

Music in Autism Resource Bases: a practical guide for teachers and musicians



Contents

Section 1:	About this guide
Section 2:	Who is this for?
Section 3:	Core values
Section 4:	The Arc
Section 5:	Before you start
Section 6:	What music sessions can look like in practice
Section 7:	What changes adults notice
Section 8:	Getting started
Section 9:	Finding support and further resources
Section 10:	From practice to policy
Section 11:	Acknowledgements
Section 12:	Glossary of terms



Section 1 - About this Guide

This guide is for anyone interested in making music with autistic children and young people in Autism Resource Bases (ARBs), regional equivalents, or other settings, whether you're a class teacher or a visiting musician.

It brings together learning from research, practice and collaboration with autistic musicians, educators, school staff and pupils.

You'll find practical ideas and approaches that can be adapted to different settings, contexts and ages. Rather than prescribing activities, this guide is underpinned by values that:

- draw on principles of [Universal Design for Learning](#), recognising that children and young people engage, communicate and participate in different ways
- see autism as a natural part of human diversity, taking a [strengths-based, neurodiversity-affirming](#) approach
- create the conditions where autistic children and young people can participate, express themselves and connect with others through music, rather than trying to change them



By adopting this flexible, responsive way of working in music, you'll create the conditions that help autistic children, and their music-making, flourish.

We hope this guide helps you find joy in making music together.

About the Authors



Alex Lupo (he/him)

Alex is autistic and was the non-academic partner in this project. Alex is also a composer, performer and sound designer who has played, recorded and written music all over the world.

Alex has collaborated with and worked alongside PJ Harvey, Charlotte Harding, The Paraorchestra, and The Terra Collective, among others.

Alex also has the role of Creative Lead and Trainer with Live Music Now and has more than 20 years' experience as a community musician, and in more recent years also as a music therapist.



Dr Beth Pickard (she/her)

Beth was the academic partner in this collaborative research project. Beth is a white, cis-gender, female, non-disabled musician and academic.

Beth is a senior lecturer, researcher and supervisor at the University of South Wales, as well as a freelance researcher, consultant, music therapist and inclusive music practitioner. Her research and practice are heavily informed by critical disability studies: exploring how disability is socially constructed, interpreted and represented across disciplines and pedagogy.

Beth was privileged to collaborate with and learn from Alex and other autistic musicians and collaborators in this project and is passionate about centring the expertise of those with lived experience.

Section 2 - Who Is This For?



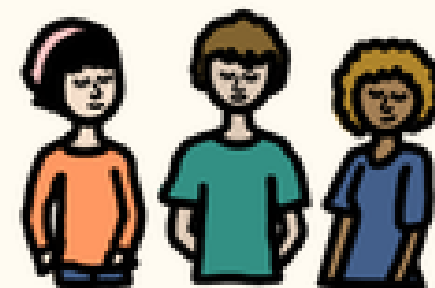
MUSIC SPECIALISTS



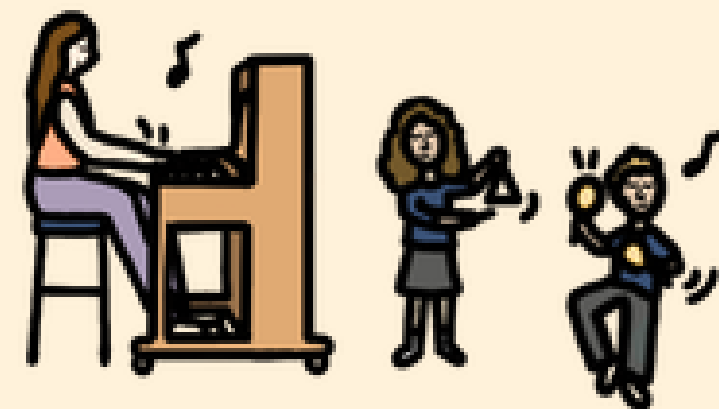
COMMUNITY MUSICIANS



FREELANCE MUSICIANS



LIVE MUSIC NOW MUSICIANS



MUSIC EDUCATORS



INSTRUMENTAL TUTORS

Anyone interested in making music with autistic pupils.



We appreciate that any of these colleagues may or may not be autistic themselves.



