

# Good Vibrations:

## The long-term impact of a prison-based music project

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*'The project has definitely made me more confident in the way I deal with people...and even in my own ability... I've been more open to learning other things, because I am capable of learning'.*

Good Vibrations Gamelan in Prisons Project participant, June 2008.

**There is growing awareness amongst policy makers and those working in the criminal justice system of the contribution that can be made by the arts in prisons, in particular by more innovative projects that are often provided by charities and voluntary organisations. Numerous research studies have suggested that projects — such as music and art programmes — that offer participants a creative outlet have a positive impact on offenders, not least by encouraging them to engage with further learning and education. The need to consider fully the long-term impact of such projects has been highlighted in reports commissioned by the Department for Culture, Media and Sport, Department for Education and Skills, and the Arts Council England<sup>1</sup>, which further suggest that research that tracks participants over time is the most appropriate way to assess the real impact of projects in prison.**

This study has aimed to do this by looking at the long-term effects of the Good Vibrations Gamelan in Prisons Project on project participants, during the remainder of their sentence. Good Vibrations is part of a music charity — the Firebird Trust — which aims to 'inspire and empower people through creative involvement in music making.' Good Vibrations uses gamelan percussion music from Indonesia, and provides intensive, usually week-long courses. Previous research<sup>2</sup> has shown that participating in the project has a number of positive effects on prisoners, but whether these effects are sustained longer-term has never previously been investigated.

### The Good Vibrations Gamelan in Prisons Project

Good Vibrations projects typically run over one week for around fifteen-to-twenty prisoners on average. They are available to any prisoner (or, in some prisons, to targeted groups for example the unemployed, the very low-skilled, people in touch with mental health teams, self-harmers), do not require any musical training prior to participation and for many prisoners will be their first experience of education in the prison setting. As well as learning how to play traditional pieces of gamelan music, participants create their own compositions as a group. They also learn about Indonesian culture and associated art-forms (e.g. shadow puppetry, Javanese dance). At the end of the week, prisoners perform a concert to which staff, peers, family members and others are invited. Over the last five years Good Vibrations has worked in twenty-four secure institutions across the UK, including Category A, B and C prisons, young offenders institutions and secure hospitals. Findings from previous evaluations have highlighted that the project increases participants' confidence and social skills and empowers them to seek further education and training opportunities.

### Methodology

Against the background of this previous research, this study aimed to explore the impact of taking part in a Good Vibrations project on participants in the longer-term while still in prison, adopting a qualitative approach, from the perspective of prisoners who took part and also of the staff who worked with the project. Using interviews with prisoners and staff and having the prisoners complete a specially designed emotional scale, this study aimed to explore the following:

- ❑ To what extent participation in a Good Vibrations project helped prisoners cope with life in prison on completion of the project.
- ❑ To assess whether participation in a Good Vibrations project enabled prisoners to engage

1. Hughes, J. (2005). *Doing the arts justice: A review of research literature, practice and theory*. The Unit for Arts and Offenders Applied Theatre Research; Miles, A. and Clarke, R. (2006). *The arts in criminal justice: A study of research feasibility*. University of Manchester: Centre for Research on socio cultural change.

2. Digard, L., Graf von Sponeck, A. & Liebling, A. (2007). *All Together Now: The therapeutic potential of a prison-based music programme*. *Prison Service Journal*, Issue 170; Eastburn, C. (2003). *Gongs behind bars: Evaluation report of the Good Vibrations Gamelan in Prisons pilot project 2003*. Wellingore: The Firebird Trust; Wilson, D. & Logan, M. (2006). *Breaking Down Walls – The Good Vibrations Project in Prison*. Birmingham: Centre for Criminal Justice Policy and Research.

with additional training and education opportunities.

- To assess and quantify any emotional, psychological and behavioural changes experienced during a Good Vibrations project and whether these changes were sustained six months after participation.

Two prisons took part in this research: HMPs, Dovegate and Grendon. HMP Dovegate is a male Category B training prison, and a privately run prison, operated by Serco. It is a relative newcomer to Good Vibrations, with three projects having been run there to date. HMP Grendon opened in 1962 and started out as an 'experimental' psychiatric prison to provide treatment for prisoners with antisocial personality disorders. In recent years, it has adopted an approach more in line with the rest of the prison estate, whilst keeping its unique regime of therapeutic care for offenders. As part of this regime it regularly utilises a range of projects to engage prisoners with the arts while undergoing therapy. HMP Grendon is a Category B prison, housing 235 prisoners in six autonomous therapeutic communities on separate wings of the prison.

