siblings too, thus allowing families with more than one, or several, children to all get involved, and ensuring that parents don't have to worry about the costs or logistics of childcare. We work in venues that are easily accessible and have the necessary facilities for families, such as baby changing areas. We provide refreshments, to help people relax and to tie in with the common routine of children's snacks. We always invite feedback from families on the running of the project, sometimes casually and at other times through specific informal gatherings or feedback forms. This has led to practical changes (e.g. day or

time), different refreshments, and output changes too – such as the dedicated ‘baby hour’ at QPF or more performance and sharing opportunities at Musical Beacons. At the beginning of Musical Beacons every family is given a project diary with space for reflections, thoughts and drawings; and also an attendance chart where a star sticker is awarded each week. We have found that this has helped people to understand the idea of continuity and progression, rather than treating it as a drop-in service, and children enjoy having their own special book and tracking their collection of stars.

The open access nature of Musical Beacons is an important part of creating the safe space in which people can be creative. People come voluntarily, they are not referred and as such we do not have specific information on anyone’s needs or circumstances, so cannot definitively categorise them as hard to reach or otherwise. However we do know that we are working in areas where people face barriers to creative opportunities, and we know anecdotally that many families that come to us cannot afford music lessons or mother and baby classes, or do not travel far from their homes for other cultural experiences. There may also be families attending who do not face significant challenges, but within the room we aim to create an inclusive environment, reflective of the local community and free from divisions or judgements. Our measure of success is to look at the people who come and the journey they have made. Many people arrive with little or no musical experience and low confidence, and visibly change across a ten week phase. Families have told us that they sing the songs together at home, reproduce the warm-up activities and games, stage their own mini concerts in the house, make up lyrics and write their own songs. Some children complete a Trinity College accredited Arts Award Explore by staying on an extra half hour each week, and two children from one project phase went on to receive bursary awards through their school to access tuition through the local Saturday Music Centre.



*Musical Beacons*

All new initiatives like these take time to become embedded and accepted in a community, and for Creative Futures' QPF project it took almost a year to reach target numbers. We found that word of mouth was definitely the most effective form of marketing, although we did use leaflets and posters in the early stages too. Key to this was getting the health visitors and midwives on board: once they knew it was happening, and had seen it for themselves, they recommended the drop-in to the families they saw. This also meant that all families, including those without social networks of others parents, got to hear about the drop-in, and had the opportunity to give it a try. One particularly successful way of engaging hard to reach families occurred when a local volunteer, such as a Maternity Champion or Community Champion, met a family who was interested in attending and accompanied them personally to the drop-in on their first visit. This approach helped to break down barriers to attending for many families, especially those from some ethnic minority groups, who would almost certainly not have attended otherwise. The location of QPF in a community hall in the centre of the neighbourhood (i.e. not in a Children's Centre or school) also helped reduce barriers some families felt towards attending.

### How have we engaged with partner organisations in order to reach our target families?

A key partner for Creative Futures is Paddington Development Trust, whose Maternity Champions project started around the same time as QPF and whose volunteers have become the bedrock of the project, supporting its delivery on the ground. The Maternity Champions programme is funded by Public Health and the volunteers are all local women with knowledge of, or interest in, parenting and early childhood. They've all had specialist training, and their role is to support parents in the local area, especially those with very young children. Their involvement has also helped sustain the project: a small amount of funding from PDT enabled the first 'baby hour' to be scheduled on a regular basis. This in turn brought in a significant cohort of new families in the early stages of parenthood, for whom there were fewer opportunities for sociable activities with their babies locally.

Less formal partnerships include with the Children's Centre and Westminster Children's Services, who appreciate QPF's aims of offering first access to Early Years provision for hard to reach families; and the Early Help team in the borough, which supports the more at risk children. With these services there is a healthy cross-referral of families, so that many attending the Children's Centre then come to QPF and vice-versa. The role of Health Visitors and Midwives in spreading the word about QPF has been mentioned already, and their attendance at occasional sessions has been welcomed by parents wanting some informal advice or reassurance without the need to make an appointment at the Centre.

Soundcastle's partnership with EastendHomes housing associating has helped Musical Beacons grow from within the community, rather than imposing something from outside. The community centre is already a familiar local space for many people who may access other services there and already know and trust the staff. This relationship has a two way benefit as we can bring new people into the centre, strengthening community connections and pointing people towards local support and provision. EastendHomes helps us to make the project visible to our target group through articles in their newsletter, which is

distributed to all of their residents, and printing flyers which are displayed in the centre and other local businesses. Within this model we also have a primary school partnership, and although they do not host the sessions the proximity of the school to the community centre attracts many of the students and their families to attend Musical Beacons. Before each project phase we give a school assembly and distribute flyers to every pupil, which has been a successful element of our recruitment. This relationship has strengthened further as we now provide an after-school club within the school, widening our access to local children and families.

## Conclusion & shared learning opportunities

Although Creative Futures and Soundcastle's projects described above share many similarities they also have significant differences, not only in the age groups they are targeting (whether just pre-school or including primary-age pupils) but more fundamentally in their approach to music itself. Where Queen's Park Families is a community project which has musical elements that support its social and developmental aims, Musical Beacons has music at its very core and is seeking to achieve all of its aims through the musical and creative process. It involves working with the members of a community to create something new, whereas the music-making in QPF focuses more on familiar songs and free play, without aiming for finished products or performance.

Both programmes are ambitious in scope, and are successfully reaching families who (as far as our data allows us to say) appear to fall into the 'hard to reach' category as well as other families from the local area. The projects seem to be demonstrating that families with children from across a community enjoy coming together for sessions which involve socialising as well as making music together, whatever form that takes. Within these projects, certain features are key to their success:

1. The project is truly embedded in the community: through partnership working and close contact with local families, everyone involved has an understanding of the needs and dynamics of the community, and the project is shaped and adapted to meet these.
2. A holistic safe space is created where people can relax, socialise, be creative and feel accepted, valued and supported.
3. The key people delivering the project are highly skilled in a variety of ways, including responsiveness and flexibility, ensuring a positive and welcoming experience.

Our learning through these projects shows that we should be brave with our ambitions, especially musical ones, and shout loud and clear about the positive change that music can help us to bring about in our diverse societies.

Article by Jenni Parkinson (Director, Soundcastle) and Julian Knight (Creative Director, Creative Futures), July 2016.

## Background to Soundcastle and Creative Futures

**Soundcastle** is a music social enterprise that devises and delivers creative music projects which enhance connectedness, resilience and wellbeing. Embedding work in diverse contexts, ranging from museums to social care, Soundcastle facilitates processes that enable people with any or no level of musical experience to create imaginative and thought-provoking new music.

[www.soundcastle.co.uk](http://www.soundcastle.co.uk)

**Creative Futures** is a multi-arts organisation that seeks to transform the lives of vulnerable children and young people through high quality participatory arts programmes. Our work is focussed in the areas of Early Years, Special Educational Needs, Primary education and with Looked After Children across London, and we have a growing network of more than 180 creative producers who lead and deliver our projects. Most programmes are devised to meet specific local needs and priorities, and we work closely with our partners and clients to ensure that the impact of our work is sustained and embedded, and that outcomes are rigorously tracked and evaluated.

[www.creativefuturesuk.com](http://www.creativefuturesuk.com)

## References

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<sup>ii</sup> *Vital Signs Report* (2015) East End Community Foundation

<sup>iii</sup> Hallam, S. (2015). *The Power of Music: A Research Synthesis on the Impact of Actively Making Music on the Intellectual, Social and Personal Development of Children and Young People*. Institute of Education Press

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