SENCO/ALNCo



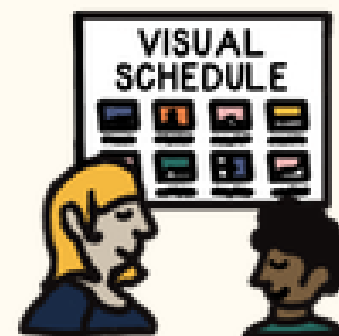
TEACHING ASSISTANTS



TEACHERS



SPECIALIST TEACHERS



AUTISM SPECIALIST



TEACHERS AT AUTISM RESOURCE BASES

Section 3 – Core Values

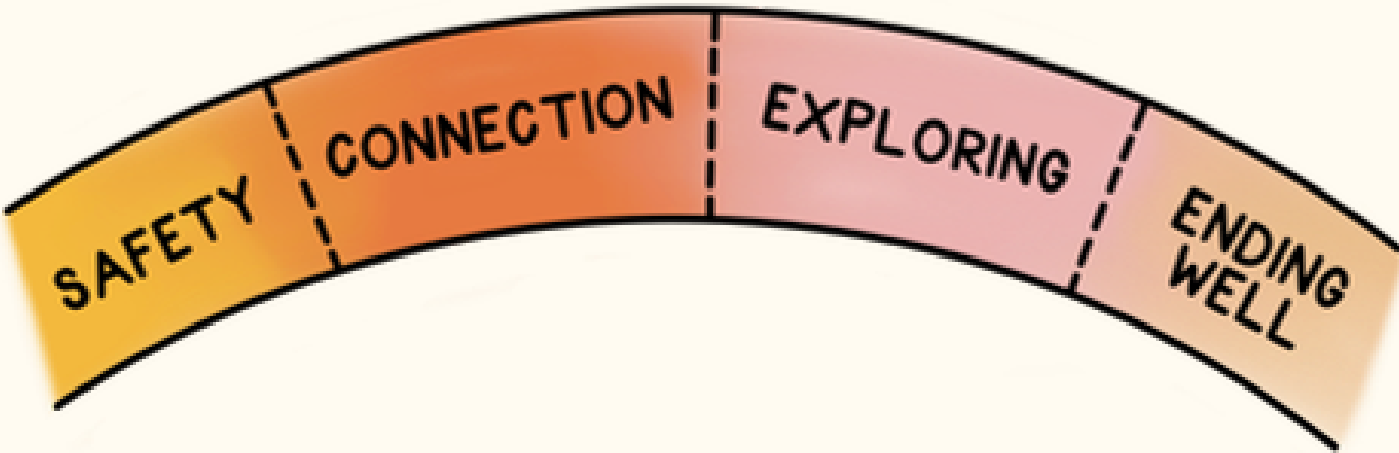
At the heart of this guide is a set of fundamental beliefs and guiding principles or values:

Headline Values	Detailed Values	Potential Examples
 Safety	Create conditions where everyone feels safe and supported, both in their relationships and in their sensory experiences.	Alfie sat at the edge of the room playing with his small plastic figures, with no conditions placed on taking part. After eight weeks, once we established a sense of safety, he began to explore new experiences through musical play.
 Acceptance	Value young people as they are and recognise all forms of participation.	As Orla played imaginatively with a train set, a musician played guitar alongside her. This parallel play, with no pressure to perform or mask, created the conditions for a meaningful connection.
 Pupil-Led	Centre young people's voices and choices.	Once the session structure became familiar, Jayden took on the role of holding up the visual choice cards during sessions. He negotiated this leadership role for himself, took it seriously, and it became a core part of his experience of the music session.
 Interest-driven	Value absorbing interests as meaningful points of connection.	Nia had a deep interest in fire alarms: their sounds and patterns. Once we knew this and incorporated it into the sessions, she began using her voice expressively through the microphone, singing about fire alarms, in a way not seen before.
 Co-created	Enable co-creation and shared ownership.	After trying a range of formats, one class decided for themselves that playing on stage as a band, with others dancing and responding as audience, was how they wanted to spend their time together in the project.
 Balance	Balance predictably and flexibility, through responsive, reflective practice.	Once we established the opening routine, Malik chose to begin each session in the sensory room, listening from afar. He then came out to take his verse of the Hello Song when ready, before returning. The predictable structure gave him autonomy over how and when to take part, exploring creative opportunities when he felt confident to do so.
 Playful	Facilitate curiosity and playfulness through creative music-making.	Maya lined up the chime bars and watched them fall like dominoes. The musician accompanied this play, accentuating the movement in their music and building humour and rapport.
 Holistic	Value both musical outcomes and the wider benefits that music can bring.	Through learning turn taking on a djembe drum, Ava understood the concept for the first time. In the supermarket, her dad could then explain it as “their turn, then our turn, like on the drum”, which helped her wait in line and meant the family could spend time together in the community.

Section 4 – Introducing The Arc

The Arc is a flexible framework that brings the values to life. It can be used across a single interaction, a session, a project or a longer programme of work.

It's best used as a framework, rather than a fixed sequence, and in fact different children and young people may move through the Arc in different ways and at different paces.