Prisoners who had participated in a Good Vibrations project were interviewed, along with staff who were involved in facilitating the Good Vibrations team coming to the prison. Interviews were also conducted with staff who knew the participants and could therefore provide further insight into any changes that might have been made. Field research was undertaken at, firstly, HMP Grendon, some six months after a Good Vibrations project had been run there. Not only did the research team have good relations with staff working at HMP Grendon, but also the culture of the prison itself is one that welcomes and supports independent research. Participants there were interviewed at length and were asked: to describe their experiences of the project; what they gained from it; and specifically to focus on their experiences and behaviour after the project. The research team interviewed seven participants in total, and spoke with several members of staff. Interviews were then conducted at HMP Dovegate so as to triangulate the results from HMP Grendon.

Given the focus of the research was to assess and quantify any potential emotional and psychological changes experienced during the project and whether these changes were sustained six months after participation, an emotion scale was developed by the research team using a representative sample of words derived from

commonly-used emotion taxonomies<sup>3</sup>. Participants were then asked to complete the emotion scale at three points during the interview, considering twelve different emotions on a five point Likert scale: anger; anxiety; boredom; calmness; contentment; feelings of depression; happiness; loneliness; moodiness; sadness; shyness; and stress. For example:

This week I generally feel:

Calm	
1.	Strongly disagree
2.	Disagree
3.	Neither agree nor disagree
4.	Agree
5.	Strongly agree

Participants completed the scale when discussing events before, immediately after, and six months after the Good Vibrations project. The interview schedule was developed in such a way that participants were required to discuss the project in a logical time sequence — before, during and after — to enhance memory recall of emotions at each specific time point. For example, participants were asked to describe the first day of the project in detail to encourage accurate memories of how they felt at that time. In order to circumvent any problems with participants' literacy, the emotion scales were completed verbally with the researcher.

During interview, participants were also asked to explain various aspects of their behaviour, attitudes, and activities in the six months since completing the project. In order to assess the quality of this information, and provide a modest form of internal data triangulation, prison officers who had taken part in the project were interviewed about their experiences. Additionally prison officers and psychology staff who regularly work with the prisoners who had taken part in the project were asked to comment on the general attitudes, behaviour, and activities of the participants in the past six months. This information was used in conjunction with the emotion scale to assess whether emotional and psychological changes experienced by participants correlated with actual behavioural change as witnessed by prison staff. Data collected from the interviews and emotion scales work together to build a clearer picture of the effect of the project on participants. Therefore, data from both sources is discussed simultaneously in the research findings.

3. Lisetti, C. (2002). *Personality, affect and emotion taxonomy for socially intelligent agents*. In Proceedings of FLAIRS 2002. CA: AAAI Press; Hobbs, J. & Gordon, A. (2008). *The Deep Lexical Semantics of Emotions*. 6th International conference on Language Resources and Evaluation. Marrakech, Morocco, May 27, 2008.

## Research findings

The participants at HMP Grendon were all adult males, who had taken part in the Good Vibrations project whilst undergoing treatment as part of the therapeutic regime of the prison. It was clear from participants that the Good Vibrations project fitted in very well with the regime as part of the therapeutic programme and the benefits from the project complemented the aims of a therapeutic community. While Good Vibrations clearly embodies much of the ethos of HMP Grendon, it is also important to note that all participants who were interviewed highlighted the impact the project had made upon them, over and above the other therapeutic activities within Grendon. Participants did not see the Good Vibrations project simply as an extension of the regime at Grendon, but as a different and beneficial experience that they were keen to discuss in vivid detail.

Two adult male participants were interviewed at HMP Dovegate to provide some triangulation of the data from Grendon. Similar to reports at HMP Grendon, both participants at HMP Dovegate emphasised that the Good Vibrations project had been a different and beneficial experience and they were keen to discuss this in vivid detail. Furthermore, they reported experiencing the project as a complete removal from everyday prison life, rather than simply part of the regime.

A number of findings emerged from the study regarding how prisoners felt about their experience of taking part in the project. These findings add support to previous studies, showing that while there are a range of reasons that people decide to take part in the project, a large part of what keeps them motivated to complete the project is to do with the enthusiasm of the tutors, the style of delivery, and the meditative quality of the music. As the main focus of this research was to assess the longer-term effects of taking part in a Good Vibrations project, these findings are discussed in detail below.

### **Relationships with staff in the six months following completing the project**

For security reasons prison staff were required to be present during the project. Having staff present was

reported to be inhibiting at first, but eventually the staff also joined in and this was reported to remove much of the inhibition felt by participants. One participant reported that staff had even enjoyed participating so much that they came in on their day off, which was the last day of the project. Such incidences made staff seem less of a remote 'authority figure', which was particularly important for those new to the Grendon regime.

