



An Evaluation of *Finding Rhythms*' Arts Intervention,
'Making Waves,' with Referred Young People and Adults in
London

Dr. Dean J. Wilkinson C.Psychol

Dr. Tim Cartwright

Department of Psychology, Edge Hill University, UK

“[It] kept me doing something that's very positive, and yeah, put my message out there and keeping people from doing the mistakes that I used to do... people can take a better choice in life”



Photography: Livvid

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

CONTEXT

The arts have demonstrated significant potential in criminal justice settings, with evidence suggesting their role in improving well-being, social skills, and emotional regulation. Programmes like *Finding Rhythms*, established in 2012, use music-making as a creative intervention to engage and support individuals in justice and community settings. Their initiatives, which focus on vulnerable groups such as young people, care leavers, and ex-prisoners, aim to foster self-confidence, employability, and better life choices. Building on this foundation, the *Making Waves* programme, funded by the London Violence Reduction Unit, was developed to offer young people and adults one-to-one mentoring and music making opportunities. In the context of prior research on arts-based interventions, this evaluation seeks to explore how *Making Waves* aligns with and builds upon the outcomes and processes observed in similar programmes, providing insights into its implementation and potential impact.

METHODOLOGY

A qualitative study was conducted to explore the development, implementation, and experiences of participants (young people and adults) in the *Making Waves* intervention provided by *Finding Rhythms*. Data were collected through interviews with the programme's development and practitioner team, as well as short interviews with young people and adults referred at various stages of the programme. Out of 24 young people and adults, aged between 18 to 46, 14 agreed to participate in interviews, with 11 completing midway and 10 completing final interviews. A focus group with key staff members from *Finding Rhythms* captured insights into the programme's aims, challenges, and successes. Thematic analysis was used to identify key themes, ensuring rigorous examination and consensus on findings while maintaining participant anonymity. Consensus was reached through discussion of the main themes by the lead researchers and through agreed adjustments.

FINDINGS

The young people and adults from *the Making Waves* project reported significant benefits across three key areas: enhancing musical skills and aspiration, delivering emotional and psychological benefits, and supporting personal and social development. Firstly, the programme enhanced musical skills and aspirations, with young people and adults noting improvements in

music making, a renewed drive for continued musical pursuits, and alignment with their desired outcomes. Secondly, it delivered emotional and psychological benefits, fostering positive feelings, reducing stress and anxiety, and enhancing overall wellbeing. Young people and adults also expressed deep appreciation for the programme's impact. Finally, it supported personal and social development by improving teamwork and communication, positively influencing other areas of life, and acting as a deterrent to lawbreaking. These findings underscore the transformative potential of *Making Waves* in fostering personal growth and resilience.

Staff discussions highlighted several key aspects of the *Finding Rhythms, Making Waves* project. They emphasised the programme's benefits, particularly fostering a sense of community among young people and adults. To encourage engagement, staff noted the importance of a suitable location, the value of live shows for deeper participant involvement, and the need for good, consistent relationships with producers. Challenges were also discussed, including navigating social acceptability and fostering creative expression, addressing uptake and capacity utilisation, refining referral systems, and setting appropriate session lengths. These insights reflect staff commitment to optimising the programme's impact and addressing operational barriers.

RECOMMENDATIONS

FOSTERING COMMUNITY AND ENGAGEMENT

- Continue to introduce alumni roles to provide ongoing engagement opportunities and encourage and support past, present, and future members.
- Continue to organise live shows to showcase young people and adults' work, giving them an opportunity to further engage, boosting their sense of accomplishment and raising awareness of the programme further.
- Introduce more group activities such as collaborative workshops and peer mentoring opportunities to strengthen the sense of community.
- Strengthen relationships with referral agencies (particularly those which work with younger people) by providing clear information about the programme, including its benefits, structure, and expectations.

ENSURING INCLUSIVITY AND MEETING PARTICIPANT'S NEEDS

- Optimise session lengths by offering sessions that best accommodate individual needs, particularly those facing challenging personal circumstances.
- Expand a flexible referral process to accommodate the diverse individual needs of young people and adults.
- Continue to adopt a more flexible approach to scheduling sessions for young people and adults whose personal circumstances make their attendance irregular.
- Use multiple methods of communication to remind young people and adults about their sessions to address issues around uptake and to continue to encourage engagement.
- Encourage young people and adults to develop long-term goals from the very beginning, such as completing a mixtape or an EP, and continue to support these aspirations.

ENHANCING PROGRAMME QUALITY AND ARTISTIC EXPRESSION

- Maintain a professional studio environment to enhance the appeal, credibility, and external reputation of the programme.
- Continue to invest in consistent and supportive relationships between facilitators and young people and adults, as these are clearly critical for maintaining engagement as well as motivation.
- Establish clear guidelines for balancing artistic freedoms with social acceptability, ensuring that young people and adults can express themselves fully when developing their music.
- Encourage open and honest dialogue regarding the lyrics policy to foster understanding and minimise frustration.

DATA FOR FUTURE EVALUATION

- Consider collating data that captures and represents the mid to long term impact of the project on the participants of *Finding Rhythms*, *Making Waves* programme.