The Arc in Practice

The Arc can be used across a whole project, a series of sessions, a single session or even a brief interaction:

- You may spend several weeks establishing safety before moving into connection and exploration.
- Within a single session, children and young people may move between connection and exploration several times.
- Even a brief musical exchange can follow the Arc: a familiar greeting (safety), shared attention (connection), a short musical idea (exploration) and a clear ending (ending well).

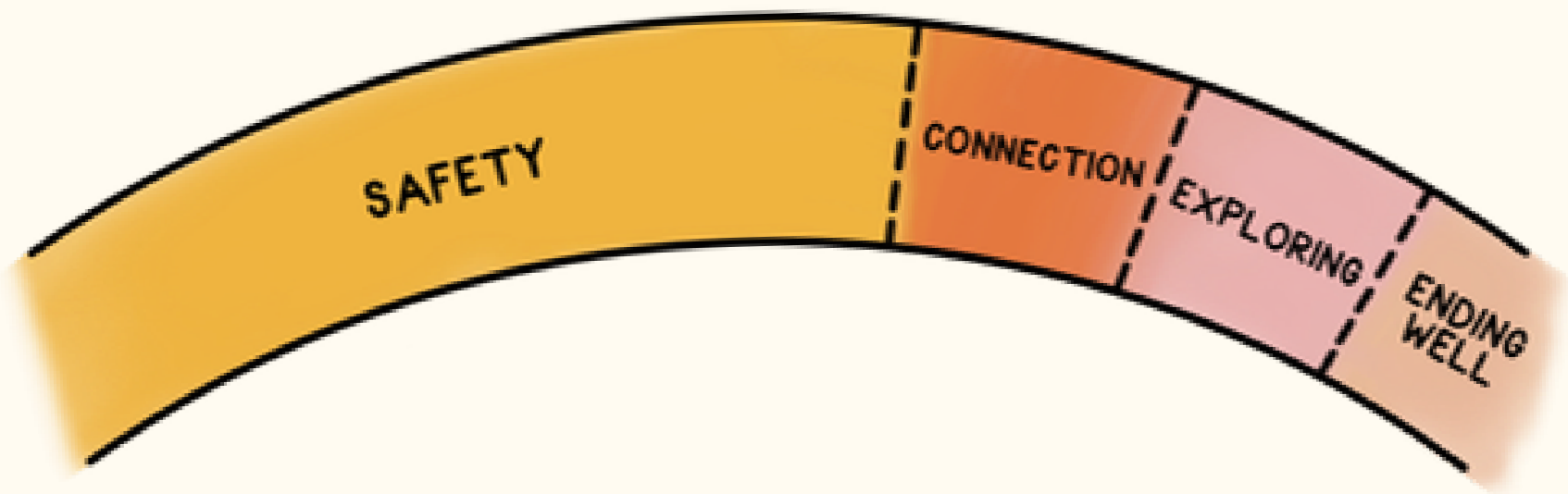
	Safety	Connection	Exploring	Ending Well
What am I aiming for?	Create a calm and predictable start that helps young people feel safe, settle into the space and prepare to take part. Welcome and respect different ways of arriving and engaging.	Notice and value each person’s sense of belonging, contribution, identity and way of participating. Create opportunities for interaction, shared attention and relating.	The main creative part of the session. Encourage curiosity, creativity, exploration, and shared music-making.	Create a predictable ending that supports regulation, reflection and transition out of the session.

	Safety	Connection	Exploring	Ending Well
What does this look like?	Gareth bounces into the space humming and eagerly sits in his seat, asking when the familiar Hello Song will begin. Rhodri comes into the space but chooses to sit outside the circle while his teaching assistant supports him to settle and regulate.	The group take turns listening and responding to each other’s musical ideas using two musical Odd Balls. Lowri chooses not to engage with the Odd Balls when it is her turn, and the adults and children respect and support this.	The musician/class teacher invites pupils to choose from a carefully selected group of instruments and explore whether, where and how they wish to engage with them. Adults and children welcome and celebrate all forms of exploration.	The group sing a familiar Goodbye Song, which they developed. It’s sung at a gradually decreasing tempo and dynamic over several repetitions.

