

Two Rhythms Independent Evaluation

Dr Steve Walden

Prof Emily Underwood-Lee

University of South Wales

19th June 2025



University of
South Wales
Prifysgol
De Cymru

This page is intentionally left blank.

CONTENTS

Thanks	1
About the Authors	1
Executive Summary	2
Introduction	3
Background.....	3
Partners and funders.....	3
Objective of the research	3
Context	4
Methods.....	4
Research design.....	4
Data collection – focus groups	5
Data analysis.....	5
Findings	6
Themes – first order.....	6
Sub themes – second order	8
Discussion	18
Opportunities for the future	19
Challenges	19
Summary and recommendations.....	20
Works cited.....	22

THANKS

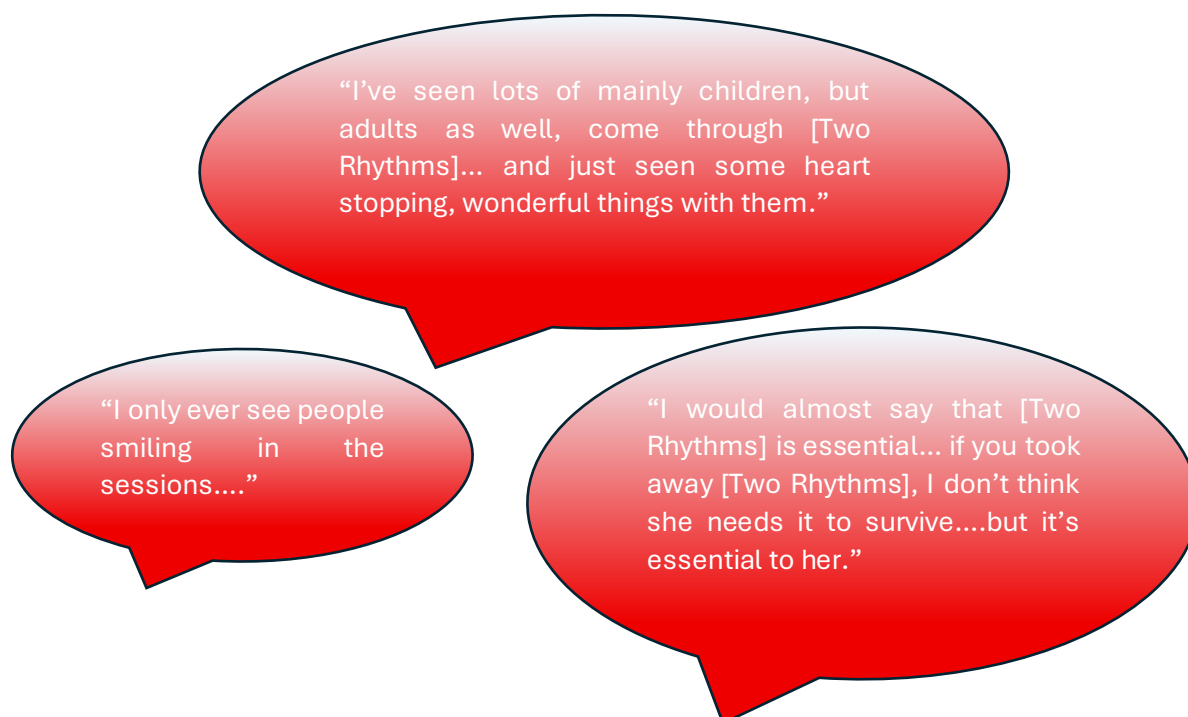
Thanks go to Two Rhythms' team, who gave their time to participate in this research and to allow us to witness their practice. We were endlessly inspired by the commitment and integrity of the whole Two Rhythms team, but special mention must go to Gray Hill and Hiroko Uenishi whose generosity, openness, and collaboration have been fundamental to the success of this research. Thanks also to the Community Foundation Wales for funding this research and seeing the value in the work. Finally, and most importantly, thanks to all the guests at Two Rhythms and those who support them, who have given abundantly of their time and honestly reflected on their experiences.

ABOUT THE AUTHORS

Steve Walden is Lecturer in Learning Disability, Faculty of Life Sciences and Education, and a member of the Faculty of Life Sciences and Education, Health, Care, and Well-Being Research and Innovation Group at the University of South Wales. His research interests include learning disabilities nursing, cultural anthropology and ethnography of people with learning disabilities, forensic anthropology and experimental taphonomy, and historicist and psychoanalytical film theory.

Emily Underwood-Lee is Professor of Performance Studies at the University of South Wales, where she is Co-Director of Centre for Storytelling Co-Chair of the 'Violence Against Women, Domestic Abuse, and Sexual Violence (VAWDASV) Research Network Wales', and Chair of the Wales Innovation Network Arts and Humanities Alliance Arts Health and Wellbeing group. She has a particular interest in stories of the maternal, gender based violence, disability, feminist methodologies, health/illness, and heritage.

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY



As the above quotes indicate, Two Rhythms is felt to be more than just another intervention - it is a transformational, and life enhancing experience for the guests that come to sessions and also for the wider community that care for Two Rhythms' guests including family, kinship groups, and professionals. A limitation of this written report is that it is not possible to capture the emotion with which people spoke about Two Rhythms in focus groups, but it should be noted that emotions were deeply and profoundly felt and the passion and esteem in which the organisation is held was apparent in everyone we spoke with.

In this report, we have presented the findings from focus groups and observation of Two Rhythms' sessions. The findings are organised thematically, and each theme offers a valuable insight into the impact of the work of Two Rhythms; however, impacts can broadly be understood to be in the areas of facilitating connection, enhancing communication, fostering wellbeing, and supporting personal development. All involved in Two Rhythms, from the organisation's own staff, the guests that they support, and the professionals and family who work with those guests in their home and social environments, highlight the profound importance of attending Two Rhythms' sessions and the power that they have to support personal development, to impart transferable skills, and, perhaps most importantly, to bring joy. Everyone we spoke to noted a unique quality to Two Rhythms, which they often referred to in reverential terms. In our assessment, the combination of enabling creativity and artistic engagement, supporting the development of imagination, and genuinely person centred, compassionate care make Two Rhythms an important and ground-breaking organisation.

