

Heavy Sound - providing alternative education and vocational learning opportunities for young people through music.

How-to Guide

This guide offers more detailed information and advice for those who may be interested in adopting or adapting the initiative in their local area.

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Title	Heavy Sound - providing alternative education and vocational learning opportunities for young people through music.
Lead Organisation	Heavy Sound.
All Organisations	Heavy Sound.
Category	Promising local practice.
Poverty Impact	Enabling reduction. Mitigation.
Introduction to the Project	
Heavy Sound is a community interest company delivering trauma-informed alternative education, mentoring, creative engagement, and community-based support for children, young people, and adults experiencing multiple disadvantages. Working across Edinburgh and the Lothians, the organisation supports individuals affected by poverty, trauma, educational disengagement, offending, poor mental health, and social exclusion. Through music, sport, mentoring, creative arts, and relationship-based support, Heavy Sound helps participants build confidence, improve wellbeing, gain qualifications, and progress into education, training, and employment. The organisation aims to create safer pathways away from exclusion, violence, and instability through long-term community-based engagement.	

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Initial Idea

Who had the initial idea?	Jordan Butler (joint CEO).
How did the idea for the project come about?	Through a need for providing a judgement free, safe space to be creative and freely express yourself after the negative adverse experiences Jordan himself had within mainstream schooling.
Were plans informed by any published reports / papers / research evidence or practice from elsewhere?	Yes
Person-centred counselling approaches including Carl Rogers theory on personal growth as foundation of who Heavy Sound help children effected by poverty and trauma.	
Was anyone else involved in developing the initial idea of the project?	No
Were those with lived experience of poverty involved in developing the initial idea of the project?	Yes
Jordan Butler himself, through his journey through homelessness, mental health challenges, addiction, and the Scottish criminal justice system has shaped the organisation's approaches.	
Was funding required to support the development of the initial idea of the project?	Yes
How was the project funded?	The same funding was used to develop the idea and then implement the project
Which organisation provided funding?	Scottish Equity Partners. Business Gateway Scotland. Scottish Government.
How much was required?	Not specified.
What was the specific source of funding?	Not specified.

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Were specific resources – other than funding - needed when developing the initial idea of the project?		Yes
Staff/Volunteer Time	N/A	
Facilities / Workspace	Room/ office rentals as a base for the counselling services provided.	
Equipment	Musical equipment.	
Local Knowledge	N/A	
Food and Drink	Partnership with Greggs the bakers which facilitated food/drink for users of the service.	
Did any barriers have to be overcome when developing the initial idea of the project?		No
Did anything in particular enable development of the initial idea of the project?		Yes
Heavy Sound was strongly shaped by lived experience and community knowledge. The organisation's founder drew on personal experiences of homelessness, addiction, mental health challenges, and involvement with the criminal justice system to develop approaches centred on trust, creativity, and long-term relationship-building. Strong community partnerships and collaboration with schools, youth services, criminal justice agencies, local authorities, and third sector organisations also enabled the organisation to develop and expand. These partnerships helped identify unmet need and supported referral pathways for individuals experiencing multiple disadvantage. Creative engagement through music, mentoring, boxing, biking, and alternative learning approaches enabled the organisation to connect with individuals who often struggled to engage through traditional service models. Heavy Sound's flexibility and willingness to adapt support around participants' interests and experiences was also a significant enabling factor. Academic partnerships and evaluation activity, including collaborative research with Glasgow Caledonian University, further supported development of the organisation's approach and helped strengthen understanding of its impact.		

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How long did it take between having the initial idea and starting the project?	Heavy Sound initially began informally as a music and community engagement project in approximately 2012 before becoming formally incorporated as a Community Interest Company in 2015. The organisation developed gradually through community-based youth work, outreach activity, and partnership working before expanding into wider alternative education, mentoring, criminal justice, and preventative support programmes.
Who made the decision to introduce the project?	Jordan and Eliazbeth Butler, joint CEO's of Heavy Sound. The project was initially developed by the organisation's founder in response to unmet need identified through youth work, lived experience, and community engagement. As the organisation developed, decisions to expand and formalise delivery involved collaboration between Heavy Sound staff, community partners, schools, local authorities, criminal justice agencies, and funding bodies.

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Early Development

Was there a pilot project or feasibility study or test of change?	No
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Accessing the Service and Engaging with Service Users

Are potential users referred to your Service.?	Yes
- Participants are referred to Heavy Sound through a combination of formal and informal pathways. Referrals commonly come from schools, additional support for learning services, social work, youth justice services, criminal justice agencies, community organisations, mental health services, and local authority partners. - Many participants are identified through existing relationships within communities or through trusted professionals who recognise that individuals may be struggling within mainstream education or support systems. The organisation also receives referrals linked to offending, disengagement from education, poor attendance, trauma, substance use, or wider social and emotional difficulties. - Heavy Sound additionally engages participants through outreach work, community engagement, peer networks, and relationship-based approaches which help reduce barriers to access for individuals who may distrust formal services.	
Are there ways, other than referral, that are used to make potential users aware of your Service.?	No
What is the most common way through which users typically access your Service.?	
Not specified.	
Do you take steps to keep in touch / reach out to users?	No
Although some service users after going through the process have showed a passion for counselling with Heavy sound in the future.	