Section 4 – Introducing The Arc

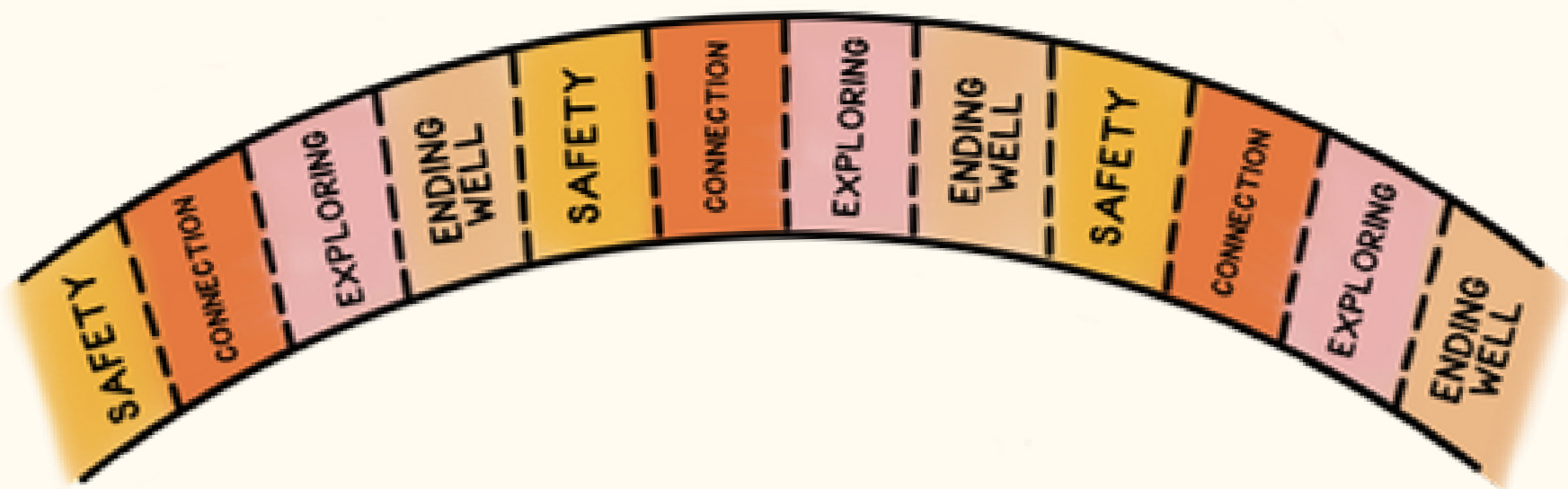
Example 1

Harri spent much of the first eight weeks of a ten-week project playing with his favourite figures alongside the music-making. During the final two sessions, he began joining in with activities focused on connection and exploration, participating in new musical experiences alongside the group.



Example 2

Owain engaged deeply from the start of the project. Within individual sessions, he often moved quickly into connection and exploration, but at times needed to return to familiar routines and a sense of safety before re-engaging in creative play.



Section 5

- Before You Start Checklist

Take time to understand the setting, the children and young people, and the environment, as this helps create the conditions for safe, meaningful and accessible music-making.



Before getting started, consider:

People

- How many children and young people will take part?
- Who will be present and what are their roles?
- What support strategies are already in place?
- What helps this group feel safe, comfortable and ready to engage?

Environment

- What is the physical space like?
- Is a quieter breakout space available if needed?
- Are there any sensory considerations: lighting, smell, texture, acoustics, noise levels or visual distractions?

Communication

- What communication approaches and systems are used in the setting?
- How do children and young people express preferences, choices and needs?



Music

- How is music currently used?
- What instruments, technology or musical resources are available?
- Are there any musical preferences, favourite songs or sounds?

Interests

- What are the current interests and passions of the children and young people? These can be powerful starting points for engagement and music-making.
- How might these provide meaningful starting points for connection and creativity?

Planning and Reflection

- Have you built in time for planning, reflection and discussion with colleagues before, during and after?

Section 6 - What Music Sessions Can Look Like in Practice

Children and young people may engage through listening, watching, moving, exploring, creating or playing. All of these can be meaningful forms of musical participation.