Steve *Emily*

Steve Walden, Emily Underwood-Lee

INTRODUCTION

Background

Two Rhythms is an accessible arts charity providing educational and therapeutic programmes for the benefit of people with profound and multiple physical and learning disabilities (PMLD). Sessions are comprised of breathing techniques, massage, music, dance, and relaxation and are responsive to the needs of individual guests.

Previously known as Touch Trust, the charity was founded in 1998 and rebranded as Two Rhythms in 2023. The Two Rhythms method was developed by the organisation founder, Dilys Price, and emerges out of her studies with movement practitioner Rudolph Laban. In early 2024, the charity began discussions with the University of South Wales about how the method might be evaluated. The resulting study, which is detailed in this report, is the first independent, academic study of Two Rhythms to be undertaken in the 25-year history of the organisation.

Partners and funders

This research is carried out by Dr Steve Walden, Lecturer - Learning Disability, and Prof. Emily Underwood-Lee, Professor of Performance Studies, both of the University of South Wales. The research was commissioned by Gray Hill, CEO, Two Rhythms, and Hiroko Uenishi, Head of Programme, Two Rhythms. It was funded by Community Foundation Wales.

Objective of the research

In this project, we undertook to conduct an independent, rigorous research study into the Two Rhythms method in order to provide evidence of

- i. what impacts the method might have,
- ii. how any impacts are achieved, and
- iii. how any impacts might be unique to Two Rhythms.

CONTEXT

Two Rhythms' ethos is that everyone can participate and experience creativity, friendship, and the joy of imagination and that everyone is creative. The charity's experience is that not only does this approach foster the development of cultural capacity for people who live with profound and multiple learning disabilities, it has the potential to advance arts practice and inclusive research with said people through this sensory-dialogical approach. However, until this study, the charity only had anecdotal evidence on which to base these assumptions.

Research has shown that creative interventions can have profound benefits for people living with intellectual disabilities including empowerment (Feniger-Schaal, 2016), enhanced communication (Geiger et al, 2020, Snow et al, 2003), a reduction in problematic interactions and behaviours, and increased physical capacity, particularly in exercises where people move together or mirror one another's movements (Fabian et al, 2024), including in those living with profound and multiple disabilities (Folostina, 2015). However, there is a paucity of literature exploring the impact of the arts by and for the community that Two Rhythms serves – for example, in our analysis of a World Health Organisation scoping review of the arts and health (Fancourt and Finn, 2019) we found only two papers had been considered (out of a total review of 962 articles reviewed) that specifically focussed on the efficacy and impact of arts interventions with and by people with learning disabilities. Two Rhythms' approach of creating experiences and artistic outputs with people with profound and multiple learning disabilities can be seen to recognise the knowledge and expertise of their guests as people who can control their own creative participation.

METHODS

Research design

Our research collaborators at Two Rhythms worked with us to co-produce a series of focus group discourse sessions. Each session focused on Two Rhythms' unique arts-based approach and the impact it has had for people with learning disabilities attending Two Rhythms' sessions, their familial carers, and support staff. Discussions were semi-structured, key points of significance relating to shared experiences were used as starting points for free-flowing conversations exploring their perspectives and those of people with learning disabilities in their lives, to ascertain the nuanced and wider impacts of those experiences for these stakeholders. Finally, we discussed our initial findings as a research team in an impact session focused upon our coproduced research, from the germinal idea, through our research journey, to a discourse on the some of the initial themes that were identified, and finally, reflexively, how our insider knowledges and perspectives had informed that journey, and what it meant to us as researchers, for people with learning disabilities, and on the importance of hearing their collective voice, and that of those supporting them.

Data collection – focus groups

Four focus groups were held between October 2024 and January 2025, which were attended seventeen participants in total. Participants were those with a professional or kinship relationship with a guest of two Rhythms. Focus groups were themed by the type of guests supported and role of the person supporting them and were grouped as outlined in table 1, below.

All focus groups were held in Two Rhythms' premises to ensure that the surroundings were familiar and accessible to participants. Focus groups were facilitated by Emily Underwood-Lee with additional facilitation by Steve Walden.

Date	No. of Participants	Inclusion Criteria	Venue
11/11/24	4 (3 family, 1 professional)	Carers of guests with PMLD who attend Two Rhythms	Two Rhythms (Llanishen)
02/12/24	6 (6 professional)	Staff who work in Two Rhythms membership organisations and facilitate or support Two Rhythms sessions	Two Rhythms (Llanishen)
31/01/24	3 (3 family)	Carers of guests with Autistic Spectrum Disorder who attend Two Rhythms	Two Rhythms (Wales Millenium Centre)
31/01/24	4 (4 professional)	Two Rhythms staff who facilitate Two Rhythms sessions	Two Rhythms (Wales Millenium Centre)

Table 1: focus group participation

Data analysis

Firstly, an inductive reflexive thematic analysis was conducted on transcripts of the discussions (Braun & Clarke, 2006; 2021). This method was chosen to efficiently organise the data set and to describe it in detail, through ongoing reflexive interaction with the data. (Houghton et al., 2017; Barden et al, 2022). Thematic analysis is a method for identifying, analysing and reporting patterns—themes or concepts—within data (Braun & Clarke, 2006). It allows researchers to efficiently organise their data set and to describe it in detail, through ongoing reflexive interaction with that data, in this case the transcripts from the focus group session outlined earlier. Our second step was a deductive framework synthesis, whereby the data is brought together in a framework according to commonalities and differences and second order subthemes are consolidated (grouped) as overarching first order themes. This helps develop descriptions and explanations of the themes constructed from the data (Carroll et al., 2013; Houghton et al., 2017; Ward et al., 2013). Our framework was built by allowing our participants' experiential knowledge of the topics discussed to guide and structure this synthesis. This in and of itself challenges notions of insufficient objectivity. Whilst a certain degree of subjectivity is arguably inherent to interpretative qualitative research by necessity, our participants have lived what they've lived, and they have shared those experiences with us as researchers. The robusticity and validity of our approach lies in transparently and systematically analysing those experiences rather than merely opining on them.