INTRODUCTION

ARTS AND CRIMINAL JUSTICE

The evidence supporting the benefits of the arts in criminal justice has grown and substantiated the impact in recent years, including acknowledgement of the value of the arts from policymakers (see Caulfield, 2021). Arts programmes in the criminal justice setting often adopt a collaborative approach to engaging and working with children and young people (Daykin et al., 2011). Burns and Creaney (2023) note the importance of the relationship with professionals to ensure that voices are listened and responded to appropriately (Hughes, 2005; Maruna, 2001). Research has shown that music programmes in community youth justice settings can enhance engagement by aligning with participants' interests, fostering a sense of belonging, and allowing young people to take ownership of activities (Daykin et al., 2013; Eagle, 2008). These programmes have demonstrated statistically significant improvements in well-being and musical abilities, with benefits such as increased self-confidence and emotional well-being (Cursley & Maruna, 2015; Wilson et al. 2009). Similar outcomes have been observed among adults in UK prisons, where participation in music projects reduces anxiety and enhances mood (Cohen, 2012; Cursley & Maruna, 2015; Wilson et al., 2009). Research from the Netherlands further highlights how arts-based programmes in secure care settings address emotional needs, aiding in mood regulation, impulse control, and self-expression, which support personal growth (Bilby et al., 2013; Smeijsters et al., 2011).

There are several benefits of arts-based activities for individuals in contact with (or at risk of contact with) the criminal justice system. Engaging activities and safe spaces, often created with arts-based activities, and more specifically music making, have been found to support increased well-being, motivation, and improved social and interpersonal skills for individuals in justice settings and the community (Mason & Prior, 2008; Price et al. 2023). In addition, there is emerging evidence supporting the impact of arts-based activities on medium and longer-term outcomes such as educational engagement and sentence compliance (Caulfield et al., 2022; Caulfield & Sojka, 2023; Hughes, 2005; Miles & Clarke, 2006). Music-making and lyric-writing with individuals in justice settings can provide the opportunity for meaningful activity, purposeful conversations, and a tool for children, young people, and adults to communicate, express their emotions, and experience a sense of achievement (Caulfield et al., 2022; Cohen, 2012). Such activities create opportunities for individuals to take ownership and directly input into the creation/co-creation and production process (Price et al. 2023). Creative methodologies in research and evaluation have enabled a process of co-production and co-designed approaches when working with individuals, allowing them to input into the shape, nature, and trajectory of the creative space (Loeffler & Bovaird, 2020; Wilkinson et al. 2022). Beyond prioritising measurable outcomes and impacts, the arts play a vital role in facilitating engagement and advancing participatory methodologies (Caulfield, Botham, & Smith, 2023).

FINDING RHYTHMS' HISTORY

Finding Rhythms is a charity, established in 2013, that specialises in interventions using musical creativity. They have worked with over 1,000 participants in 34 prisons completing more than 100 albums of original music, in addition to building vital partnerships with like-minded charities, schools, alternative provisions, and probation services. *Finding Rhythms* aims to help learners make the kind of music that they connect with personally and through this process, improve their self-worth and wellbeing. They treat each learner as an artist and creator in their own right, and through this approach, hope to build trust and empower the participants of the programme, demonstrating a level of commitment to the individual's success that they may not have experienced previously. The interventions provided by *Finding Rhythms* are predominantly targeted at young people and young adults (aged 16-30) who they believe need high-quality, person-centred interventions. Their work has both a preventative focus with alternative provisions, homeless shelters, and community support groups, and a rehabilitative focus which predominantly involves partnerships with prisons. *Finding Rhythms* work in prisons, communities, and schools. The community work is aimed at helping vulnerable and at-risk young people who have been marginalised, including those not in education, employment, or training (NEETS), care leavers, and ex-prisoners. Work has taken place in youth centres, probation services, youth offending teams, and local councils. *Finding Rhythms* courses focus on skill-building, employability, and personal development with the aim of improving well-being, developing positive relationships, confidence, and the ability to make improved life choices.

MAKING WAVES DEVELOPMENTS

Funded by the London Violence Reduction Unit, *Making Waves* was piloted following *Finding Rhythms'* reputation in providing effective music interventions. This programme aims to provide referred young people and adults, with 10 free one-to-one weekly sessions with a professional producer. Young people and adults are offered the opportunity to create and release their own music in a private studio space, where they receive mentoring and support throughout the programme. The programme aims to build participants' confidence, self-belief, and transferable skills for employment and prepare them for a better future. Within the year 2024, 66 referrals were made to *Making Waves* (15 self-referrals, 51 referrals from partner organisations). These young people and adults were either serving community orders, recently discharged from prison and under probation, on parole, or deemed 'at risk' due to other factors, such as recent arrest, drug and alcohol dependency or care leavers. A total of 175 sessions were delivered, equating to 293 hours. The attendance rate for these sessions was 69%.

STUDY AIMS

The aims of *Making Waves* are broadly threefold: to improve personal wellbeing, to improve social skills, and to improve musical skills. As such, the study we outline in this report sought to

indirectly ask participants of the *Making Waves* project how they felt the project had achieved these aims.

METHODOLOGY

DESIGN

A qualitative approach was adopted to capture the development, implementation and experiences of the young people and adults who were engaged with the *Making Waves* intervention provided by *Finding Rhythms*. Qualitative interviews were held with the development and practitioner team at *Finding Rhythms* to understand the experience of development, implementation, and provision. Short interviews were held with the young people and adults who were referred to the intervention to understand, at timely intervals for example at midway or at the end of their sessions, their experience of the service, the activities they were engaged with, and the benefits and outcomes of undertaking the activity.

PARTICIPANTS

As the participants of the study included *the young people and adults* who engaged with *Making Waves* and *the project team*, these shall henceforth be referred to as such. All participants discussed within this report have been given pseudonyms to retain their anonymity.

