

# SOUNDING OUT A STORY

*Sounding out* was a pioneering study support project which attracted £1 million in funding and the attention of high-ranking government ministers. Three years on the project had delivered on its targets, created demonstrable improvements in young people's behaviour, and showed high satisfaction levels among pupils, teachers and musicians.

Yet Yorkshire Youth and Music, who ran the project, almost collapsed as a result.

**Anita Holford** on the lessons that have been learned – and how they are being passed on

**F**ive years ago, *Sounding Board* got wind of a project in Yorkshire that was leading the way in out of school hours music-making. *Sounding out*, a pilot organised by Yorkshire Youth and Music (YYM) and involving five schools and 92 young people, was showing that music could have a real impact on the motivation of disaffected young people.

It was hailed as an example of good practice, and even got the attention of Chris Smith, then secretary of state for Culture, Media and Sport, and Charles Clarke, at the time under-secretary of state for Education and Employment.

Just over a year later, YYM had secured nearly £1 million including in-kind support, in funding – nearly half of it from the New Opportunities Fund (NOF) – to carry out a three-year project, and in September 2000 *Sounding out* was officially launched, with an event which was attended by David Blunkett MP and Baroness Pitkeathley.

The project was impressive for the way it met quantitative and qualitative targets, the strong partnerships it created, and its focus: not music but study support for young people, and the social, educational and personal impacts a music project can deliver.

It was equally impressive for its obsession with evaluation, resulting in a warts-and-all account of the project with detailed recommendations that could be critical for the well being of other community arts organisations.

David Price, evaluator and author of *Taking soundings*, the final and public report from the project, says that YYM should be praised



for the amount of time and resources they invested in the evaluation element. But he's clear that – as evaluations need to go – it was only a starting point: "We were really only looking at how the effects were perceived by those involved, and although the staff were convinced that it made kids more inclined to go to school, and more engaged in lessons, the big question is, will that be sustained, and how much exposure does a young person need to have a long-term effect?"

What's equally important – and, Price believes, is the reason that the project was successful – is that the three-year involvement allowed musicians to develop more creative approaches to music-making. Early on, the project team realised that most of the musicians were used to having to deliver results quickly, and so tended to depend on repertoire-based approaches that would give more predictable outcomes. The training was reshaped to incorporate a more compositional and improvisational approach, and the musicians who rose to the challenge were reported to have gained "a fresh impetus to their work, and a set of tools to make pupils more independent learners".

Schools then had to take on board new methods – and new attitudes to learners. "Some of the schools had fairly low expectations of what the kids were capable of", says Price. "They needed to go beyond 'isn't it great we've got kids excited about drumming' to look at how much further they could go. And once the schools tried it, they didn't want to go back to the standard approaches."

Keyworkers (the link people responsible for supporting the project in each school) reported that pupils were more stretched, and their social skills and creativity developed more quickly. Pupils referred to the value of risk in building teamwork skills and helping with self esteem.

There's no question then that this was a successful project which transformed the lives of the young people who took part and will continue in some form in many schools. Yet it left YYM with little to show for the three years, and almost caused its collapse. Six months into the project when a new project manager, Bill Vince was appointed, there were already teething problems. Sessions weren't taking place as

*Above and p13: Sounding out pupils at work. Pictures from Taking soundings report*

## STRAIGHT As?

A key aim of the project was to deliver study support objectives, particularly to "increase motivation self-esteem and self-confidence in disaffected learners". Did the project make the grade? Here's what keyworkers reported by the end of the three years.

%	
88	Keyworkers reporting an increase in pupils' confidence
80	Those noting an improvement in behaviour
43	Those noting an improvement in academic attainment
88	Those feeling the work stretched pupils appropriately
33	Those reckoning pupil engagement was excellent
100	Those reckoning pupil engagement was at least good

## REPORT CARD

### How the project was structured

- ✓ Twenty-three primary and secondary schools in Calderdale, Sheffield, Kirklees, Wakefield and Rotherham with the largest proportion of disadvantaged students – those who had free school meals or were statemented, had special educational needs or poor attendance rates.
- ✓ New Opportunities Fund gave £455,863, £130,000 came from Paul Hamlyn, West Yorkshire Grants, Carnegie, Esmée Fairbairn Performing Right Society Foundation, and the Percival Whitley Educational Trust. Plus £500 a year from each school, and other in-kind support.
- ✓ Recruitment taster sessions in each school during autumn 2000 enabled artists to be chosen. Two keyworkers, usually teachers, were responsible for the project in each school. Main phase included weekly workshops; termly keyworker training days, forum and steering group meetings, evaluation visits and sharings within each school; and annual reports, evaluations, and an inter-school sharing.
- ✓ The project beat its quantitative targets (to work with 600 children for 30 weeks for three years) with 1,800 participants: 1,000 taking part for at least a year, and many for more than two years. There were 1,829 music sessions, performances watched by over 8,000, and 53 musicians employed.

