

Music in Autism Resource Bases in Wales

Making national music education infrastructure work for autistic pupils

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Policy Context

Wales has a strong national framework for inclusive music education. Curriculum for Wales places music within the expressive arts area of learning and experience. The Additional Learning Needs Code establishes person-centred planning through Individual Development Plans (IDP). The National Plan for Music Education creates a delivery framework through the National Music Service for Wales. Together, these policies support inclusion, equity, creativity and learner wellbeing.

This agenda is also consistent with Wales' wider commitment to neurodiversity-affirmative practice and participation reflected in the national Neurodivergence Improvement Programme. The implementation question is whether autistic pupils in Autism Resource Bases (ARBs) are visible within these systems in practice.



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

Welsh Government, the National Music Service for Wales, local authorities and schools should treat music as part of curriculum entitlement and person-centred ALN provision. 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

Wales has a distinctive opportunity because curriculum reform, ALN implementation and national music education delivery are already aligned around equity, learner wellbeing and local curriculum design.

The issue is not whether a school has music provision. It is whether pupils learning 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

29%

of responses came from Wales

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.



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.

Wales already has an established music education infrastructure: Curriculum for Wales, the Additional Learning Needs system, and the National Music Service for Wales all point towards equitable, learner-centred provision. The policy challenge is to ensure autistic pupils in ARBs have equitable access to expressive arts entitlement and local music delivery in practice.

“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 Wales

The call to action is national. Wales should use Curriculum for Wales, the Additional Learning Needs system and the National Music Service for Wales, together with specialist providers 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 National Music Service planning</p> <p>Welsh Government and National Music Service for Wales partners should ask how autistic pupils in ARBs and equivalent provision are being identified, reached and enabled to participate through local music education delivery.</p>	<p>4. Link music to individual development and local curriculum design where relevant</p> <p>Where music supports communication, regulation, participation, wellbeing or learner voice, schools and local authorities should consider how this is reflected in Individual Development Plans and expressive arts curriculum planning.</p>
<p>2. Treat music as curriculum and ALN provision, not enrichment</p> <p>Schools and local authorities should frame music in ARBs as part of expressive arts entitlement and person-centred provision, not as optional enrichment.</p>	<p>5. Fund music provision in ARBs at scale</p> <p>Future work should identify sustainable funding models so that accessible music provision can be funded and sustained across different ARB models, local authorities and partnership structures in Wales.</p>
<p>3. Build workforce confidence through practical support</p> <p>Professional learning should support teachers, support staff, musicians and music service practitioners to deliver neurodiversity-affirmative, sensory-aware and pupil-led music practice.</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, as outlined in the National Plan for Music Education.</p>

What Remains Unanswered?

Wales is well placed to explore how music can be recognised within Individual Development Plans where it supports communication, participation, regulation, wellbeing or learner voice, while still protecting music as a creative and cultural entitlement. Wales now needs evidence on how music provision can be specified, timetabled and sustained within ARBs; how National Music Service and local authority music services currently reach these settings; how staff confidence changes over time and how autistic pupils experience musical progression, enjoyment and participation across different forms of provision.

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](#), [Cymru Stakeholder Event Summary](#), [Focus Group with Autistic and Non-Autistic Professionals Summary](#), [Songwriting Workshop Summary](#).