The impact on prisoners' perceptions and relationships with staff was an important outcome of the Good Vibrations project as afterwards they felt they had something in common and it was important to see others get involved. This enabled a relationship of trust to develop between staff and prisoners, as prisoners began to see staff as 'human' rather than 'just a uniform':

*Previously, I despised staff, see them as authority, never really got into talking to them but now am on first name basis, interacting a lot more because [during the project] I didn't just see them as staff I saw them as people. That was a big eye opener.*

Indeed, participants were surprised how well staff got involved in the gamelan sessions.

This view was held across the participants and represented a change in the nature of how staff and prisoners interacted:

*This is hard for me to say you know....but the staff were brilliant, interacting, playing the music, getting involved and getting us there on time. To begin with they didn't want to get involved.....but towards the end they got involved and it is nice to see.*

Prisoners also reported that relationships with other staff who had not been involved in the project improved. Seemingly once prisoners begin to see past the uniform, they are able to judge all prison staff as individuals. At the time of interview — around six months after the project — both participants and staff reported that these improvements in relations had been sustained.

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### **Confidence, communication, and social skills in the six months following completing the project**

Perhaps one of the most significant findings to emerge from this study is the general improvement in social skills reported by participants and observed by prison staff, even six months after the project. This in itself is not a new finding, as previous research<sup>4</sup> found that graduates of Good Vibrations projects showed improvements in social skills. It does however confirm that these improvements are sustained, at least in the prison setting. Participants reported an increased empathy and bond with other participants and staff, which translated into a willingness to communicate with a wider variety of inmates. Allied to this, of those reporting any level of shyness on the emotion scale, all but one considered they felt less shy by the end of the project and that this feeling had — to some extent — continued up to the point of being interviewed for this research some six months later.

Participants spoke of the importance of developing skills beyond that of learning to play instruments, namely listening and communication skills, which with hindsight, many reported they never really had before. They also cited learning to work in a group and being aware of others' needs as important. These skills were felt to be applicable in therapy groups and in their day-to-day life in prison. Interacting with others during the project continued on the wing and in other activities, for some owing to their increased confidence in speaking to others and for others because they had learnt to value the opinions of other people. The project succeeded in altering participants' perception of others, in enabling them to learn the value of allowing others to express their feelings and making them feel more comfortable around people they hadn't met before. This was particularly useful within the therapeutic regime at Grendon, as it was described as 'all part of the journey'.

Participants also reported a positive impact in a wider sense on their relationship with their families, through telling them about the Good Vibrations project and subsequently demonstrating their achievements through the concert and CD. Seeing this reassured families about the behavioural changes their

imprisoned relative was going through and some reported that this brought them closer together.

Staff broadly confirmed the improvements in communication, confidence and social skills reported by participants. The majority of participants directly attribute these changes to the project as it provided them with an unpressured and unthreatening environment in which to develop. Interestingly several participants commented that they had not anticipated the level of impact the project would have on them.

### **Skills development, training and education in the six months after completing the Good Vibrations project**

All participants expressed a great degree of pride and sense of achievement at having completed the course, and in particular having had the courage to take part in the concert in front of inmates and staff on the final day. In the past many participants had started other courses or programmes that for various reasons they had not completed. Completion and presenting their skills gave participants 'a sense of achievement and wellbeing'. As a result of this sense of achievement, six months after completing the project participants stated they were more confident to learn other things and more open to the idea of developing other skills. The

concert was cited as a pivotal point, in that participants were nervous but felt it was important to be taken 'out of their comfort zone.'

For some, this sense of empowerment had encouraged them to consider other courses and they had begun to be proactive at learning other skills. This was clearly demonstrated by one participant who contacted the county library to get more information on Indonesian culture, whilst another gave up smoking in order to save up for a guitar. Others had taken part in and made active moves towards educational courses offered within the prison.

Participants compared the project to a range of other courses, both educational and arts-based. Some reported they felt other courses were inflexible and didn't allow participants to have a voice and express their opinions. The personal gains from Good Vibrations were cited as being as important as learning

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4. Digard, L., Grafon von Sponeck, A. & Liebling, A. (2007). All Together Now: The therapeutic potential of a prison-based music programme. *Prison Service Journal*, Issue 170.

practical skills or educational attainment, but also served to highlight that learning had taken place in a highly enjoyable and rewarding way. This enjoyment, combined with the sense of achievement, encouraged the moves towards further learning, training and education mentioned above. One participant succinctly described the Good Vibrations project as 'a stepping-stone to other education'.

Making prisoners more culturally aware was also felt to be important, particularly as prisons were described as often being 'culturally dead' unless prisoners made the effort to be proactive and get involved in things like Good Vibrations.