FINDINGS

Themes – first order

Our research found that Two Rhythms is having demonstrable impact in 6 key areas, which are:

Facilitating Connection

We found that Two Rhythms was enabling people with PMLD to connect with their peers and to form friendships that extend beyond the time that is spent at Two Rhythms and into people's daily lives. New and meaningful connections were also facilitated between people with PMLD and those who support them including their families and professionals. Surprisingly, we also found connections were formed between people who did not attend Two Rhythms sessions with guests because they were able to take skills learnt through attending Two Rhythms and apply them in their other social and community relationships.

Enhancing Communication

Two Rhythms enabled the development of meaningful diverse two-way communication and expression, including among those who are non-verbal, which was developed through the sessions and could be applied beyond them in clients' wider contexts. The person-centred and flexible approach taken by Two Rhythms staff was also inspiring more meaningful communication outside of sessions between people with PMLD and those professionals and kin that support them.

Fostering Wellbeing

Every single research participant highlighted that attending Two Rhythms enhanced the wellbeing of the person that they support as well as enhancing their own wellbeing and supporting the development of their professional practice. Many people highlighted that the wellbeing gained from a Two Rhythms session was profound and long-lasting.

Supporting Personal Development

We found that attending Two Rhythms provided opportunities for both Two Rhythms' clients and those that support them to develop new and important skills. This also raised confidence in clients that extended into their daily lives and raised the confidence of those that support them to perform their professional roles.

Developing Creativity

Two Rhythms identifies first and foremost as an arts organisation. We found this principle guided the work that was done and bore fruit in terms of enhancing the creativity of all who attended including people with PMLD, professionals working with people with PMLD and Two Rhythms' own staff. Further, this enhanced creativity was linked to improved wellbeing, communication, social connection, and joy.

Building Trust in Oneself and Others

The trust in Two Rhythms found amongst people who use their services (including guests and those professionals and kin that support them) was exceptional. All those we spoke with were highly enthusiastic about the process and practice and ambassadors for the organisation. They were confident that their needs would be met when they attended sessions through a tailored and flexible approach and that they would be safe and cared for in the sessions. In addition to the highly skilled and empathic staff, the familiarity of the Two Rhythms routine was key in building trust as well as the chances for long-term engagement with the organisation across the client's life course.

In addition to the domains in which we found that Two Rhythms is having an impact, research participants highlighted a number of opportunities for organisational development. Potential for growth exists in areas including: working those beyond the learning disability community, working in mainstream education, and linking with other arts and wellbeing organisations. Challenges that were highlighted included the funding climate, and the need for highly skilled and experienced practitioners to facilitate (e.g. not "watering down" the Two Rhythms method through expansion), and the need to maintain familiar surroundings and wider chances to engage with arts and culture when working in new premises.

Although focus groups were organised into similar groups (e.g. carers of guests with PMLD, staff who work in Two Rhythms membership organisations, carers of guests with Autistic Spectrum Disorder, and Two Rhythms staff), the group sizes were not large enough for a conventional statistical analysis. However, the overwhelming positivity of the themes discussed below were pervasive across all focus group discussions.

Sub themes – second order

2nd Order Theme	1st Order Theme(s)
Connection without division - no us and them	Facilitating Connection
Connection between clients/between peers/friendship	Facilitating Connection/Enhancing Communication
Meaningful diverse two way communication and expression	Facilitating Connection/Enhancing Communication
Person centred/responsive and adaptive/facilitates choice and autonomy	Facilitating Connection/Enhancing Communication/Fostering Wellbeing/Supporting Personal Development
Spirituality	Facilitating Connection/Fostering Wellbeing
Creativity and self expression	Developing Creativity/ Enhancing Communication/ Facilitating Connection
Music and emotion	Developing Creativity/Enhancing Communication/Facilitating Connection
CPD/staff development/raising confidence of carers and families	Supporting Personal Development
Improved engagement within and without (clients)	Supporting Personal Development
Positive influence (clients)	Supporting Personal Development
Transferable skills (clients)	Supporting Personal Development
Raising confidence (clients)	Supporting Personal Development/Fostering Wellbeing
Self esteem and validation/feeling valued	Supporting Personal Development/Fostering Wellbeing
Across the life course	Building Trust In Oneself and Others
Feeling safe	Building Trust In Oneself and Others
Reassuring and welcome routine	Building Trust In Oneself and Others
Reassurance of the familiar	Building Trust In Oneself and Others
Trust in Two Rhythms/trusting in the original approach	Building Trust In Oneself and Others
Finding joy	Fostering Wellbeing
Less disruptive/sustained attention/emotional regulation/euthymia	Fostering Wellbeing

Relaxed and calm	Fostering Wellbeing
Wellbeing of clients/cared for	Fostering Wellbeing
Wellbeing of staff/carers/families	Fostering Wellbeing
Interactions are important to achieve a sense of belonging	Fostering Wellbeing/ Facilitating Connection

Table 2: 1st and 2nd order themes

Below, we outline each of the sub-themes and illustrate them with quotes taken from focus groups. Where no one quote entirely summed up the richness of a particular sub-theme, we have used multiple quotes. To preserve the anonymity of participants, we have redacted certain identifiable details and these are indicated with square brackets.