YOUNG PEOPLE AND ADULTS

Of the 66 referrals during the period between March 2024 and December 2024, 24 young people and adults (aged between 18 to 46) were referred to *Making Waves*. Age brackets include 18-25 ($n = 10$), 26-29 ($n = 4$), and 30+ ($n = 10$). Twenty individuals identified as male and four identified as female. All 24 participants had risk factors relating to violent behaviour, 22 (91.7%) had contact with the criminal justice system, 19 (79.2%) had recently served a custodial sentence, 20 (83.3%) were not in education, employment, or training, and 11 (45.8%) were in supported living. Fourteen of the 24 individuals referred to *Making Waves* agreed to record interviews. Eleven completed the midway interview and ten completed the final interview. Interviews were held between the young people and adults and the artists (facilitators) of the project at intervals throughout the curriculum. The conversations were audio recorded with the consent of the young people and adults. The facilitators made use of an interview guide/schedule set by the lead evaluator at the start of the process, to guide the conversation (see Table 1). The interview guide was developed to capture the experiences and opinions of the young people and adults of the project at various stages throughout the course of *Making Waves* sessions.

TABLE 1**QUESTIONS FROM THE INTERVIEW GUIDE/SCHEDULE**

INTERVIEW CONDUCTED	QUESTION
Midway session	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. How would you describe what you've been doing on the project so far? 2. How have you found the whole process of 'Making Waves'? 3. Has the activity helped you to think any differently / what difference has the activity made to you? 4. What skills do you think you've learned so far (ideally, we want them to say more than just music, lyrics, production - more general skills)? 5. How do the sessions make you feel / has it had any impact on how you feel? 6. What have you achieved so far? Where do you want to be at the end of the project?
Final session	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Would you recommend the project to other people? Why? 2. Did the project live up to your expectations? 3. How have the sessions helped you? (push for impact outside of music) Think about: <ol style="list-style-type: none"> a. Personally (impact on confidence, wellbeing) b. Socially (teamwork, skills, prosocial behaviour) 4. Was there anything about the session(s) that was (were) particularly meaningful or useful? 5. Have you done creative activities before? How does this project compare to other creative activities that you have done? 6. Have you developed new skills? And how will you use them in the future? 7. Would you like to be in touch with FR in the future? How would you like to keep in touch with us? 8. Would you recommend the project to other people? Why?

THE PROJECT TEAM

A focus group discussion took place between the *Making Waves* team, including the founder/creative director, business director, project manager, project coordinator, and the music producer. The focus group was held by the lead evaluator with these key staff members at *Finding Rhythms* who work on or coordinate the *Making Waves* project. The purpose of the focus group was to capture the original intentions and aims of the programme, the developmental stages, implementation experiences as well as challenges, and learning and celebrations during the process.

REFERRAL PARTNERS

Several referral partners also gave feedback on the project. Referral partners for the project included Advance Charity - Minerva Wraparound Service, Catch22, CFO Hubs, Change Grow Live, Divert, Department for Work and Pensions, HM Prison and Probation Service (including prisons, probation services, and approved premises), Kairos Community Trust, National Prison Radio, NHS Mental Health Teams, Only Connect, Royal Borough of Greenwich Care Leavers, Switchback, and Trailblazers.

ANALYSIS

The interviews and focus groups were analysed using thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006). This process involved the researchers becoming familiar with the data, generating initial codes, searching for themes, reviewing themes, and defining and naming themes. These codes and themes were then discussed between the lead researcher and research associate and a consensus was reached on how best to thematically present the findings from the study. In some instances, this resulted in the themes and codes being reworded to more adequately reflect the findings, and in other instances, different quotations were used to more adequately demonstrate the code in question. To increase readability, the quotations used by participants have been edited (e.g. repeated words, grammatical errors, and disfluencies have been adjusted appropriately).

RESULTS

THE INTERVIEWS

Thematic analysis of the data from the 14 young people and adults resulted in 11 codes belonging to three higher order themes (see Table 2). The codes appeared to converge around the *emotional and psychological benefits of Making Waves*, *personal and social development from Making Waves*, *skill acquisition and aspiration from Making Waves*, and *other aspects of Making Waves*. These are discussed in further detail below.

TABLE 2

HIGHER ORDER THEMES AND CODES THAT EMERGED FROM THE INTERVIEWS

HIGHER ORDER THEME	CODE	INSTANCES
Musical skills acquisition and aspirations from <i>Making Waves</i>	Programme improves musical/production skills	18
	Programme has inspired continued musical aspiration	13
	Desired outcomes from the programme	7
Emotional and psychological benefits from <i>Making Waves</i>	Positive feelings towards the programme	16
	Programme reduces stress and anxiety	13
	Programme improves wellbeing	13
	Appreciation for <i>Making Waves</i>	7
Personal and social development from <i>Making Waves</i>	Programme improves teamwork	12
	Programme improves communication	8
	Programme has helped in other areas	9
	Programme is a deterrent to lawbreaking	4

MUSICAL SKILLS ACQUISITION AND ASPIRATION FROM MAKING WAVES

The most explored aspect of the programme is the young people and adults' perceptions of how the ***programme improves musical/production skills***, discussed 18 times by ten of the 14 young people and adults. Four young people and adults offered very complimentary and constructive viewpoints on engaging with the programme: "I think I've achieved a lot working with you, confidence-wise in music, songwriting, learning new things with different styles, different tempos, stuff like that." (Amara). "It's exciting because it gives me new avenues of producing, co-producing music with co-produced ideas, and elevate the tempo to different levels and to create a distinctive likeable music." (Adrian). "It's such a great opportunity to work on your creative skills, especially your vocals or production and song writing to make a mixtape or EP album." (Ethan). "Yeah, it's definitely helping me change the way I think. I feel like I'm more productive, that it helps me to open up more and really experience music on a different level." (Jahlil).