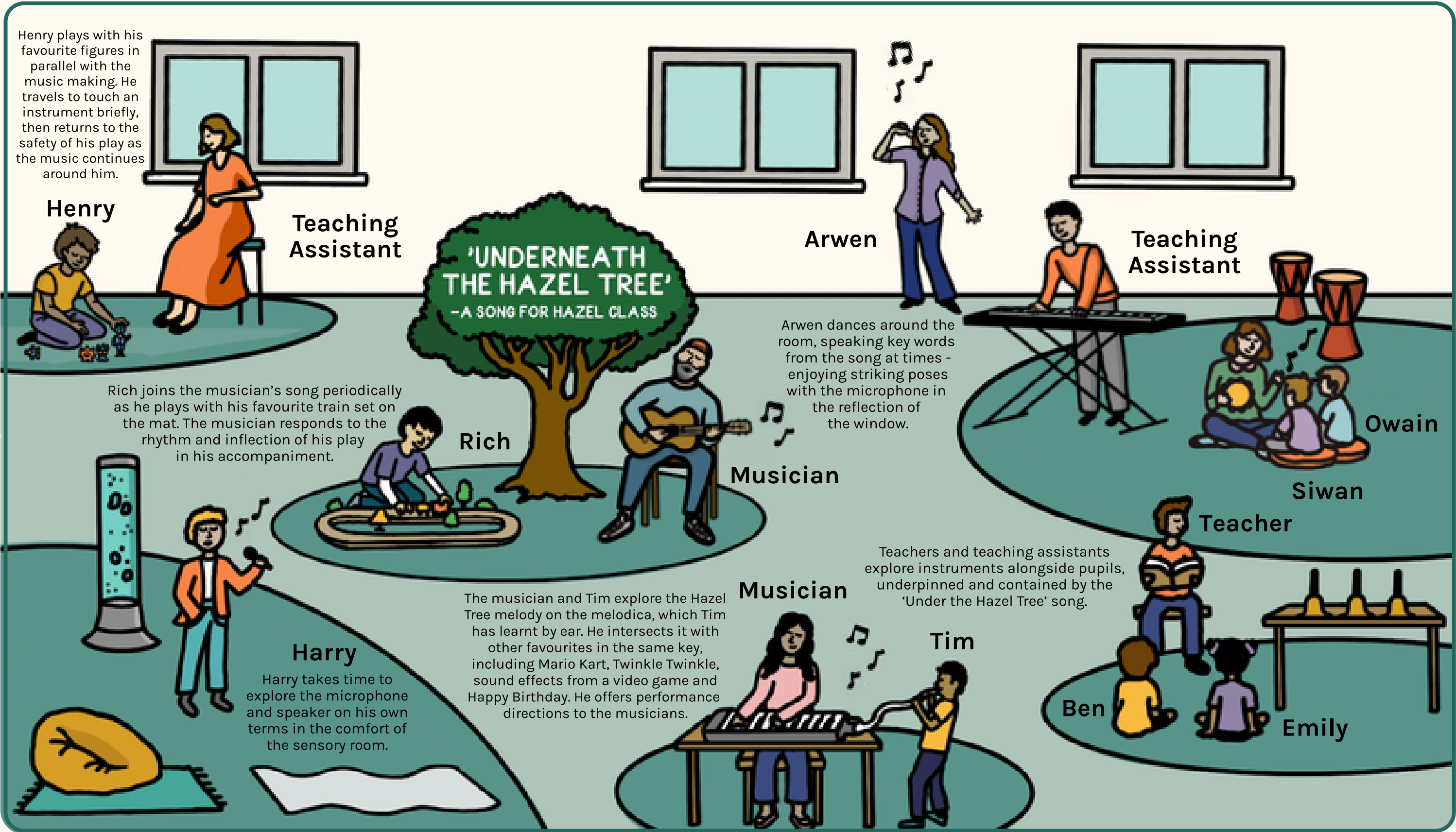


Section 6 - What Music Sessions Can Look Like in Practice

Example 2:

There is an original song being sung, composed with and for the class. Alongside this, a wide range of musical activities and interactions are taking place around the classroom.

The song continues throughout this part of the session and gives a backdrop for the pupils to explore instruments, movement, parallel play, listening and other activities of their choice.



Section 6 - What Music Sessions Can Look Like in Practice

This example emphasises that there is scope for different music and different approaches to co-exist within a session and across spaces. Pupils' interests and passions have guided how each musical space will be inhabited.

Example 3:

There is scope here for different music and different approaches to co-exist within a session and across spaces.

Pupils' interests and passions have guided how each musical space will be inhabited.

"The Loud Room"

While a sensory room might often be a quieter space, the pupil-led approach has dictated this to be a loud space during the project, where pupils can explore extremes of dynamic and intensity and be creative with timbre and feedback.



Breadth of opportunities in the main classroom

Eric autonomously begins experimenting with creating musical sequences using music software on the smart board. He enjoys engaging with colours and patterns and sharing his ideas with the teacher. The teacher interacts by joining Eric's engagement with the musical sequences.

Daniel is enjoying sampling using the Koala app on the iPad independently, then sharing what he has created with the teacher, the musicians and his peers. He transitions to singing a whole song which is heard and celebrated by his peers.



Meg and Gary interact by beginning to explore taking turns at tapping her duck model and exploring ducks (Meg's absorbing interest) on the iPad.

Joseph travels around the space and interacts with different stations he finds interesting, holding a tambourine in his hand which gives voice to the rhythm of his movements. He enjoys the agency to move around and choose where and how he interacts with music.