The sections below, and the data in the table above, has been presented thematically according to how they link to one another and how they align with first order themes. It should be noted that there is significant cross-over between themes, for example, feeling relaxed, being heard, and finding joy could all be seen to contribute to wellbeing, and so on. However, each theme presented below can be seen as having emerged distinctly within the data and we have attempted to capture some of the nuances and differences between them.

The order in which themes are presented in not to be understood as an indication of importance but is chosen in order to enable connections between different themes to become more visible. Given the small sample size, it was not possible to do a statistically significant analysis of theme frequency or importance.

Connection without division - no us and them

“I do it for our individuals and the staff, it’s to give....to provide the wellbeing for us all. I don’t separate us, I say we’re connecting and we’re all one, so that’s how I do deliver my sessions.”

The staff at Two Rhythms do not view themselves as a separate entity from the guests, but rather as connected with them in reciprocity during sessions, much as one would experience between the cast, crew, and director in a theatre or film set rehearsal. There is we, not us and them.

Connection between clients/between peers/friendship

“Her eyes were just shining and she was connecting, and she was amazing....and yes as soon as we started singing together it was that kind of communal thing.”

There is a connection between guests that was described on multiple occasions between different focus groups that began with recognition of peers, transcended through valued interactions, and became friendship. This was recognised by family, care staff, and Two Rhythms staff alike, who know the guests and the nuances of their communication.

Meaningful diverse two way communication and expression

“He knew I was there and the two care team persons were doing the things that he had to be doing, like getting him to stretch and things but he knew I was there, and he kept sort of you know with his one hand sort of, this hand, he would sort of try to touch me and it was almost bringing me into the session.....because he knew I was there and something that was like a whole group of people doing the same thing, rather than everybody scattered, individuals going here, there and everywhere.....and it was actually tuned to his needs and what he understands, rather than just carrying on without him understanding if you know what I mean.”

Communication without words on the most meaningful level was clearly evident between Two Rhythms staff and their guests in all focus group discussions; a true emotive connection that is familiar to arts practitioners. Further, the connection and communication that was modelled in Two Rhythms sessions was being replicated in care and domestic settings by professionals and family members.

“I’ve got a class of non-verbal children, they’re all non-verbal, and we use lots of different communication strategies. Every child has the right to be heard, so we like to encourage them vocal expression. However you can be heard through instruments, so I do find that the part where they get to make their own sound, that they have a choice of instruments and they can make the sound out using any sort of technique and I introduce that into some of my other lessons, so it’s giving them their own voice.”

Person centred/responsive and adaptive/facilitates choice and autonomy

“They see [name of client], a lot of people don’t see [name of client], they see somebody silent, or they see behaviours.....but they are so open here, and it’s just.... they’ve got the sensory approach, so even though we have got a deficit on the language, it doesn’t matter they still have ways to reach him....”

The two Rhythms team value their guest as individuals and each other in their interactions; this is more than just person-centred communication, it is being tuned to who the person is and responding them as who they are. Participants particularly valued the care that was given to adapt activities and sessions according to the needs of guests and to recognise and value each guest’s capabilities and strengths. This was highlighted as something particularly unique to Two Rhythms and contrasted with other, more inflexible, organisations.

“Whether its verbal or non-verbal, you know seeing how people are at and just being able to respond to that....and for me that is the height of the creativity I think within the session.”

Spirituality

“...and to me it does feel spiritual in there. I don’t feel I’m in the day centre, I feel I’m in this room, this lovely room and we’re all just connected and I just feel that we could be anywhere, we are not in that day centre, this is just....to me I feel we’ve got this calmness in the room.”

Spiritual connectedness was alluded to a number of times in focus group discussions. It can perhaps best be described as a warm transcendent sense of oneness couched in all concerned truly valuing one another’s company and wanting to share that.

Creativity and self expression

“It’s so important that she has things like this in her life because they are sensory, they are relationship building, they give her opportunity to express herself in the way that she’s able. I really believe she would have gone down the drama routine if I’d given her the opportunity early enough and probably been a musician as well because the way she is.... but yeah, and its just perfect for [NAME].”

Professionals and family members reported that Two Rhythm’s guests are too often considered unable to engage in artistic creation yet, given opportunity, this was a valued creative output for guests to meaningfully engage. This is perhaps the most unique aspect of the Two Rhythms approach. Creativity and artistic expression in a giving space is foregrounded; this is not arts therapy in the conventional sense, it is true, freeing artistic expressivity that has been opened up for guests that has a therapeutic benefit because of that very quality.

“It might be that we are hearing them play a drum, to them that might be the only way that they can express themselves or dancing or singing, or a movement or something and then we get them to share, and I think sometimes that’s the most powerful thing as well....it’s like their moment to shine, they get to like be seen, be heard.”

Music and emotion

“You may get responses from certain children with particular songs that you wouldn’t get with other songs, so you can tap into their individualised learning styles and personalities a little bit more, which is really nice.”

Music was a channel for artistic expression and emotional connection between Two Rhythms staff and guests and foregrounded a means of connection with emotion at a deeper level. It was also seen as a helpful method for personalising sessions according to guest preferences or the wider learning or environment (e.g. seasonal music, music related to particular topics at school etc).

CPD/staff development/raising confidence of carers and families

“If I’m trained in it, I can just pull it out of the bag and I can do that session myself and actually teach expressive movement to children who don’t have much movement, and that’s what I wanted to learn for my own professional development is how is that done”

Staff at Two Rhythms actively seek to develop their skills and are supported to do so, but also are motivated to do so by the genuine desire to support their guests, and this was recognised by the carers and families of guests. Further, professionals attending Two Rhythms with guests found the techniques useful in their own career development and wider professional practice.