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Working with People with Lived Experience of Poverty

Are those with lived experience of poverty involved in <u>delivering</u> the project?	Yes
People with lived experience are involved throughout the organisation's development and delivery. Heavy Sound's approach was shaped directly by lived experience of trauma, poverty, addiction, homelessness, offending, and disengagement from services. The organisation uses lived experience mentors, peer support approaches, and relationship-based engagement to build trust with participants who may have struggled within mainstream systems. Staff and volunteers with relevant lived experience help create relatable and non-judgemental environments where participants feel understood and supported. Lived experience also informs programme development, mentoring approaches, outreach activity, and the organisation's wider understanding of poverty, exclusion, and trauma.	
Are people with lived experience of poverty involved in <u>managing</u> the project or in <u>project governance</u> ?	No
Are people with lived experience of poverty involved <u>in any other aspect</u> of the project?	Yes
External music practitioners, sports practitioners and adult service mentors with lived experiences.	

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Leadership, Governance and Partnership Working

Who is responsible for managing the project?	
Jordan Butler and Elizabeth Butler. CEO's and co-founders.	
Is this the only responsibility of the person managing the project?	Yes
What proportion of the manager's overall workload is given over to this project?	
All of it.	
Is there a Project Steering or Advisory Group?	Yes
Who is involved?	An advisory group which will also include young service users.
How does it work?	All decision making will go into decision making circles and come up to the board and at the heart of that will be the young people.
Are any other governance arrangements in place to review strategy and performance?	Yes
A new strategy currently in development where young people are at the heart of it. Reviewing what went wrong and how this can be improved by the view of service users.	

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Links to Wider Policies, Strategies and Statutory Requirements

To the best of your knowledge, is the project aligned with national and/or local anti-poverty strategies and priorities (e.g., local authority or health board priorities)?	Yes
Getting it Right for Every Child.	
In your opinion, has the project benefitted from being part of this anti-poverty strategy?	Yes
In some ways yes, but it's difficult following certain anti-poverty strategy as the organisation are looking at a holistic view in tackling poverty rather than one specific area.	
Is the project part of any other strategy?	No
Is the project delivering a service that is a statutory commitment?	No

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Funding

Is funding used to support the work?	Yes
Has external funding been secured to support the work?	Yes
Which organisation provided funding?	Scottish Government, Bailey Gilfford, the Vardy project, Violence Reduction Unit, Lottery funding.
What was the specific funding stream/source/scheme?	Certain pots of money provided for specific items or causes within the organisation.
How much funding was secured?	Not specified.
For how long has funding been secured?	Not specified.
Is future funding from the same external source a possibility?	Yes
Which organisations might provide funding?	Scottish Government is a consistent funder due to stable relationship built over the years and how important Heavy Sound is regarding combatting poverty.
Is future funding dependent on achieving pre-agreed outcomes or outputs?	No
What are these conditions?	Pre agreed arranged where the Scottish Government will give the organisation funding every year for three years. Consistent funding over the years.
Has a specific sum been secured from your organisation to support this work?	Not specified.
How much funding was secured?	
For how long has funding been secured?	
Is future funding from your organisation a possibility?	Not specified.

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Is future funding dependent on achieving pre-agreed outcomes or outputs?		Not specified.
What are these conditions?		
What are the future - longer-term - prospects for this work if existing funding sources were no longer available?		
Not specified.		

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Staffing and Resources

Do existing staff from your organisation contribute toward the work of this project?		N/A
Role:		
Are existing staff from the host organisation paid extra (for example, taking on extra hours) to contribute toward the work of this project?		N/A
Extra hours worked:		
Have additional paid staff been employed to contribute toward the work of this project?		No
Role:		
Is the post permanent or fixed term?		N/A
Duration:		
Are volunteers involved in delivering the project??		Yes
Role: This has not always been the case but now volunteers are now involved within the organisation. Work is given out to volunteers, dependent on their strengths and what their happy doing.		
Are specific resources – other than staff/volunteer time and money - needed to support the delivery of the project?		Yes
Facilities / Workspace	Local community centre Kitchens, local gyms	
Equipment	Musical equipment	
Local Knowledge	N/A	
Food and Drink	N/A	
Are any of the resources needed to deliver the project provided in-kind, rather than budgeted from project funds?		
Who provides:		
Were new IT systems, additional software, or upgrades existing software (databases, Apps) required to deliver this project?		Yes

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Regarding the music side of things, certain software and equipment is required to produce and learn about music production.

