

Music in Autism Resource Bases in England

Making national music education infrastructure work for autistic pupils

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Policy Context

England has national structures for both Special Educational Needs and Disabilities (SEND) reform and music education. The SEND and Alternative Provision reform agenda focuses on stronger support in mainstream schools, while the National Plan for Music Education positions Music Hubs as the main infrastructure for widening access. This agenda aligns with the National Strategy for Autistic Children, Young People and Adults (2021–2026), which emphasises improving outcomes, participation and support for autistic people and their families. Autism Resource Bases (ARBs) sit between these systems as specialist provisions embedded in mainstream schools. The recent publication of government guidance on inclusion bases reinforces the growing national focus on specialist provision within mainstream schools.

Without clearer expectations, autistic pupils in ARBs may experience unequal access to both school music provision and local music education infrastructure. England's challenge is not the absence of music education infrastructure, but whether that infrastructure deliberately identifies, reaches and supports autistic pupils in specialist provision that is embedded within mainstream schools.



Research

Musical Connections is an AHRC-funded collaboration between Live Music Now, the University of South Wales and the University of Southampton Centre for Music Education and Social Justice. This builds on three years of Live Music Now pilot work with more than **340 learners** across **24 ARBs** or **equivalent provision**, which identified limited access to music and low staff confidence in facilitating music. This twelve-month research project took a Participatory Action Research methodology, collaborating with autistic stakeholders in all phases of the research journey. The research team is committed to a strength-based understanding of autism - rejecting the notion of autism as deficiency or pathology and valuing autistic culture and identity.

Advice

National policy should require Music Hubs, schools, local authorities and SEND leaders to plan, evidence and resource inclusive music provision within ARBs. Music is part of autistic pupils' curriculum and cultural entitlement, not a discretionary enrichment activity dependent on local goodwill.



Key messages

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UK academic studies found on music education in ARBs

36%

of UK survey respondents had Music Hub or equivalent music service contact

100%

of UK survey respondents believed the social and emotional impact of music was important

What Musical Connections found

Evidence Gap

- The scoping review found no UK research on music education in ARBs or equivalent provision.
- Only five relevant studies met the criteria, all from the USA.
- The review identified themes around **varying intentions in music, process versus product-oriented practices, absence of progression pathways and absence of children's voices.**

Why this matters

The evidence base is still limited, so policy cannot assume that music provision in ARBs is being delivered consistently or understood well.

The issue is not whether music provision exists in the wider school. It is whether pupils in ARBs are able to participate in music in ways that are meaningful, safe and responsive to their needs and interests.

Across the UK-wide survey

113

settings responded across the UK

40%

of responses came from England

3,000+

possible settings were invited

Current provision

- The most common responding setting served primary-age learners.
- The most common class size was **8 to 12 pupils.**
- Most commonly, settings reported **1 to 3 hours** of access to music per week. However, this may overstate provision, as settings with more music activity may have been more likely to respond and the earlier pilot work suggests more limited access.
- In **52%** of responding settings, ARB staff delivered the majority of music.

Music service provision

Only **36%** of responding settings had contact with a local Music Hub or Music Service.

Follow-up conversations suggest a mixed picture: in some cases, accessible provision was not available, while in others, schools were not accessing or investing in music service provision.

This points to a system connection problem, not a simple failure by any single group.

Barriers identified by settings

Resources, budget and expertise were named as the main barriers to more music making. These findings point to a need for system-level support: settings require **time, training** and **access** to specialist music education expertise if inclusive music provision is to become consistent and sustainable.

“Many of our learners are musically led”

Teacher, Autism Resource Base



What effective provision needs

The Project Values

Safety | acceptance | pupil-led | interest-driven | co-created | balance | playful | holistic

A neurodiversity-affirmative approach

- Reframe what engagement looks like in music.
- Accept pupils' chosen modes of participation, whether playing, listening, dancing, or watching.
- Follow pupils' musical preferences to build relationships and trust.
- Recognise that music can be joyful, painful, or sensory-complex depending on the young person.



Music service provision

Staff and musicians need **confidence, time and practical support**. A focus group with pilot project participants highlighted flexibility, co-regulation and trusting pupils with instruments as central to practice.