“[The staff] began to learn that [Two Rhythms] makes a big difference to [NAME], and they’ve started to love to go with him you know, that they can see how much he enjoys it....and it also helps them to know how to approach him as well when he’s in their charge.”

Improved engagement within and without (clients)

“He’d get very agitated if we stopped to talk to someone, now it either doesn’t bother him at all or he’s looking as if he’s taking an interest, he doesn’t join in the conversation because he doesn’t speak but [since attending Two Rhythms] he sees it as normal if you like.”

This was a recurrent subtheme. Many families and carers of guests reported that the improved engagement seen by Two Rhythms staff in guests during sessions guests over time followed through into other facets of their lives and thus had a wider enriching experience for all concerned. Several participants also noted that Two Rhythms guests had formed friendships through attending the sessions.

“If somebody else has had a turn, she might clap her hands at somebody you know, after she’s done her bit ... she’s given them a clap, and you’re thinking ‘wow’”

Positive influence (clients)

“So the last few sessions have just gone so well, and you know he’s so familiar with it all and you know, even one time we came in we were something like quite late because there were traffic problems getting here, and that’s something that would normally make him very agitated you know, sort of things like that....but he powered through the different parts of it, and it regulated him you know, he came out of the session much better.”

Two Rhythms was viewed as an overwhelmingly positive experience for guests by all concerned, but the wider positive influence on quality of life for their families and carers as a result was frequently commented upon, and Two Rhythms staff discussed that working there has been a positive influence for them also; they alluded to finding genuine joy in their work.

Transferable skills (clients)

“We started that at home now, and she almost expects it and she has a rest sort of in the afternoon, she will let us know when she’s had enough in her wheelchair, she wants to go on her bed rest, and you know she keeps looking at the ceiling ‘oh where are my little lights’, and the same at night.”

The activities that guests engaged in at two Rhythms gave them skills over time that they could use to engage in like and even new activities in other settings, broadening their scope and their ability to find enjoyment. They also gave important life skills that were difficult for guests to acquire in other settings, as was particularly noted by professionals who had tried other methods but found Two Rhythms to be the most effective.

“The body awareness because....sorry I can’t help but come from the educational perspective of everything, it’s the body awareness.....obviously its all your health and wellbeing but it teaches so much of like PSE at their level, their appropriate level, understanding.....where their arms are, where their legs are, especially with all the different conditions where it takes a lot of effort for them to just raise their arm by having that cognitive ability to do that.”

Raising confidence (clients)

“It’s achievable for a lot of our learners, they get given targets, especially in the education system that they may not get for years, and a Two Rhythm session, if the activity is just breathing, that’s achievable for them and it gives them that willpower to go ‘oh yeah, I can do this’, its achievable for them and it changes their.....you can see, you can see it in their eyes like ‘oh yeah, I did that, I did that really well’.”

Two Rhythms staff noted that guests’ confidence built over time as sessions progressed, and families and carers noted that this confidence became evident in other facets of guests’ lives, foregrounding personal growth.

“The session is like, it’s a sense of a belonging as well isn’t it.....you know, they are part of that group, it’s a belonging, I think that’s really important for their confidence.”

Self esteem and validation/feeling valued

“She just blinked.... but everybody looked at her blinking cos that was her movement, and they clapped, do you know what I mean, so that was for her WOW.”

Feeling valued and validated is important for all of us. Two Rhythms facilitating this ethos of praise, positivity and validation for guests achieving on their own terms was readily apparent in

all discussions. Two Rhythms staff, and guests' families and carers, not only noted the positive impact this had for guests, but they also felt the same appreciation for their own successes.

“Even if I think he’s been a bit naughty today, she’ll say ‘oh you did good exploring’ and its always a positive, it’s very validating for them you know.”

Across the life course

“He feels so comfortable with [NAME], where we’ve been coming for such a long time.”

This subtheme alludes to Two Rhythms benefitting guests across age ranges from childhood to older adulthood, and the further benefits (discussed elsewhere) that this positive influence has for their families and carers. This was felt to be important because, in participants' experience, most interventions and activities were short term or focussed on a very specific age range. It was also felt to be a comfort to have something consistent for guests to attend during major life transitions such as changing school or moving into new accommodation.

“The actual structure is essential.... because that’s... everything goes in a particular order at a particular time, and you know if anything disrupts that then he feels disrupted.”

Feeling safe

“For me it’s more like a ‘right this is the safe place, this is the safe environment and I can express myself freely, and I can be grounded, I can reconnect with myself and others, and this is my little community’.”

A sense of nurturing trust was evoked by families, carers discussing their own experiences and those of the guests that are their loved one or charges in the Two Rhythms space. Two Rhythms staff also allude to this. All concerned felt able to be vulnerable in this supportive atmosphere and be able to grow within it. Family and carers felt that guests were in safe hands, and that guest felt safe. Two Rhythms staff felt safe with one another, and this was felt by guests.

Reassuring and welcome routine

“If they’re coming in every week, they know the format of the session and they get to learn that off each other.”

For many guests discussed in the focus groups, particularly those with neurodivergent needs, knowing that their Two Rhythms session was approaching elicited positive anticipation of enjoyment, and being reassured by a familiar, welcoming and positive experience.

“We use calendars and diaries a lot, and its always there upon the wall when its coming up, and you know he knows that we’re getting ready to go on that day, and he’s keen to do it and he’s keen to move towards the steps when he’s here.”

Reassurance of the familiar

“She got to know the routine, so that gave us an understanding that she knew what was happening, and so that was wonderful, that was amazing.”

As alluded to in the previous subtheme, a regular, familiar and enjoyable experience was a source of reassurance for guests, but also for families and carers know that is what the cared for person would be participating in.

Trust in Two Rhythms/trusting in the original approach

“There’s not enough sessions like Two Rhythms.”