Guitar Corner

Following pupils' interests in the previous week, Ryan hosts 'Guitar Corner' on the mat where pupils who have already expressed an interest in playing the guitar come together and articulate songs they wish to learn to play or participate in together.



Section 7

- What Changes Adults Notice

This guide encourages practitioners to look beyond traditional ideas of participation and musical success.

As children and young people engage in different ways, staff and families may notice new forms of communication, connection, confidence and musical engagement:

“One child last week went home and tried to tell his family about all the instruments and Mum was absolutely thrilled that he was trying to tell her about his school experience for the first time.”

“Since the workshops started, I have noticed a marked improvement in the children’s ability to find and keep the beat, as well as their overall engagement and enthusiasm during our Charanga lessons. There has also been a clear boost in self-confidence, with several children now willing to perform verses independently in front of the class.”

“I’ve never, ever in my wildest dreams thought that music could be used in that way before, so it’s great to see that it extends far beyond exams, A-levels and classrooms and whenever you’re able to take that into to change behaviour, it can have a very positive effect on the lives of families .”



“Through the music, we found out his likes and preferences ... different things that actually make the children happy ... We’re going to use those things now to make sure that we can support the children better when they do become dysregulated.”

“I was shocked how, week to week, the pupils remembered the songs. Because they weren't songs that they could access without you guys being there. And that shocked me a bit because their attention is not good, you know, as a whole, it's not great.”

“We have one student and his home life wouldn't have been the best and he was actually writing a song about it. It was interesting to see how much he understands what has happened. And he wasn't getting upset by it ... he actually enjoyed performing the song to the adults in the room. He wouldn't ever really speak about it [before]. And if he was annoyed, he wouldn't ever go into why he is annoyed. But when he was given a guitar and a microphone, this is what he did.”



“We had our very first assembly where it was run just by the special needs classes. We actually sang a song ... a couple of years ago we would have been afraid that if we put them up in front of the whole school, it could be a disaster.”

Section 8 - Getting Started



You don’t need specialist equipment, a dedicated music room or a large budget.

Start small and build on existing interests, resources and strengths.



Where to start

The matrix below suggests four possible starting points based on the resources, experience and confidence available in your setting.

Wherever you begin, the arc and values can guide your practice, and you can build from there as your confidence, experience and resources grow.

	Lower confidence or experience	Higher confidence or experience
Higher budget	Arrange a musician-in-residence project to build musical culture in your setting, giving staff and pupils the chance to learn alongside one another. Bring pupils’ passions together with curriculum music, following the arc and values. <i>First step: contact Live Music Now and other organisations or charities about a residency.</i>	Invest in a modest set of instruments offering a range of textures and rhythmic, melodic and harmonic options. Be led by pupils’ interests and passions as you play together, using the arc and values to guide you. <i>First step: choose two or three instruments from the Under £50 or Under £100 lists.</i>
Lower budget	Identify pupils’ interests and passions and bring these to life. Listen to music together, make music from the words and concepts in their interests, or follow pupils’ own musicality once a pulse is introduced. Use the arc and values to guide you. <i>First step: pick one pupil's interest and spend a session making sound around it.</i>	Use instruments you already have or can find, along with natural materials, to explore musical elements such as pitch, rhythm and timbre. Apply the arc and values to shape how you approach a curriculum outcome or subject idea. <i>First step: gather a few found objects and explore their sounds together (see Free and Under £20 below).</i>

Section 8 - Getting Started

The ideas below can help you build your resources over time, from free and found materials through to a modest instrument set and music technology.

Examples of instruments used in Live Music Now music sessions

Free

- A table top
- Recycled materials or found objects e.g. egg box, water bottle, empty box, paper
- Your voice, e.g. whistling, humming, breath, singing
- Your body, e.g. body percussion, clapping
- Free online music technology tools (see right)
- The class iPad (see right)

Under £50

- Melodica e.g. Stagg 32 key
- Chime bar set e.g. A-Star set of 8
- Desktop push bells
- Wireless microphones e.g. Tonor Wireless microphones x 2
- Bluetooth speaker e.g. Anker Soundcore

Under £20

- Sensory scarf pack
- Pack of egg shakers
- Ukuleles
- Tambourines
- Wooden claves



Under £100

- Portable keyboard e.g. Casio CT S100
- Handpan tongue drum e.g. Lekato 15 notes 13 Inch C-Key
- Acoustic guitar
- Djembe style drum

How to create a useful instrument set

- Something melodic - chime bar set or an iPad running Thumbjam
- Something unpitched - a djembe drum
- Harmonic support - a guitar / keyboard
- Something for amplification - speaker and / or microphone

Within each of these it could be useful to have a range of textures and timbres, e.g. wood, metal, soft, sharp etc.