Not only was the programme largely successful in improving musical skills, the **programme has inspired continued musical aspiration** amongst young people and adults, discussed 13 times by seven of the 14 young people and adults. One participant discussed their aspirations: "I want to take away the skills and put them to use and not make it go to waste regardless of whether [I] get somewhere where I can use it or help someone else." (Elias). Another participant exclaimed: "I want to be making more music ... This is something that I would love to continue doing, but it's unfortunate we have to stop." (Levi). Another participant remarked: "It's got me so motivated with music. I had gaps in the past where I took a break and all that. This has just got me so motivated with it all again. It's brilliant, mate. It's brilliant." (George).

Finally, young people and adults were asked to consider what their **desired outcomes from the programme** were. This was discussed seven times by six of the 14 young people and adults and mostly covered the desire to complete the programme to obtain the qualification from the Kings Trust (formerly known as Prince's Trust), to be invited back to a *Making Waves* live show and be invited to perform, but most desired outcomes revolved around the production of an EP. One participant explained: "So far, I've achieved, I think it's about five or six songs. At the end of the project, I want to have a strong mixtape to put out, like a body of music that could just sustain me for the next six to seven months or my musical career." (Darius). Furthermore, another participant added: "At the end of here, I want to get as many tracks done as possible and then I want to go on further to study mixing and marketing. I've got a course lined up next year, and the CFO are going to fund it for me, and I just want to go from there and once I got a qualification, I want to get a job." (George).

EMOTIONAL AND PSYCHOLOGICAL BENEFITS OF MAKING WAVES

The second most discussed aspect of the programme within the interviews was the young people and adults' clear **positive feelings towards the programme**, discussed 16 times by nine of the 14 young people and adults. Discussing their personal expectations of the programme, one participant remarked: "I have completed most of my tracks and yeh got world-class producers arrange my stuff ... [it's] been brilliant, it's been a vibe. Yeah, definitely lived up to my expectations." (Ethan). Another participant explained: "It's been a positive experience. Always leave on a high ... definitely a positive experience I'd say." (Malik). One participant discussed how the programme had helped them use their own experiences to encourage others: "[It] kept me doing something that's very positive and yeah, put my message out there and keeping people from doing the mistakes that I used to do. They see the things that I used to do, and they can choose the positive role, because I've got positive lyrics that people can adapt to instead of doing the wrong things that I'm always talking about. But [how] I've lived, people can take a better choice in life." (Levi)

The emotional and psychological benefits of taking part in the programme were discussed in length by young people and adults, but it was the various ways in which the **programme reduces stress and**

anxiety which was explored in the most depth, discussed 13 times by eight of the 14 young people and adults. One participant explained how the programme acted as a form of escapism: "It's definitely something positive that I'm enjoying doing, but obviously it's giving me that escapism from what I'm actually going through. I mean, the housing situation and the anxiety I've got around that. It's giving me the space to just leave all of that to the side and just get immersed in what we're doing here." (Malik). Another participant explained how the programme allowed them to express their anxieties in their music: "Being able to song write, and get loads of things off my chest that I'm going through at the moment. A lot of the hardships that I'm finding with being released from prison, trying to get work struggling in that sense, but also trying to stay motivated and like continue ... and keep my chin up and I'm working on myself. I think that it's just giving me a lot of opportunity to express myself and be creative." (Ethan). One participant explained how attending the sessions gave them the space to talk about their anxieties: "I would say more or less it's helped me, like when I know I have got a session, if there is something bothering me, I can't talk about. I know I can come here." (Micah)

Conversely to this, rather than just viewing the programme as a means of reducing their anxieties, it was also discussed how the **programme improves wellbeing**, mentioned 13 times by eight of the 14 young people and adults. One participant describes the overall feeling of engaging in the programme and how this contributed to his improved confidence, saying he feels: "more positive, more confident, definitely. I think when you leave stuff for a while your confidence drops a little bit. And now because I'm doing stuff constantly every week, my confidence is building and getting stronger and stronger as I'm going along. So, I think it's brilliant." (George). Similarly, one participant discusses the programme in a self-actualising manner, stating: "I feel like it helps you reach your best potential. Like, really express yourself in different ways and how you're feeling." (Jahlil). Another participant discussed how the programme has changed his demeanour but also how it has affected those around him: "I love it, bro. Like, I go home smiling now, and mum gets home and she is gassed. "How's the course?" "It's great, it's great". And so, a lot changed in me as a person." (Callum).

Finally, four of the 14 young people and adults expressed their direct **appreciation for Making Waves** seven times. This praise is best exemplified by one participant who remarks: "I would recommend the project to other people because the team is great, you feel welcome, and they will just accommodate everything you need musically.", later adding: "I've done a lot of creative activities ... I'll definitely put this one in the top three of the creative projects that I've been invited to go into." (Darius).

PERSONAL AND SOCIAL DEVELOPMENT FROM MAKING WAVES

It was clear from young people and adults that taking part in the *Making Waves* programme helped them improve their personal and social skills. Seven of the 14 young people and adults discussed twelve times how the **programme improves teamwork**. When asked to discuss some new skills they had developed, one participant stated: "Socialising skills, meeting different people, because even last

week when the photographers came in, I'd say that we had a great rapport" (Darius), and another said: "I would say that's interpersonal skills like communication, being able to express how I'm feeling, and I would say communicate how tracks to perform and how they are structured." (Ethan).