This was alluded to by several families and carers. Whilst guests enjoyed replicated sessions in other settings, the positive reaction and expressed enjoyment was never as great as when in the original two Rhythms setting with trusted and familiar staff.

“So my feeling is you know they’ve said to me ‘[NAME] can go to [Two Rhythms] in the day centre and that won’t cost you any money’, and I’m like ‘no she’s not doing it there, it’s not the same, it’s not as good, it’s not the right environment, and its not the right people’.”

Finding joy

“I was really excited about being trained to become a facilitator to deliver Two Rhythms sessions myself.”

The guests find joy in their sessions. Families and caregivers find joy in the guests’ happiness. Two Rhythms staff find joy in their work. All concerned find joy in the intersections of these spaces.

“By the end of the whole session, he had a smile practically from there to there you know, because he was enjoying it.”

Less disruptive/sustained attention/emotional regulation/euthymia

“Well if he’s agitated, cos he can’t cope with things like waiting, so if we’re out somewhere and he’s struggling with waiting, we would do a little peace and calm mantra, and I know he’s drawing on the feelings that he’s had from being here, and we use the same music that they do in the relaxation session sometimes for bedtime to help him self-soothe to sleep.”

Guests were reported by families and carers to be able to better regulate their emotions during Two Rhythms sessions, and focus their attention for longer, and this was often a sustained effect that was transferred by guests into other settings and aspects of their lives. Staff were also taking many of the techniques they had learnt with guests in Two Rhythms sessions and applying them in their wider work, ensuring benefits cascaded to not only Two Rhythms’ guests but to other people that those staff support.

Relaxed and calm

“It’s teaching them to relax as well because a lot of ours, all their lives are really busy, might have siblings at home, and everybody is rushing around, and I think one lad in particular that we do it with, he was very loud and when he started he’d scream through the session, not being hard work or anything, cos he was excited, it was new to him, he was loving it, but then he found he could express himself in a different way.”

Families and carers reported that guests would often feel calm and relaxed going into Two Rhythms sessions and more so afterward. Two Rhythms sessions were considered to be a rare haven of relaxation within the otherwise complex lives of guests and would have a direct impact on the emotional state of guests long after their Two Rhythms sessions.

Wellbeing of clients/cared for

“Guests have that non-verbal communication and trust, safety and connection and they remember that feeling.”

The wellbeing of guests being a multifaceted primary focus for Two Rhythms was noted in all focus group discussions. This was a source of reassurance and joy for families and carers, and a source of joy and pride in their work for Two Rhythms staff. Caring for guests and supporting their creative expression was reported as a truly actualised *raison d’être*.

“They come out of there happy, their wellbeing is better for them and, I think, it’s the confidence that builds them up and up and up through those sessions, that makes them feel and happy and good in their place you know.”

Wellbeing of staff/carers/families

“I do mine on a Monday morning ... mood can be quite low, cos Monday, you know, nobody wants to come back to work So I see that it's raising that mood you know, it's lifting that mood....”

Two Rhythms staff care for another as well supporting caregivers and families, everyone's wellbeing foregrounds everyone's wellbeing. This, in turn, ensures that everyone is able to continue to care for those people that they support.

“You ask staff to go on a Saturday and they're thinking ‘oh I could be doing this with my family, I've got this, I've got that’, but you go down....., and we came out and you were like you spent a day in a spa.... Set you up for the day....”

Interactions are important to achieve a sense of belonging

“It's essential to her, she's made friends, she's built up relationships....in fact she's got lovely friendshipsits just a special relationship..., built up through [Two Rhythms] and I took her in, and she just knew, she held his hand with both of hers and it was just so lovely that she had that opportunity... but it's the fact that she's had the opportunity because the environment is right because she's familiar with it, she's had this opportunity to make these fantastic relationships, to have closer.... I only ever wanted that for [NAME] to be in the community, to be known and to know people in the community”

Interactions between guests, families, caregivers, Two Rhythms staff, and with one another transcend connectedness to interconnectedness and a true sense of belonging. Interactions are valued in the achievement of belonging and this sense of belonging fosters meaning full interaction in a positive cyclic reciprocity. Sadly, participants often stated that the capacity of Two Rhythms' guests to interact was underestimated in the wider society and so having a space in which guests were able to meaningfully interact with others and time was taken to facilitate this, was especially valuable.

“And as a carer to know that [NAME] sees me as well, and kind of appreciates the relationship that we have with each other, and you know it's lovely to feel recognised and appreciated and just welcome when you come here.”

DISCUSSION

The evidence from the thematic analysis conducted for this study clearly demonstrates that finding an expressive voice through the arts for and with people with profound and other learning disabilities supports wellbeing, positive patterns of behaviour, meaningful interaction, inclusion and communication and in doing so foregrounds the same for their support staff and, perhaps more importantly, for familial carers and loved ones. The impact on the wellbeing of families and carers is also of profound benefit for not just the individual themselves, but for the people they support, as evidence demonstrates that people are not able to care adequately for another if their own wellbeing is not supported (Tronto, 2013; Cameron *et al.*, 2020). Two Rhythms creates what might be understood as a circular economy of care where, by ensuring the wellbeing of all including carers themselves, physical and psychological outcomes are better for all.

These positive benefits of meaningful arts engagement for people with profound and multiple learning disabilities have been pervasive themes in the study conducted here and echo the research literature of the past two decades (Terret, 2008; Barrett and Clements, 2012; Goddard, 2018; Kelly, 2019; Lirola *et al.*, 2020; Mino-Roy *et al.*, 2022; Bunning *et al.* 2024). Studies have found that participation in musical activities significantly improves social skills, including turn-taking, imitation, vocalisation, initiation and eye contact (Duffy and Fuller 2000), all of which and more were recounted as occurring during or due to Two Rhythms sessions, and that the benefits of creative engagement for persons with profound and multiple disabilities are enhanced when participants are facilitated to have gestural control and to enter a state of 'flow' (Brooks and Petersson 2005), which is also readily apparent in the work of Two Rhythms. Further, the literature demonstrates that arts participation not only improves mental and physical health and wellbeing but also enables integration and understanding with the wider community (Caldwell *et al.* 2008). Again, this is confirmed in the findings regarding Two Rhythms' work presented in this report.

