

Music in Specialist Provision in Mainstream Schools in Northern Ireland

Making national music education infrastructure work for autistic pupils

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Policy Context

Northern Ireland has statutory commitments to special educational needs, curriculum access and the arts, but it does not have a dedicated national music education strategy. The SEN Code of Practice frames access to a broad and balanced curriculum as a core expectation, while the Northern Ireland Curriculum positions Music within The Arts from Foundation Stage onwards. Delivery is shaped by schools, the Education Authority (EA), the EA Music Service (non-statutory) and inspection frameworks that emphasise access, equity and learner experience. The implementation question is whether autistic pupils in Specialist Provision in Mainstream Schools are consistently visible within these systems and whether current arrangements support the ambitions of the Northern Ireland Autism Strategy 2023–2028 which emphasises participation, inclusion and improved outcomes for autistic children and young people.

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 Autism Resource Bases 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

The Department of Education, Education Authority, EA Music Service, Education and Training Inspectorate and schools should treat music in specialist provision as part of curriculum access and SEN inclusion. Music is part of autistic pupils' curriculum and cultural entitlements, 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, SPIMS 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

Northern Ireland has a relatively static policy environment, so applied evidence is especially important.

If policy does not specify how music should be adapted in specialist provision, access is shaped by local interpretation, capacity and partnerships.

Across the UK-wide survey

113

settings responded across the UK

21%

of responses came from Northern Ireland

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, Specialist Provision in Mainstream School



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.



A workforce and infrastructure approach

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.

Northern Ireland has a practical route for change through the Education Authority, Education Authority Music Service and Specialist Provision in Mainstream Schools. This creates an opportunity to develop training and delivery models that can be tested, adapted and scaled through existing structures.

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

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

“Music flows through the children.”

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 Northern Ireland

The call to action is national. Northern Ireland should use Special Educational Needs guidance, the statutory Arts curriculum, the Education Authority, the Education Authority Music Service and specialist music organisations such as Live Music Now so that autistic pupils in Specialist Provision in Mainstream Schools are included in music education planning from the outset.

<p>1. Make SPiMS and equivalent settings visible in EA music planning</p> <p>The Education Authority and EA Music Service should identify how autistic pupils in Specialist Provision in Mainstream Schools are reached, supported and enabled to participate in music provision.</p>	<p>4. Include music within person-centred planning where relevant</p> <p>Where music supports communication, regulation, participation, wellbeing or learner voice, it should be considered within person-centred planning and resourcing discussions, consistent with the Northern Ireland Autism Strategy 2023–2028.</p>
<p>2. Use music to support SEN inclusion and Arts curriculum access</p> <p>Schools and system leaders should frame music for autistic pupils as part of curriculum entitlement and participation, not as optional enrichment or a one-off visiting activity.</p>	<p>5. Use evidence to support inspection, planning, resourcing and scale</p> <p>Future work should show how inclusive music provision supports curriculum access, learner experience, wellbeing and participation in Northern Ireland settings. Sustainable delivery will require appropriate workforce capacity and investment. As the EA Music Service is a non-statutory service, expanding inclusive provision will require appropriate long-term investment alongside effective partnership working. Evidence should inform decisions about long-term resourcing as well as programme design.</p>
<p>3. Build a training route for specialist provision</p> <p>The Education Authority, the Education Authority Music Service and Live Music Now should use the project's training resource to develop a practical workforce development route for teachers, support staff and music practitioners working in specialist provision in mainstream schools.</p>	<p>6. Ensure autistic representation in decision-making and workforce development</p> <p>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?

Further work is needed to understand how many Specialist Provision in Mainstream Schools are currently reached by music services; how music provision is prioritised within SEN and curriculum planning; what training enables staff and musicians to sustain practice and how autistic pupils experience musical progression, enjoyment and participation across different forms of provision. Further work should also explore how potentially isolated provision leads connect with one another and share 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](#), [NI Stakeholder Event Summary](#), [Focus Group with Autistic and Non-Autistic Professionals Summary](#), [Songwriting Workshop Summary](#).