Linking closely to improved personal and social skills is how the **programme improves communication** which was discussed eight times by five of the 14 young people and adults. One participant explained that the experience had not only improved his communication but explained a further benefit to this: "It's given me experience for the future... I know how to work better with a producer/engineer. So, I'm going to be much more open to conversing, to learning how someone works so we can ultimately work better as a unit." (Elias). Similarly, another participant went into some detail explaining how the creative process had directly led to improvements in their ability and desire to collaborate: "I think it's good that also, seeing how your production style works as well, and because I think it's all about how you bond with your producer. And I think the better relationship you have in terms of just feeling comfortable, it allows you to express yourself in a way that you want and get the best out of you. I feel relaxed and feel like I can express myself. That's a great starting point." (Ethan)

Young people and adults also explained that the **programme has helped in other areas** too. Five of the 14 young people and adults discussed areas other than their improved communication and teamwork skills nine times, most of which included better timekeeping skills. For example, one participant noted: "The activity has definitely made me realise that I can't just show up to anywhere at any time because I will miss out ... It's reminded me that... you've got to actually try to be on time to everything." (Darius). Other young people and adults discussed similar points related to the programme teaching them the importance of structure and routine, but one participant highlighted specifically how the programme had helped them to develop confidence in self-expression: "I feel like skills I have learnt so far, just being able to not just be judgmental towards myself as much as I used to in terms of my songwriting and how I express myself". (Ethan).

Finally, discussed four times by two of the 14 young people and adults was how the **programme is a deterrent to lawbreaking**. Both young people and adults discussed this briefly stating that: "it's been good for me, staying out of trouble again, doing well for myself, bettering myself." (Ivan) and: "The difference that it's made is that [it's] just keep me on a positive thing and positive during my passion that I do like music and not falling into doing the mistakes that I used to do. So, it's very helpful." (Levi)

Summary of the interviews: The *Making Waves* programme resulted in the young people and adults feeling they had improved their musical skills, confidence, and aspirations while providing emotional support, fostering personal and social growth, and serving as a positive influence that keeps them engaged in constructive and creative pursuits.

THE FOCUS GROUP

Thematic analysis of the data from the five focus group participants resulted in the emergence of 11 codes belonging to three higher order themes (see Table 3). The codes appeared to converge around *highlighting benefits, encouraging engagement, and overcoming challenges*. These are discussed in further detail below.

TABLE 3

HIGHER ORDER THEMES AND CODES THAT EMERGED FROM THE FOCUS GROUP

THEME	CODE
Highlighting benefits	Young people and adults have benefited greatly from the programme Programme helps young people and adults feel part of the community again
Encouraging engagement	Importance of a suitable location Benefits of live shows to further engagement Engagement is excellent when young people and adults turn up Importance of a good consistent relationship with the producer Young people and adults wanted to be involved further in the programme
Overcoming challenges	Balancing social acceptability and creative expression Issues with uptake and capacity utilisation Issues with referral systems Issues with setting appropriate session length

HIGHLIGHTING BENEFITS

The benefits of taking part in the *Making Waves* programme was an important theme discussed during the focus group. This discussion evidenced how the ***young people and adults have benefitted greatly from the programme***. This included numerous positive outcomes, but the main aspects of this included general beneficence from the programme and feeling like a key member of the community. The music producer reflected on the emotional release and fulfilment young people and adults gain through the programme: "The stuff that they've been able to get off their chest is ... you can tell that they're so elated by the end of each session. For me it's just been one of the most fulfilling things I've done in the music industry to watch people grow like that because I've worked with a lot of people that don't appreciate the opportunity, and I feel like these guys really do." The programme also provides a sense of purpose for many young people and adults, as the project coordinator explained: "This is the only thing that he wakes up for... He just loves making music." Whilst numerous young people and adults clearly experienced the benefits of the programme, the business director also discussed how professionals working within referral agencies have noticed a remarkable change too: "Particularly when you speak to referral partners about how they're going, it is quite common that they'll be like: "I've never seen them so engaged in something.""

One of the key benefits of taking part is that the **programme helps young people and adults feel part of the community again**. The project coordinator reflected on this, sharing her experience of a participant who completed the programme and continued their involvement in the programme: "I think that's really important that there's the community aspect. I think it's definitely coming through, like one participant comes for mentoring. He's had his mentoring then pops downstairs and had a session with the music producer... I do think he does feel like very much part of the community with us." This sense of belonging is something the team is eager to expand upon. The music producer suggested that the group sessions could further strengthen these community bonds: "We were talking more about maybe the group sessions... there would be a high chance of these guys afterwards hanging out for a bit... because now they've sort of established that connection with each other. The community thing will be even bigger." Connecting this idea back to the programme's original aims, the founder/creative director added: "When I go back to my aims, originally the beginning was about creating this culture, this hub, this activity. And I'm thinking they do an intense hour and a half making music with you, but ... there could be a focus group for those guys." The impact of bringing people together was evident during the recent live show, in which the music producer recalled: "I think when we did the live show, it was the first time we really got people together and it was really nice to see them communicating with each other and sharing their experiences. That's maybe something we can push a bit more on now."