**Emotional, psychological, and behavioural change in the six months after completing the Good Vibrations project**

As discussed above, the results of the emotion scales confirm that many of the positive changes reported by participants and staff have been sustained. As none of the participants were reported as demonstrating significant behavioural issues immediately prior to the Good Vibrations project it is not possible to assess whether improvements in reported levels of emotions such as anger and calmness have resulted in significant behavioural change. However, what can be noted regarding behavioural change is that measurements of decreased shyness and loneliness are supported by staff who reported greater social interaction and improved social skills of those who had participated on the project. Additionally, the project had resulted in active behavioural change for the majority of participants who have gone on to engage in some form of further learning.

In terms of how prisoners continued to deal with prison life in the months after the project, generally they reported positive outcomes in their behaviour and dealing with personal problems, which many felt would have longer-term impacts after their sentence in all areas of their lives:

*Taking part has given me a push to work harder, I've come from a background of drink and drugs and violence and that's all I have*

*ever really known so to feel good about meself in positive way was something new to me ... I'm capable of doing better things.*

In addition to the positive changes discussed above, the emotion scale also assessed participants' levels of boredom, anxiety, happiness, and contentment. Interestingly, participants reported being less bored even six months after the project. Unsurprisingly participants felt engaged at the end of the project, and this lack of boredom continued —

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decreasing only slightly — at least up until the time they were interviewed. It is possible that this is a result of the participants becoming interested in new hobbies and activities. Furthermore, the majority reported decreases in feelings of anxiety. Some attributed this to their increased ability to keep calm, while others suggested that they simply felt more comfortable in their surroundings and with other people. This could be accounted for by the fact that participants had by this time spent longer at Grendon and so felt more at ease. While most participants reported feeling generally happy

prior to taking part in the Good Vibrations project, those that felt unhappy reported feeling significantly happier both immediately after the project and longer-term. Similarly, those participants who felt discontented with life at HMP Grendon before the project reported feeling very contented at interview. In summary, participants reported positive emotional and behavioural changes across the board and, where it was possible to comment, these changes were confirmed by staff.

**Conclusions**

Previous research<sup>5</sup> found that participants in a Good Vibrations project at HMP Brixton developed the desire to change and felt that they had the ability to do so. This study demonstrates that many participants have actually put that desire to change their behaviour into action. The key findings from this research suggest that six months after completing a Good Vibrations project participants experienced:

5. Wilson, D. & Logan, M. (2006). *Breaking Down Walls – The Good Vibrations Project in Prison*. Birmingham: Centre for Criminal Justice Policy and Research.

- ❑ Greater levels of engagement and an increased openness to wider learning;
- ❑ Improved listening and communication skills;
- ❑ Improved social skills and increased social interaction;
- ❑ Improved relationships with prison staff; and
- ❑ Decreased levels of self-reported anger and a greater sense of calmness.

In short, the study concludes that participating in a Good Vibrations project has a sustained and positive emotional and psychological impact on participants, leading to positive behavioural change. The participants interviewed at HMP Dovegate confirmed that the results reported from prisoners at HMP Grendon could be replicated outside of a therapeutic community. This suggests that expanded support for innovative projects like Good Vibrations would have significant benefits for prisons and the prison system as a whole.

Given recent recommendations that the most appropriate way to assess the real impact of projects in prison is to track participants over time<sup>6</sup>, it would be advantageous to follow this 'Grendon sample' of Good Vibrations participants as they progress through the penal system, and then after they are released back into

the community. Additionally, as it appears that Good Vibrations projects have a positive impact upon participants in a variety of prison settings we recommend broadening this work out to compare the effects on participants of Good Vibrations projects in other prisons. We also recommend that the emotional scale developed for this research is a suitable tool to be incorporated into any further evaluations undertaken about the impact of Good Vibrations.

Some of the benefits to Good Vibrations participants appear to be specific to participation in gamelan music. However, it should be noted that some important beneficial aspects of the Good Vibrations approach are likely to be replicable in other projects. These include: the style of facilitation (including the ability for participants to shape the learning experience to a large extent); the performance of the music to an audience; and the opportunity to share their achievement with family and friends (in this case a CD of the performance). We therefore suggest that projects that share these characteristics are likely to have positive impact upon offenders.

*A copy of the emotion scale developed for this research is available from the authors. Please Email [laura.caulfield@bcu.ac.uk](mailto:laura.caulfield@bcu.ac.uk)*



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6. Miles, A. and Clarke, R. (2006). *The arts in criminal justice: A study of research feasibility*. University of Manchester: Centre for Research on socio cultural change.