However, where there is a distinct difference between the work of Two Rhythms and much of the findings reported in the wider literature is that, although the benefits of arts participation by and for people with learning disabilities are well known, programmes aiming to achieve this are rarely sustained over time in the way Two Rhythms is and there is a prevalence of short term interventions (Bundred 2006, Schalock *et al.* 2011). In this respect, Two Rhythms sustained work in this area over many decades is exceptional and has enabled them to yield benefits for their communities beyond those normally reported in the literature. These authors believe, having experienced Two Rhythms sessions in person with people with profound and other learning disabilities, including those with neurodivergent needs, and having discussed the impact of those sessions with their primary carers (both familial and staff) that the, at times intangible and often ethereal, yet very real, flow of meaningful communication enabled by the arts underpins the sense of wellbeing (for all stakeholders) engendered by being part of the creative emotional community that Two Rhythms represents.

OPPORTUNITIES FOR THE FUTURE

Two Rhythms was felt to be a unique service that was desperately needed in order to support people with profound and multiple learning disabilities and the communities that surround them, as well as wider society. This uniqueness is something that Two Rhythms should both celebrate and capitalise upon.

“There is nothing like it, you know all the things that [NAME] has done over the years, places she’s been, there’s nothing like it.... to actually ... be with other people, peers for [NAME], peers for me, it’s just amazing.”

Several specific opportunities were highlighted by participants in the focus groups, which Two Rhythms may wish to consider investigating in future:

- Extending provision to other client groups including in mainstream schools and in dementia settings.
- Extending provision to other settings which might mean Two Rhythms staff running sessions in care and/or community living spaces.
- Training and supporting professionals including teachers, teaching assistants and other education workers in both mainstream and specialist provisions, care workers and support staff in learning disability settings, and medical and allied healthcare professionals, to facilitate Two Rhythms sessions in their own contexts.
- Expanding Two Rhythms sessions to bring in other skills, for example, one focus groups participant felt that the Two Rhythms techniques could be adapted to help with the development of spatial awareness. However, it should also be noted that staff did demonstrate that they were already adapting sessions significantly in order to suit the needs of the individuals attending, which might mean that it is not new content that needs to be developed but better signposting of the existing work.
- The Welsh curriculum is focussed around six key areas of learning in all Welsh schools including in specialist provision.¹ Three of these areas of learning are pertinent for Two Rhythms’ work - ‘Languages, Literacy and Communication’, ‘Health and Well-being’ and ‘Expressive Arts’. It was felt by focus group participants working in education, that Two Rhythms would be ideally placed to help schools develop this curriculum content.

“I feel shouldn’t be just for children with additional needs, cos I practice this session with my daughter who’s in mainstream Welsh medium, and she absolutely loves it and she said ‘Mammy why can’t I have it in my school’, I said ‘I don’t know’.”

Challenges

Unsurprisingly, financial challenges were repeatedly highlighted. Arts funding, social care funding, changes to the benefits and support that disabled people are able to access, and a climate of austerity, have all created an environment that is increasingly challenging for both Two Rhythms and the people that use, and pay for, their services. While our study has not investigated this in depth, it is apparent that the Two Rhythms are aware of these issues and are taking steps

¹ [Successful futures: review of curriculum and assessment arrangements | GOV.WALES](https://www.gov.wales/successful-futures-review-curriculum-and-assessment-arrangements)
(<https://www.gov.wales/successful-futures-review-curriculum-and-assessment-arrangements>)

to mitigate them, including commissioning this research to evidence the impact of their work and support future fundraising and lobbying.

Another, and perhaps more surprising area of concern that was highlighted by focus group participants was the move to new premises. Participants really value the context of the Wales Millenium Centre and the additional benefits that this brings for Two Rhythms' guests. Although the space within the Wales Millenium Centre is still available, people were concerned that the benefits of Two Rhythms could be lost through expansion into other premises and this is something that the team at Two Rhythms should be careful to mitigate. Similarly, people were concerned about the quality of sessions if not delivered by the Two Rhythms core team and any proposed extension to activities should be careful to consider how quality can be maintained.

"There would be all sorts of things happening here, and they used to be able to go to the Green Room for lunch, so she met sort of Gok Wan, Simon Cowell.....people that were in the theatre, she would meet. They would have members of the orchestra if they were practicing, come down to [Two Rhythms] and do some sessions with them, they'd have the Welsh National Opera come down and do some singing with them..... It was just a lovely, lovely environment you know, the Millenium Centre is the best place to be I think."

Finally, one focus group participant highlighted the issue of 'toxic positivity'. Two Rhythms aspires to recognise the value in everyone, but it was felt that there was potential for this to become pathologizing or patronising, and that care should be taken to recognise people with learning disabilities as complex and nuanced individuals. While this research found no evidence of this in current practice, it is an important point to keep in mind and we recommend that this is regularly reflected upon.