ENCOURAGING ENGAGEMENT

Another key theme that emerged from the focus group was how to continually encourage engagement in the programme. Given the apparent benefit of the programme, this was an important area of discussion and spanned numerous issues such as finding a suitable location, live shows, the importance of a good working relationship, and involving young people and adults after they have completed the programme. A largely discussed issue with the programme is the **importance of a suitable location**. Describing the issues with finding a suitable space, the business director discussed the benefits once they finally managed to secure somewhere appropriate: "I think there's an importance in securing a delivery space that is suitable for the activity... Once we finally did get into the space, I think it just sort of raised the bar of how the activity was working." Following on from this, whilst discussing the importance of having a physical space in that it gives the programme a sense of professionalism which aids engagement, the business director further explained: "I think one of the key things is around the professionalism of it because the space is part of what they're buying into. You're coming to this space and you're professional, and you're feeling good about interacting in that environment." Likewise, on the thread of professionalism, the project coordinator considered how securing a permanent space also strengthened the programme's identity and external presence, stating: "Just from a brand perspective, we finally have a space... it's really helpful for us in terms of external comms, in terms of people really knowing who we are... Just having a place that is ours just somehow makes us feel more legitimate."

The **benefits of the live shows to further engagement** were also discussed. The business director explained some of these benefits, namely how it increases exposure of the programme: “We did a launch and had 50 people attend and stay all night, and with different stakeholders we’re having conversations that just weren’t facilitated before. And then we even have prisons get in touch and say, “Oh, we heard about *Making Waves*” and it also opens up delivery in those spaces as well.” The music producer reinforced this point, emphasising how the live shows provide something tangible and a way for stakeholder to see the programme in action, and how this may be particularly helpful for prisons: “It’s something tactile, something that stakeholders can actually approach and see in action.”

Although the focus group discussed issues with initial engagement, they generally noted how **engagement is excellent when young people and adults turn up** to the sessions. Discussing his views on how engaged the young people and adults are in the programme, the music producer explained: “When they’re actually in the room, they’re really engaged, and we get something done regardless.” The project manager then added to the discussion that one of the reasons for engagement is because of the music producer and his abilities as a music producer: “When we get them to the studio and they specifically meet the music producer and they see how good he is as a producer, they’re like, “Well, I’m going to take up this opportunity now” and then they’re usually a lot more engaged after that or their attendance is better after that.”

Continuing from the comment on the music producer’s professionalism, the **importance of a good consistent relationship with the producer** was discussed in some detail. Speaking about the bond developed over time between the producer and the participant, the business director discussed the importance of this but also the issues when, for some reason, there is a break in this relationship: “There’s something about this kind of work where there’s such an importance for people to build that strong relationship with you... they’ve developed this kind of trust in relationships that you’ve got to really think about.” Although members of the focus group agreed in the importance of this working relationship, the music producer suggested that a potential remedy to any issues resulting from disruption, for example caused by the producer needing to take time off, a solution may be to introduce a secondary producer who could also build rapport with the young people and adults: “Maybe it will be a case of having people shadow the sessions and being introduced to the participants with me backing them, to ease other people into the connection.”

Similarly, a further point discussed by the business director was how **young people and adults wanted to be involved further in the programme**. She discussed how young people and adults were eager to perform their music and continue to be involved in *Making Waves*. She explains: “The live performance aspect, that came from the guys wanting to do that. So, we’ve now put that into the programme that we’re going to do open mic night. We did our first one in October, and yeah, I just love that. That was never part of the plan, but because they’ve said that’s something that they’d like, then we’ve been able to put that into the delivery plan.” As young people and adults come to the end of their allotted time

with the programme, many ask about ways of keeping in touch. The business director remarked: "So, when they have their ten weeks, at the end of that, what can we do? ... How do we manage that? How do we give them something that is going to be of value and that they're going to want to continue to stay in touch with us for?" Following her acknowledgment of this issue, besides hosting continued open mic nights, the business director also suggested a further option to keep young people and adults interested and engaged: "Are there roles that can be [introduced] ... maybe peer mentoring that we can facilitate?"

OVERCOMING CHALLENGES

The final theme to emerge from the focus groups was how to overcome the numerous challenges faced within the programme. Some of these had already been handled appropriately, and others allowed room for improvements, particularly with regards to lyrics policy, uptake, referrals, and session length. The most discussed aspect of the programme was **balancing social acceptability and creative expression**. The business director explained the difficulty in managing sensitive content, particularly when young people and adults struggle to understand why certain lyrics are inappropriate to be shared in the public domain: "Understanding when we say: "Oh, these aren't appropriate lyrics", not everybody's getting that and so there's quite a long, drawn-out process that the music producer and the project manager are having to do to get them to understand why those lyrics are not appropriate to share publicly." In practice, the music producer elaborated on how this issue can stop individuals from expressing themselves but how not doing so can result in issues with releasing the music, citing the issue from a participant's perspective: "I've told him quite a few times and he'll tell me that next week he'll come back with something more appropriate and then doesn't, and then it's like: "I'm just going to have to let you get on with this. I'm not going to stop you from recording and telling your stories", but I'll have to keep reminding him that this is probably not going to be releasable." The music producer also offered a practical solution to addressing the issue of cleaning up lyrics in post-production, stating the drawbacks of this but also the benefits of doing so, noting that this was a necessary step to ensure the content is suitable for more broader audiences: "At the end of the project we'll censor everything and then you can have your music", which adds time to what I have to do, but it's obviously a necessary step. I think that will just cover us in the long run." When considering what this issue must feel like for the individuals taking part in the programme, The music producer noted that it did not discourage the young people and adults from expressing themselves. He recalled one participant's initial disappointment, observing: "Initially I think ___ was, was a little bit taken aback that he wasn't going to get his music... But I feel like it hasn't stopped him from coming and recording. He clearly just wants to let it off his chest and he's not going to stop coming because of that." Regardless of these issues, when considering the overall benefit of the programme versus the issues related to censoring, the business director added: "It's part of the process, and actually I think there's something of huge value that they do get to come and express this stuff in a way that is safe, because given the nature of what they're expressing, there won't be many places where it can be."