Was additional training – for staff or volunteers - required to deliver this project?

Yes

A redo of training process is underway where staff will be trained to the highest degree where they will be accredited at the end. Trauma training, understanding of neurodivergences and child protection will be part of the robust training processes

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Monitoring and Evaluation

Do you – or other organisations - collect data on the project for monitoring or evaluation purposes?	Heavy Sound uses a combination of qualitative and quantitative monitoring and evaluation approaches. The organisation records participation, attendance, qualifications achieved, progression into education and employment, and engagement with mentoring and support activities. Evaluation also focuses on relational and wellbeing outcomes which are often more difficult to measure through conventional approaches. This includes changes in confidence, emotional regulation, communication, trust, social interaction, educational engagement, and wellbeing. Heavy Sound has also participated in external academic research and evaluation, including collaborative work with Glasgow Caledonian University examining the impact of community-based music interventions for young people experiencing trauma and exclusion. Published research highlighted the importance of trust, safe environments, mentoring, and relationship-based practice in supporting engagement and wellbeing. The organisation recognises that many preventative and relational outcomes emerge over long periods of time and may not always be fully captured through short-term performance indicators alone.
Is there baseline data to describe what things were like before the start of the project?	Not specified.

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Is the difference that the project is making measured or monitored by the host organisation?	Yes
Who within the host organisation is responsible for monitoring the impact of the project	Project staff, senior management, delivery partners, and organisational leadership contribute to monitoring and reviewing project impact. External academic partners have also contributed to evaluation activity.
How often is the impact of the project monitored or measured by the host organisation	Monitoring is undertaken on an ongoing basis throughout delivery, with formal reporting completed at intervals determined by funding agreements, partnership arrangements, and programme requirements.
What methods, techniques or strategies are used by the host organisation to impact of the project	Heavy Sound uses a combination of qualitative and quantitative approaches including attendance records, participation data, qualifications achieved, mentoring records, progression monitoring, case studies, participant feedback, reflective practice, wellbeing discussions, and partnership reviews. The organisation also uses relationship-based observation and ongoing engagement to understand changes in confidence, emotional wellbeing, communication, behaviour, and educational participation.

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What information is collected by the host organisation about the project?	
Number of users	Yes
Profile of users	Yes
Experience of users	Yes
Outcomes for users	Yes
Anything else	Yes
Additional information collected may include educational engagement, school attendance, qualifications achieved, progression into employment or further education, mentoring engagement, wellbeing indicators, partnership feedback, behavioural change, and involvement with justice or support services where appropriate.	
Has the data that has been collected by the host organisation been used to adapt the way the project works?	Yes
Monitoring information, participant feedback, reflective practice, and partnership discussions are used continuously to adapt programme delivery, engagement approaches, and support pathways. Heavy Sound's work is intentionally flexible and responsive to the changing needs of participants and communities. Evaluation findings and lived experience feedback have informed the development of trauma-informed approaches, mentoring models, alternative learning environments, outreach activity, and partnership working. Data has also been used to identify gaps in provision, improve accessibility, strengthen safeguarding approaches, and adapt support for participants with increasingly complex needs.	
Has an external organisation been employed to formally evaluate the project?	Yes

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Who conducted the evaluation	Glasgow Caledonian University researchers and academic partners have contributed to formal evaluation and research relating to Heavy Sound's community music and alternative engagement approaches.
Details of the evaluation	"COOL Music: a bottom-up music intervention for 'hard-to-reach' young people in Scotland" British Journal of Music Education, Cambridge University Press https://www.cambridge.org/core/journals/british-journal-of-music-education/article/cool-music-a-bottomup-music-intervention-for-hardtoreach-young-people-in-scotland/063F0220A3FC4D0EA73ACB87331DF47A

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What were the key findings from the evaluation	• Relationship-based and trauma-informed approaches supported engagement among young people excluded from mainstream systems. • Creative music and arts activities helped build trust, confidence, communication, and emotional expression. • Safe and supportive environments were important in improving participation and wellbeing. • Long-term engagement and consistency were central to positive outcomes. • Participants valued non-judgemental support and opportunities to build positive relationships with trusted adults. • Community-based creative interventions can support educational engagement and social inclusion among young people experiencing multiple disadvantage.
Has the data that has been collected from this evaluation been used to adapt the way the project works?	Yes
• Evaluation findings, participant feedback, and reflective learning have been used to strengthen Heavy Sound's trauma-informed and relationship-based approach. Learning from evaluation activity has informed programme design, mentoring approaches, community outreach, safeguarding practice, and the development of alternative learning environments. • The organisation has also used evaluation findings to strengthen partnership working, improve understanding of participant needs, support funding applications, and demonstrate the value of long-term preventative and relational approaches which may not always be captured through short-term outcome measures alone.	