### What made it different

- ✓ To ensure clear communication between YYM, schools and musicians, **local forum meetings** were set up.
- ✓ A **professional development programme** for keyworkers and musicians included workshop techniques and project management and fundraising skills.
- ✓ The **Link-Up strand** (a key musician devising a performance piece to work across all schools, and to be performed together) paved the way for future joint projects and funding bids between schools.
- ✓ There was £750 to each school to **purchase instruments** – which would be kept by the schools.
- ✓ YYM **paid musicians to attend meetings** and for training, and **paid supply teachers** to cover for school staff.
- ✓ The three-year timescale allowed **longitudinal evaluation** – through six-monthly questionnaires, observation of sessions and interviews with pupils, keyworkers and artists.
- ✓ The **evaluator was interventionist** – so issues that were discovered during the evaluation process could be responded to as the project went along, rather than simply presented at the end of the project.

planned and many schools were becoming disillusioned.

*Sounding out* had quadrupled YYM's turnover, and brought many additional funders and partners into the equation. With only two core and two project staff, the organisation simply couldn't cope with the impact of managing the many relationships and developing complex contractual, monitoring and financial reports. Indeed, the situation had already led to the original project manager leaving, and eventually resulted in the resignation of the director, Jan Hinde.

To a certain extent, this was a problem waiting to happen, as community arts organisations struggle with low core resources and rely increasingly on project, rather than revenue-funding, often from outside the arts.

But to make matters worse, there was also a disagreement with the main funder over the beneficiary numbers. NOF argued that the target was 8,000 young people; YYM had said it would be 600. After 10 months of negotiations, NOF accepted their mistake and the dispute was resolved, but it left YYM's board disappointed in the funding relationship, and took up valuable time which had an impact on the project's delivery.

There are many lessons to be learned from *Sounding out*, but it seems the most important

is to take account of the destabilising impact that a large project has on an organisation's core resources, thinks Liz Bavidge, chair of YYM: "It's easy to focus on the outputs and not understand what it takes to get there. We were aware of the admin needs, but not of the impact of those needs on staff time. To take a simple example, getting an accounting system that was compatible for our needs and our funders' needs, took much more energy and time than we'd anticipated. I don't think we could have done anything differently, but organisations need to consider the effect it will have."

"They may need extra staff for a short time to get the project set up, or for existing staff to give dedicated time," Bavidge continues. "They also need to make sure they have other strong projects in their portfolio, so that they don't become swallowed up by one large project."

**A** model of good practice or a salutary tale for arts organisations with big ambitions? The evaluation report is candid about the difficulties, and concludes with recommendations for project organisers, schools and funders, but seems to suggest that anything's possible – as long as organisations are properly prepared.

Bill Vince believes that organisations should

MORE  
on the web

Taking soundings – an impact study of *Sounding out*, Yorkshire Youth and Music's three year study-support project – is hosted for YYM on Sound Sense's website – W: [www.soundsense.org](http://www.soundsense.org) and search for "Taking soundings". Hard copies are available from YYM: see opposite.

## PLUS MARKS FOR ARTS ORGANISATIONS

*Taking soundings* offers recommendations for project organisers, schools and funders, including:

- ✚ Complex partnerships can't be rushed – it takes time for them to develop, and to make sure each understands their agreed service levels.
- ✚ Be clear on specific outputs and agree them with funders, but don't be afraid of outputs which can't be measured.
- ✚ Allow time for effective management – be clear about expectations and timescales, keep a clear paper trail.
- ✚ Allow time for building collaboration between artists and teachers – including planning, review, sharing skills – and cost this, and the management time needed to make it happen, into the project plan.
- ✚ Research the availability of appropriately skilled artists – if there aren't enough, consider a training programme.
- ✚ Make sure you have enough staff to cope with large-scale performances – bringing in short term staff if necessary – otherwise you risk leaving your office understaffed.
- ✚ Make sure your organisation is adequately prepared for the size of the project – when writing the funding bid consider the impact on core resources, and the future development of the organisation, and make sure these are properly resourced.

## LINKS

*As a result of Sounding out, YYM, creativity in education experts CAPE UK and the Guildhall School of Music are to deliver a six month programme of training in the Yorkshire region from January 2004 which will encourage musicians to use more creative approaches in their workshops.*

*Details from Yorkshire Youth and Music, Dean Clough, Halifax HX3 5AX T: 01422 383130 E: info@yym.org.uk*

prepare for the opportunity a project presents, as well as the impact it will have. "The shame for YYM is that there's no organisational legacy," he explains. "The project team members have moved on and the organisation went back to one member of staff. If there had been an organisational capacity audit at the beginning it would have identified the longer term needs, and the fact that there needed to be time built in to plan what would or could happen to the organisation at the end of the three years."

He is also convinced that the project could have been extended. "I've no doubt that the project model is sustainable," says Vince. "The project gave us an opportunity to test this assumption that a three year model is better than a shorter one. The evaluation shows a huge dip in energies after a year, but I think the model that will really do the business is a three, four, five or six-year one, that students can dip in and out of for one to two years at a time. That's the more interesting scenario."

YYM's board isn't quite as positive. "We would not choose to do such a large project again," says Bavidge. "We will be better off having a range of small projects and diversifying what we're doing. It is a huge undertaking for a small organisation and there's a very big risk that it will consume it – a case of the tail wagging the dog."

The evaluation report makes essential reading for any organisations which are project-funded, but particularly for small organisations embarking on large, multiple-funded projects. YYM's experience needn't be off-putting, indeed it could be the making of an organisation, but the key seems to be in looking at the project from all angles before you even begin to fill in that form.



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