If you have iPads:



[Thumbjam](#) - many high quality sounds and hundreds of editable musical scales with a simple and colourful interface



[Bloom](#) - create and explore unique patterns and melodies by simply tapping the screen



[Odd balls](#) - bluetooth MIDI controller balls that can be paired with an iPad for tactile and playful music making



[Garageband](#) - music-making app which spans song creation and real time high quality instrument playing, often comes preloaded on new iPads



[Clarion](#) - innovative and customisable musical instrument



[Echo String](#) - accessible strummed instrument



[LaunchPad](#) - grid-based, beat-making looping instrument



[Koala Sampler](#) - play and experiment with sounds you record into the iPad

For your smart board:

[Creatability suite](#) - web browser-based accessible music-making tools, spanning body tracking synths, virtual glockenspiel, drawing to sound, and lite version of Clarion (see above)

[Chrome Music Lab](#) - lets users explore concepts like rhythm, melody and soundwaves

[Ableton Learning Music](#) - platform designed to teach the fundamentals of music to beginners with no prior experience

[Patatap](#) - audio-visual synthesizer turning your keyboard into a musical instrument

Section 9 – Finding Support and Further Resources

You don't have to do this alone. Need to persuade your head teacher/senior leadership team? [Download our one-page summary](#) to help start a conversation.

Schools and specialist settings tell us that limited time, resources, budget and musical expertise can make it difficult to develop music-making opportunities. A range of support is available, including:

Music Hubs and Music Services

In the survey that formed part of the research for this guide, only 36% of settings reported having contact with their local Music Hub or Music Service. Yet these organisations can provide valuable support through teaching, training, resources, partnerships and progression opportunities for children and young people.

England

Find your local Music Hub in the [Arts Council England music hubs webpages](#).

Wales

Find your local Music Service through the [National Music Service Wales](#).

Northern Ireland

Contact the [Education Authority Music Service](#).

Scotland

Find information at [We Make Music Scotland](#).



National Music Education Context – England, Wales

[The Power of Music to Change Lives: A National Plan for Music Education](#) in England

The [National Plan for Music Education](#) in Wales

Both emphasise that music education should be accessible to all children and young people.

Resources and Organisations

Live Music Now

Live Music Now is the national charity that led the development of this research and guide. We work with schools, Music Hubs, Music Services and cultural organisations across the UK to develop inclusive music programmes and strengthen workforce practice. We offer musician residencies, training, mentoring, consultancy and project delivery to support inclusive music-making.

[Find out more](#) or contact education@livemusicnow.org.uk

Sounds of Intent

A framework and collection of resources that help practitioners understand, observe and support children and young people's musical development

Tuning in to Autism

Animations, flash cards and songs to support musical play with young autistic children



Sounds Right Resources

A practical guide for inclusive music-making by Adam Ockelford who co-created the Sounds of Intent framework (see above)

Count Me In!

Resources for inclusive group making music with children and young people

Little Amber and Amber Plus

Free activity cards and resources to enable children and young children to engage with music

Jessie's Fund Resources

Resources to help you use music for play, learning and emotional connection with children

Guide to using iPads to make music from Drake Music

Section 9 – Finding Support and Further Resources

[MEHEM Uprising Resource Balloon](#) - a comprehensive resource for anyone making music in inclusive settings

[Charanga](#) - online music resources and curriculum support, including for SEND provision. Ask your local Music Service or Music Hub if they can provide access.

[Oak National Academy](#) - free online practical and inclusive music curriculum resources

[Open Up Music](#) - develops accessible instruments, resources and programmes, including Open Orchestras and the National Open Youth Orchestra, for young disabled musicians

[Soundabout](#) - provides music-making, training and resources for Learning Disabled people with complex support needs.

Research, Reading and Listening

- Loud Hands: Autistic People, Speaking, The Autistic Self Advocacy Network (ASAN) (2012), The Autistic Press
- Music & Autism: Speaking for Ourselves , Michael B. Bakan (2021), Oxford University Press.
- Autistic Knowledge: A Discussion from a UK Context, Natalie Cairns-Ratter (2025), Sentio Journal, 7, p. 11-23.
- [Universal Design for Learning Guidelines](#) [Online], (2026), CAST
- Disability and Accessibility in the Music Classroom: A Teacher's Guide, Alexandria Carrico and Katherine Grennell (2023), Routledge.