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Is there an intention to employ an external organisation to evaluate the impact of the project in the future?	Yes
Is there an intention to undertake your own formal evaluation in the future to estimate the impact of the project?	Yes

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Impact

To what extent have the aims of the project been achieved?	Fully met.
What difference has the project made?	
• Improved engagement in education among children and young people previously disengaged from mainstream learning. • Reintegrated young people back into mainstream school following prolonged periods of educational disengagement. • Supported progression into employment, further education, and training opportunities. • Increased confidence, communication skills, emotional literacy, and self-esteem among participants. • Developed trusted relationships and safer support networks for children, young people, and adults experiencing trauma and exclusion. • Improved wellbeing through trauma-informed mentoring, creative engagement, physical activity, and community-based support. • Reduced social isolation and increased positive participation in community life. • Trained lived experience mentors to support others within communities. • Supported families experiencing poverty, instability, and financial hardship. • Provided throughcare and mentoring support for individuals involved in the criminal justice system. • Improved access to alternative education for young people struggling within formal school settings. • Supported individuals affected by trauma, offending, addiction, violence, and poor mental health through long-term relationship-based support. • Attendance within Additional Curriculum provision reached 81% between January 2022 and February 2023. • Heavy Sound estimated savings to the public purse of over £2.6 million in one year through interventions with 12 young people.	

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Have conditions or demand changed since the project was introduced?		Yes
Demand for organisations such as Heavy Sound has increased due to growing recognition of the complex needs experienced by many children and young people who struggle within mainstream education systems. Increasing levels of poverty, trauma, poor mental health, social exclusion, and unmet additional support needs have contributed to higher demand for trauma-informed and relationship-based alternative learning environments. The organisation reports that capacity is currently stretched and that sustaining high-quality relational support while responding to growing demand remains a significant challenge.		
Has the project had the capacity to meet these changing conditions and demand?		No
Heavy Sound has responded by continuing to strengthen partnership working, adapting delivery models, and prioritising relationship-based approaches that maintain trust and consistency for participants. However, the organisation recognises that wider systemic pressures across education, mental health, and community services continue to affect capacity and demand.		
Has the project changed through time?		No
What changed	0	
Why has it changed	0	
Has the project had any unexpected or unintended outcomes?		No
In your opinion, is the project having an impact on tackling poverty?		Yes
Heavy Sound supports children and young people experiencing poverty-related disadvantage to gain qualifications, improve confidence, and progress into employment, training, and further education opportunities. Many participants have previously disengaged from mainstream education due to trauma, exclusion, instability, or adverse childhood experiences. The organisation's relationship-based and trauma-informed approach helps individuals rebuild trust, develop skills, strengthen wellbeing, and improve long-term life opportunities. Heavy Sound also supports participants to recognise their strengths and potential rather than being defined by poverty, exclusion, offending, or educational disengagement.		

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Learning from Experience

What is working well?

- Relationship-based and trauma-informed approaches which build trust and long-term engagement.
- Creative and alternative learning environments that support young people who struggle within mainstream systems.
- Strong community partnerships and collaborative working with schools, youth services, and justice agencies.
- Involving young people in decision-making and shaping activities.
- Use of lived experience mentors and peer support approaches.
- Flexible and person-centred support tailored to individual strengths and interests.

What, if anything, is working less well?

- Managing increasing demand alongside limited staffing and organisational capacity.
- Difficulties securing long-term sustainable funding for preventative and relational work.
- Challenges associated with supporting individuals experiencing increasingly complex needs.
- Wider systemic pressures within education, mental health, and community support systems.

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What are the key learning points that you'd like to share with other practitioners?

- Relationship-building and trust take time and must remain central to delivery.
- Trauma-informed and non-judgemental approaches improve engagement among individuals excluded from mainstream systems.
- Creative engagement can provide effective pathways into learning, communication, and personal development.
- Practitioners require ongoing support and reflective practice to avoid burnout and emotional exhaustion.
- Young people should be actively involved in shaping services and decision-making processes.
- Long-term preventative work cannot always be fully understood through short-term outcome measures alone.

Are there plans to develop or expand the project in the future?

Yes

bigger capacity that is not only a young person service but is also an adult and community-based service is the plan. Plan to provide therapy and embed wellness into the community as well.

How easily do you think this project could be replicated in another setting?

Would love to be able to replicate Heavy Sound outside and along with the towns and villages with massive poverty and deprivation within East Lothian. By involving the young people and getting together and quantifying the values of heavy sound, this can be replicated in different places. This is a future plan.

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