When considering the difficulties of this issue, The founder/creative director acknowledged that allowing the young people and adults to freely express themselves often leads to better outcomes, but also recognising the issue of managing sensitive material: "You get more from them, don't you? When you allow them to run with ideas?... It's hard to hear sometimes. You know, it's a tricky one and some partner organisations might just be much more black and white about it."

The business director also discussed **issues with referral systems**. For example, she explained: "There has been an instance of [a] particular probation officer not seeing the value in music activity and actually actively dissuading [it]." Another issue involved inaccurate referrals, which sometimes created confusion and frustration. The business director explained: "We had somebody that just kept making really wrong referrals but then promising the individual, and then we're like: "Hang on, why are you overpromising?"... There's a bit of work to finesse how you interact with referral partners." In some instances, referral agencies simply do not respond to requests for further information, making referrals impossible. The business director highlighted an example where a local authority, who should be connecting individuals to the programme, was unresponsive: "There's somebody... who really should be signposting to us and they're not even responding to emails. So that can be quite a challenge, to make sure you're in the right networks to even get the referrals in the first place."

A further matter that was discussed was the continued **issues with uptake and capacity utilisation**. Discussing these issues in some depth, touching primarily on uptake issues appearing to be caused by travel distance and day-to-day complications, the project manager explained: "...there've been people that have seemed like they're really engaged and then when it's actually come to having to make the journey down to the studio, something's obviously just getting in the way, and it's really hard for us to actually ascertain what those barriers are because they don't talk to us about them or they: "I'll be there next week", "Something's come up", "I've got the doctors", "Sorry, I meant to tell you."" Likewise, the music producer added his own perspective, noting that some young people and adults, especially those who have recently been released from prison, face some uncertainty where they may feel motivated to take part, but their life circumstances soon overwhelm them: "So, if they've just come out [of prison], I feel like they'll have this limbo period where maybe this opportunity might come up... But then suddenly their life floods in, and then all of a sudden, they can't make it. ___'s last few sessions, he just clearly had so much going on in his life and things have changed for him." The project manager concluded the discussion on how to effectively deal with issues around uptake by striking the right balance and remembering that all young people and adults have unique circumstances: "I think I'm really trying to draw the balance between not putting lots of pressure on people that it puts them off, but also ... that this isn't an opportunity that can just keep going on forever."

Finally, **issues with setting appropriate session length** was briefly discussed. Speaking of the allotted two hour per sessions, the music producer shared that, over time, they discovered that this amount of

time was actually adequate: “We didn't need the whole two hours. It sort of pressurises people into knowing that they need to get moving.” The project manager added a perspective on the intensity of one-on-one sessions and how the two-hour duration could feel too long for some young people and adults who needed breaks: “Two hours is quite a long time to be focusing, because one-on-one is quite intense. So, an hour and a half works quite well.”

Summary of the focus group: The *Making Waves* programme provides young people and adults with a sense of belonging, emotional fulfilment, and professional growth through music, fostering community connections, engagement, and self-expression while overcoming challenges related to participation, referrals, and content management.

FEEDBACK FROM REFERRAL PARTNERS

The benefits of the programme were also briefly alluded to by referral staff. For example, one partner found that the launch of the new studio space was an uplifting and impactful event that showcased the importance of collaboration and community. After attending, she stated: “The event was a very uplifting on so many levels... I have referred a few of our participants here but the highlight for me was listening to Malik’s music and observing his reactions and behaviour. He became a totally different person - his humility, gratefulness and recognised talent was palpable throughout the event... Last night made me cry for all the right reasons. Partnership working is so important for our clients and so lovely for us to observe such positive outcomes.” Another partner discussed the benefits of the programme that they had noted, stating: “The *Making Waves* programme at *Finding Rhythms* has had a profound impact on the development, wellbeing, and self-esteem of one of our clients over the past few weeks. The two-hour weekly sessions have steadily improved Jahlil’s communication and creative skills, with fantastic input and wrap-around support from the staff, and fundamentally they're in a safe space where they're valued and can be their authentic self. *Finding Rhythms* are a fantastic partner with a dedicated, passionate staff team who provide invaluable opportunities in ____, and we highly recommend their programmes to young creatives looking to develop their skills. A 5-star project!”

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

The *Making Waves* project broadly seeks to use music creation as a medium to improve young people and adults' confidence, self-belief, personal wellbeing, as well as social skills and/or transferable skills to prepare them for employment. There was a breadth of engagement in the study across ages from 18 to 46, demonstrating a good level of engagement via the established referral pathways. Most of the young people and adults were male (83.3%) suggesting that the referral pathways may be utilising such programmes for male populations where other arts-based programmes are more utilised and attractive for female populations. It's also important to note that these demographics largely align with those of the broader criminal justice system, particularly in terms of sex (78%; Ministry of Justice, 2024). Through interviews with participants and a focus group representing the project team, this study asked young people and adults and the project team about their perceptions of how well the project had achieved these aims. The key themes from the interviews included musical skills acquisition and aspirations, emotional and psychological benefits from *Making Waves*, and personal and social development from *Making Waves*. The key themes from the focus group included highlighting benefits, encouraging engagement, and overcoming challenges

Making Waves appeared to be a very effective programme in improving musical and production skills. Young people and adults reported growth in areas such as confidence, songwriting, and differing musical styles including using new techniques and tempos. Improving in these areas not only resulted in the development of such technical skills but it also inspired young people and adults to consider their futures in terms of their long-term musical aspirations. Many young people and adults aimed to produce clear measurable outcomes from the programme such as mixtapes and EPs to show the extent of their progress or to fuel their continued aspirations. The programme facilitators discussed some of the reasons for these improvements, explaining that these were made possible because of a dedicated workspace to make music, which improved the overall appeal and credibility of the programme, making it more professional.