Teachers involved in the research project discussed how they had been nervous to engage in music prior to the project but now felt confident in its centrality.

England already has music education infrastructure. The policy challenge is to ensure ARBs are **visible** within it and that provision is **accessible**, not merely available.

“We must disrupt and reframe expectations of what engagement looks like.”

“Following pupils’ musical preferences enabled relationship and trust.”

“Following pupils’ musical preferences enabled relationship and trust.”

Music is also important beyond curriculum entitlement. For autistic pupils, music-making can support communication, regulation, social connection and self-expression, while also recognising musical strengths and the potential for exceptional musical ability in some children (Ockelford, 2015; Shaughnessy et al., 2024).

Musician-in-Residence Projects

Two 10-week **Musician-in-Residence projects** were delivered by Live Music Now in South Wales and Northern Ireland. The research methodology employed a mosaic approach, including teacher questionnaires, teacher interviews, weekly reflections from musicians, staff and parents, researcher observations, creative and flexible pupil interviews, and final focus groups. Collaborative analysis with the steering group of autistic musicians ensured autistic perspectives shaped the interpretation. Initial themes include: "Defying expectations", "Innovation", "Patterns across media", "Real music and not real music", "Connections through music", "Impact on musical and non-musical outcomes" and "Who has the power and agency to make decisions?"

Policy recommendations for England

The call to action is national. England should use SEND reform, Music Hubs, curriculum policy and specialist organisations such as Live Music Now so that autistic pupils in ARBs are included in music education planning from the outset.

<p>1. Make ARBs visible in Music Hub inclusion planning Music Hub lead organisations should be asked to show how Autism Resource Bases and equivalent specialist provision are represented in inclusion strategies, school engagement data and partnership planning.</p>	<p>4. Plan music into specialist provision from the outset When ARBs or specialist provisions are established or expanded, music should be considered as part of staffing, environment, curriculum planning, budgets and partnership arrangements.</p>
<p>2. Treat music as curriculum access, not enrichment Department for Education, schools, Music Hubs and local authorities should frame music for autistic pupils in ARBs as part of broad curriculum entitlement, cultural participation and equitable access.</p>	<p>5. Fund scalable partnership models England needs investment to scale evidence-informed partnership models that connect schools, Music Hubs, autistic musicians and specialist music organisations, with attention to cost, workforce time and sustainability.</p>
<p>3. Build subject-specific SEND confidence in music Professional development should support teachers, support staff, musicians and Music Hub practitioners to deliver neurodiversity-affirmative, pupil-led and sensory-considered music practice.</p>	<p>6. Ensure autistic representation in decision-making and workforce development Autistic people are experts in autistic experience and should be involved in the co-design, delivery and evaluation of music provision. Workforce planning should also support opportunities for autistic musicians and educators to contribute to and lead practice.</p>

What Remains Unanswered?

England needs clearer evidence on whether Music Hub engagement with mainstream schools reaches ARB classes, or whether pupils in specialist provision remain outside local music education planning. Further work should examine training, progression, cost and scalable models, while also exploring whether music can help connect isolated ARB teachers and provision leads. As this type of provision expands, music could offer a practical route for raising ARB visibility, building local networks and sharing inclusive practice.

Resources and Outputs

Outputs include policy briefings, a free practical guide for teachers and musicians, film resources, academic publications and a Live Music Now training programme.

Visit the [Live Music Now website](#) to access these resources.



References

- Ockelford, A. (2015) 'The potential impact of autism on musical development', in McPherson, G. E. (ed.) *The Child as Musician: A Handbook of Musical Development*. 2nd edn. Oxford: Oxford University Press, pp. 122-146.
- Shaughnessy, C., Ockelford, A., Bonneville-Roussy, A. and Mann, W. (2024) 'Building musical lives: The impact of supporting musical play in the everyday lives of autistic children and their families', *Psychology of Music*, 52(3), pp. 479-493.

Evidence sources to reference/link to: [Musical Connections Scoping Review Summary](#), [Pilot Focus Group Summary](#), [Focus Group with Autistic and Non-Autistic Professionals Summary](#), [Songwriting Workshop Summary](#).