SUMMARY AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The importance and profound impact that Two Rhythms has on all who engage with the organisation is hugely significant, promoting wellbeing for all involved and having tangible impacts on the lives of people with learning disabilities including supporting the development of creativity, friendship, community and transferable life skills. It is the view of the authors of this report that everything possible should be done to continue the work of the organisation and to extend this to others who may benefit. This is particularly important given the development of Two Rhythms over three decades, a position that is all too rare in the arts, health and wellbeing sector, where funding is often project based and short-term. Nonetheless, the limitations of Two Rhythms as a small arts organisation should be recognised, and it is incumbent upon the leadership of the organisation to ensure that any expansion does not jeopardise the quality of the offering. One way of ensuring that the organisation is sustained and strengthened, and that Two Rhythms' excellent practice is shared, might be through linking with other like-minded organisations, which is particularly important as the arts, health and wellbeing sector is often fragmented through lack of meaningful networks and through being placed in a position of competing for ever-decreasing resources, as is highlighted in the academic literature. In the light of this, we suggest that Two Rhythms staff are supported to share their expertise widely through training others, through carefully expanded provision, and networking opportunities and that

opportunities for careful expansion to other client groups and other settings, including mainstream education, are explored.

WORKS CITED

- Barden, O., Walden, S.J., Bennett, D., Bird, N., Cairns, S., Currie, R. *et al.*, 2022. Antonia's story: Bringing the past into the future. *British Journal of Learning Disabilities*, 50(2), pp.258–269.
- Barret, D.B. and Clements, C.B., 2012. Expressive arts programming for older adults both with and without disabilities: An opportunity for inclusion. In: *Older Adults With Developmental Disabilities and Leisure*. London: Routledge, pp.53–63.
- Braun, V. and Clarke, V., 2006. Using thematic analysis in psychology. *Qualitative Research in Psychology*, 3(2), pp.77–101.
- Braun, V. and Clarke, V., 2021. One size fits all? What counts as quality practice in (reflexive) thematic analysis? *Qualitative Research in Psychology*, 18(3), pp.328–352.
- Brooks, A. and Petersson, E., 2005. Raw emotional signalling, via expressive behaviour. *Proceedings of the 2005 international conference on Augmented tele-existence*, pp. 133-141.
- Bundred, S., 2006. Solutions to silos: Joining up knowledge. *Public Money and Management* 26 (2), pp. 125-130.
- Bunning, K. and Grove, N., 2024. Creative journeys involving adults with profound and multiple learning disabilities: Co-development in multi-sensory theatre. *British Journal of Learning Disabilities*.
- Caldwell, K., Brinko, K. T., Krenz, R. and Townsend, K., 2008 Individuals with intellectual disabilities: Educators in expressive arts therapy. *The Arts in Psychotherapy*, 35 (2), pp. 129-139.
- Cameron, E.E. *et al.*, 2020. 'Maternal psychological distress & mental health service use during the COVID-19 pandemic', *Journal of Affective Disorders* , 276, pp. 765–774.
- Carroll, C., Booth, A., Leaviss, J. and Rick, J., 2013. "Best fit" framework synthesis: Refining the method. *BMC Medical Research Methodology*, 13, pp.1–16.
- Duffy, B. and Fuller, R., 2000. Role of music therapy in social skills development in children with moderate intellectual disability. *Journal of Applied Research in Intellectual Disabilities* 13 (2), pp. 77-89.
- Fabian, R., Tarasova, D., Bergmann, T. and Sappok, T., 2024. An improvisational theatre intervention in people with intellectual disabilities and mental health problems. *International Journal of Developmental Disabilities*, 70(2), pp.278–286.
- Fancourt, D. and Finn, S., 2019. *What is the evidence on the role of the arts in improving health and well-being? A scoping review*. Copenhagen: World Health Organization.
- Feniger-Schaal, R., 2016. A dramatherapy case study with a young man who has dual diagnosis of intellectual disability and mental health problems. *The Arts in Psychotherapy*, 50, pp.40–45.
- Geiger, A., Shpigelman, C.-N. and Feniger-Schaal, R., 2020. The socioemotional world of adolescents with intellectual disability: A drama therapy-based participatory action research. *The Arts in Psychotherapy*, 71, pp.1–8.
- Goddard, J., 2018. Valuing the place of young people with learning disabilities in the arts. In: K. Runswick-Cole, T. Curran and K. Liddiard, eds. *Valuing Disabled Children and Young People*. London: Routledge, pp.170–187.

Houghton, C., Murphy, K., Meehan, B., Thomas, J., Brooker, D. and Casey, D., 2017. From screening to synthesis: Using NVivo to enhance transparency in qualitative evidence synthesis. *Journal of Clinical Nursing*, 26(5–6), pp.873–881.

Kelly, B., 2019. The Adapted Expressive Performance Approach: Performance techniques for musicians with learning disabilities. In: Z. Moir, B. Powell and G. D. Smith, eds. *The Bloomsbury Handbook of Popular Music Education*. London: Bloomsbury, p.141.

Lirola, M.J., Ruiz-Rico, G., Hernández-Rodríguez, A.I. and Prados-Megías, M.E., 2020. Body expression-based intervention programs for persons with intellectual disabilities: A systematic review. *International Journal of Environmental Research and Public Health*, 17(20), p.7569.

Mino-Roy, J., St-Jean, J., Lemus-Folgar, O., Caron, K., Constant-Nolett, O., Després, J.P. and Gauthier-Boudreault, C., 2022. Effects of music, dance and drama therapies for people with an intellectual disability: A scoping review. *British Journal of Learning Disabilities*, 50(3), pp.385–401.

Schallock, R. L., Verdugo, M. A. and Gomez, L. E., 2011. Evidence-based practices in the field of intellectual and developmental disabilities: An international consensus approach. *Evaluation and Program Planning*, 34 (3) pp. 273-282.

Terret, L., 2008. *Who's Got the Power?: Performance and Self Advocacy for People with Learning Disabilities*. London: Routledge.

Tronto, J.C., 2013. *Caring democracy: markets, equality, and justice* . New York: NYU Press.

Ward, D.J., Furber, C., Tierney, S. and Swallow, V., 2013. Using framework analysis in nursing research: A worked example. *Journal of Advanced Nursing*, 69(11), pp.2423–2431.