The programme also provided clear psychological benefits, with many young people and adults discussing the programme as a means of escapism, stress relief, and a place of positivity. Young people and adults described it as a valuable means of expressing their own personal day-to-day challenges and issues, affording them the opportunity to explore these issues in a constructive way. Beyond this, young people and adults also explained that the programme helped improve their self-esteem, as well as motivation, a sense of purpose and achievement, and their overall wellbeing. The programme facilitators also discussed the positive impacts of the programme on the young people and adults, explaining how many expressed profound improvements in their lives and how they had clearly seen the sessions as opportunities for skills development and an emotional release.

Furthermore, the structure that the programme provided was not only beneficial to the young people and adults, but the positivity of this was also felt by external referral agencies. Young people and adults stated that the programme also facilitated personal growth, particularly in the areas of teamworking and communication. Due to the nature of the programme, young people and adults gladly developed their teamworking skills, with many explaining how they valued the input of the producer. This in turn resulted in them developing their ability to clearly articulate their musical styles and the rapport building skills, which ultimately enhanced the creative process. The programme facilitators noted these improvements too, explaining that a consistent relationship between the participant and the producer was key to engagement and successful outcomes.

They also stated that the programme appeared to create a stronger sense of community in the young people and adults, with many wanting to continue with the programme beyond their allotted time, with some considering mentoring roles or performing in the live shows. The facilitators explicitly emphasised the value of fostering these community links, suggesting that group sessions, peer support, and further live shows would enhance a sense of belonging and connection, as well as serve to help raise awareness of the programme. Young people and adults also briefly discussed the benefits of maintaining a structure, how the programme had increased their time keeping skills, and how it generally fostered a sense of discipline. For one or two, this level of structure from the programme appeared to act as a deterrent to further negative behaviour, as they saw the programme as a way in which they could channel their energy into positive outcomes.

Finally, the programme facilitators discussed some of the challenges the programme faces, and offered some suggestions on how these can be handled and turned into opportunities. A key issue that was explored was the challenge of balancing creative freedom and social acceptability, as censoring lyrics was a necessary aspect of music making but often served to frustrate some young people and adults who felt they were not able to speak their minds. Other challenges included uptake as well as issues related to travel for young people and adults, some of whom had to travel several hours a day to get to the studio. Related to this, there was some discussion of how young people and adults sometimes led unpredictable lives, but that this could be remedied by the programme staff using a flexible and individualised approach to avoid adding further pressure and burden upon young people and adults. Also, the facilitators discussed a need to liaise the programme with referral agencies, but to do so in a way which demonstrates the efficacy and clear tangible benefit to young people and adults from taking part. Whilst some referral agencies had noticed this, others had not, and raising awareness with such ones could only increase their engagement in the programme.

By acknowledging the clear benefits to engagement in the programme and considering ways to address the issues and challenges that it faces, *Making Waves* clearly demonstrates its ability to bring about positive long-term change to young people and adults and the community, fostering personal growth, community connection, and artistic development, as well its clear potential for improvement

and sustained engagement. To do so, based on the findings presented above, the following recommendations (see Table 4) could be considered to enhance *Making Waves*.

TABLE 4

RECOMMENDATIONS FROM THE STUDY FINDINGS

RECOMMENDATIONS	
Fostering community and engagement	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Continue to introduce alumni roles to provide ongoing engagement opportunities and encourage and support past, present, and future members. • Continue to organise live shows to showcase young people and adults' work, giving them an opportunity to further engage, boosting their sense of accomplishment and raising awareness of the programme further. • Introduce more group activities such as collaborative workshops and peer mentoring opportunities to strengthen the sense of community. • Strengthen relationships with referral agencies (particularly those which work with younger people) by providing clear information about the programme, including its benefits, structure, and expectations.
Ensuring inclusivity and meeting participant's needs	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Optimise session lengths by offering sessions that best accommodate individual needs, particularly those facing challenging personal circumstances. • Develop a flexible referral process to accommodate the diverse individual needs of young people and adults. • Continue to adopt a more flexible approach to scheduling sessions for young people and adults whose personal circumstances make their attendance irregular. • Use reliable methods of communication to remind young people and adults about their sessions to address uptake issues and to continue to encourage engagement. • Encourage young people and adults to develop long-term goals from the very beginning, such as completing a mixtape or an EP, and continue to support these aspirations.
Enhancing programme quality and artistic expression	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Maintain a professional studio environment to enhance the appeal, credibility, and external reputation of the programme. • Continue to invest in consistent and supportive relationships between facilitators and young people and adults, as these are clearly critical for maintaining engagement as well as motivation. • Establish clear guidelines for balancing artistic freedoms with social acceptability, ensuring that young people and adults can express themselves fully when developing their music. • Encourage open and honest dialogue regarding censorship to foster understanding and minimise frustration.
Data for future evaluation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Consider collating data that captures and represents the mid to long term impact of the project on the participants of <i>Finding Rhythms, Making Waves</i> programme. This might mean nurturing the links with other organisations, and referral partners to device data sharing agreements if not already in place, to allow for mid to long term follow up date. The alumni group and activities may also provide a good opportunity to evaluate the over the next 6 – 12 months.

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