- It Takes All Kinds of Minds: Fostering Neurodivergent Thriving at School, Rachael Davis, Claire O'Neill and Sue Fletcher-Watson (Eds) (2026), Routledge.
- Creating a Neurodiversity-Affirming Classroom: Easy Ways to Achieve Access, Agency, and Wellbeing for All, Kara Dymond (2025), Jessica Kingsley Publishers.
- Autistic Music, Musicking, and Musicality, Jon William Fessenden (2019), Journal of Literary & Cultural Disability Studies, 13, p. 1-19.
- Towards autistic flow theory: A non-pathologising conceptual approach, Brett Heasman, Gemma Williams, Divine Charura, Lorna G. Hamilton, Damian Milton, & Fergus Murray (2024), Journal for the Theory of Social Behaviour, 54(4), p. 469-497.
- Universal Design for Learning in Music Education, Ryan M. Hourigan, Alice M. Hammel, and Elise Hackl-Blumstein (2024), Conway Publications.
- [Middletown Centre for Autism \(2026\), Podcast Series \[Online\]](#)
- Music, Language and Autism, Exceptional Strategies for Exceptional Minds, Adam Ockelford (2013), Jessica Kingsley Publishers.
- [The impact of autism on musical development](#), Adam Ockelford (2023 video)
- A Strength-Based Guide to Supporting Autistic Children, Clare O'Neill (2012), Jessica Kingsley Publishers.
- Neuroqueer heresies: notes on the neurodiversity paradigm, autistic empowerment, and postnormal possibilities, Nick Walker (2021), Autonomous Press.



Section 10

– From Practice to Policy

This guide is one output of our Musical Connections research. It is accompanied by a series of policy briefings, summarising the key findings and exploring how music education systems, policies and services can better support autistic children and young people in Autism Resource Bases (ARBs) and other specialist provision.

Together, the guide and policy briefings aim to support change at both a practice and system level.

Download the policy briefings and share them with colleagues, school leaders, or local decision-makers who can help drive change.

Although our research did not explore Scotland's policy context, we hope the toolkit will be useful to colleagues working in specialist provision in Scotland.



[England Policy Briefing](#)

[Wales Policy Briefing](#)

[Northern Ireland Policy Briefing](#)

[Short guide for policy makers](#)

Acknowledgements

The toolkit was created as part of a twelve-month research collaboration between Live Music Now and University of South Wales, funded by the AHRC Hub for Public Engagement with Music Research at the University of Southampton.

Our sincere thanks to:

- Alan Chappell-Williams, Lead Curriculum Officer, Cardiff Council
- Anita Holford, communications and editing, [Writing Services](#)
- Associate Professor Carmel Conn, University of South Wales
- [Centre for Music Education and Social Justice, University of Southampton](#)
- Dr Alex Lucas
- Emily, illustration and graphic design, [@21andsensory](#)
- Gary Day, [Garden of Music](#)
- Live Music Now musicians Cheylene Murphy, Daisy Evans, Megan Rushbrook, Ryan McGroarty
- Porth Community School, Rhondda Cymon Taf, South Wales - pupils, staff and parents/guardians
- Professor Adam Ockelford, University of Roehampton
- Project Steering group: Banji Ibidapo, Fatima Lahaam, Maddie Morris
- St Dallan's Primary School, Warrenpoint, Northern Ireland – pupils, staff and parents/guardians
- Specialist Provision Service, Education Authority, Northern Ireland

THANK
YOU!

Photo credits: Adrian Mullan, Amped Vision

Glossary

Universal Design for Learning (UDL)	An approach to learning and teaching which embraces a range of flexible modes of engagement and participation for all learners. For example, instead of asking pupils who know the answer to raise their hands, a UDL approach might welcome a pupil to speak the answer, demonstrate their understanding through their actions, or write down an answer.
Pathology paradigm	A common way of understanding autism and disability that has shaped thinking for some time. It sees autism or disability as a problem within the person.
Neurodiversity paradigm	A way of understanding autism as a natural and valuable neurological variation. It suggests there is no such thing as a normal brain, and values difference and diversity.
Neurodiversity-affirming	Approaches to practice which value difference, recognise and build on strengths, provide accommodations, and embrace authentic identities.
Strength-based	Approaches to practice which take a holistic view of an individual’s strengths and challenges. Strengths are identified and valued, adaptations are made to the environment, and efforts made to remove constraints.
Monotropism	A tendency to focus attention deeply on a small number of things. A common part of autistic experience which is increasingly understood and researched.
Flow	Flow states are heightened moments of concentration, motivation and enjoyment, where a person becomes totally absorbed in what they are doing. There is growing interest in the close connection between autistic experience, absorbing interests and flow states, with many aspects of autistic experience closely matching flow states.
The Double Empathy Problem	This theory shows that social communication difficulties between autistic and non-autistic people are a two-sided issue, not a one-sided deficit. The problem lies in the mismatch between neurotypes not a deficiency or problem in autistic people.