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Since 2007, **Moving Music Concerts** have offered high quality music to adults who may not otherwise have access to the arts, particularly people living with dementia or cognitive decline, Disabled people, people with neurodiversity, and their family, friends, and carers.

The concerts are held four times per year in Dorchester Abbey, as well as in community hospitals around Oxfordshire.

In 2024, Moving Music was awarded funding through Science Together, a University of Oxford initiative, delivered in partnership with Oxford Brookes University. Science Together is an engagement programme that aims to enable mutually beneficial partnerships between university staff, researchers and local community organisations. Moving Music opted to use their Science Together participation to evaluate the impact of the concerts, including using the Storytelling Evaluation Methodology.

Storytelling is an approach developed by the Old Fire Station in Oxford and inspired by Most Significant Change (MSC). It involves collecting stories from people about their experience of a project, and then bringing other people together for an inclusive, collaborative analysis of these stories.

The Old Fire Station (OFS) is a centre for creativity that encourages people to understand and shape the world in which we live through stories, the arts, and connecting with others. It shares its building with the homelessness charity Crisis and is focused on including people facing tough times in its activities and operations. It developed the Storytelling Evaluation Method (Storytelling) in 2017 and has since worked with over 150 local and national partners to put it into practice.

Storytelling involves the following key stages:

1. **Identifying storytellers** – people who reflect a range of different perspectives on the project being evaluated
2. **Collecting stories** – each storyteller discusses their experience with a trained story collector, guided by four key questions: What was your involvement? What changed for you? Why is this change important? What enabled it to happen? This is not an interview but a relaxed conversation on equal terms
3. **Editing stories** – these conversations are recorded, transcribed, and edited into two-page stories that aim to faithfully reflect the storyteller's insights while preserving their 'voice' – telling it in their own words. The stories are sent to the storytellers for their approval before being shared
4. **Discussion session** – a facilitated discussion bringing together people with different perspectives on the work to discuss the stories and what can be learned from them
5. **Sharing learning** – the outcome of the discussion session is shared in a learning report



How does Storytelling differ from other approaches?

- **It centres the experience of those most involved** - Storytelling doesn't presuppose outcomes in advance. It asks people to share what change looks and feels like for them in their own voice and words
- **It is a meaningful and collaborative process** - telling your story can be an enjoyable and validating experience. The process can help organisations to listen better, build relationships, and ensure evaluation is collaborative and involves different people and perspectives at each stage
- **It leads to rich and versatile learning** - Storytelling captures rich qualitative data. It's good at measuring change that is unexpected, emergent, personal, or complex, and understanding how change happens. It results in powerful, human stories that help us to learn, and can also be used across wider comms, marketing and fundraising



Executive summary

Moving Music concerts are like little gems, like walking along a beach and finding a shiny stone. It's wonderful that they're lighting up my life and illuminating it. I really look forward to the concerts. I look forward to being there with people I love. I'm hoping my mum, my grandson and granddaughter will be at the next concert. Wouldn't that be lovely? (Audience member)

What happened for Moving Music storytellers?

Audience members engaged when they otherwise wouldn't
They felt safe and able to relax and express themselves
They were acknowledged personally and 'felt special'
They enjoyed the feeling of 'going out' for a big event
They felt elated or uplifted afterwards
Carers experienced respite and community support
Moving Music became part of a clinical 'toolbox'
Musicians developed personally and professionally
All participants felt part of a mutually supportive community

Why did this happen?

An organisational culture of warmth and welcome
Tailored and responsive programming informed by caring expertise
Professional musicianship and high quality performance
Expert non-musical facilitation
An inspiring and relatively accessible venue
Well organised, knowledgeable, and empathetic volunteers
Multiple modes of audience engagement
The power of music to support connection and stimulate memory
A focus on inclusion — 'both carers and cared for'

Considerations



The current choice of venue (Dorchester Abbey) involves accessibility tradeoffs that need to be considered carefully. There are benefits to holding the concert in such a venue, but for some target audience members, travel there will be impossible.



Moving Music could do more to build relationships with Global Majority communities in Oxfordshire. This need not significantly alter the current format of the concert, and could improve the experience for all audience members while making the concert more welcoming for those who may not currently see the event as for them.



Donation levels could be adjusted to bring in more revenue from audience members. The concerts are currently seen as very good value, and some could afford to pay more without compromising accessibility.



The stories reveal extreme challenges for some older people to access events outside of their usual place of residence. For these people, getting out at all may be too much to manage.



There is a significant problem of loneliness, isolation, and 'empty days' among Moving Music's target audience. Less frequent events must be considered in this context, but this is also a consequence of major society-wide failures of accessibility and inclusion. Could Moving Music play more of an advocacy role in discussions about policy change?

Moving Music and Science Together held 16 conversations with the people most closely involved in their work. These included audience members, their family and carers, care home and day centre professionals, a clinician, venue staff, and Moving Music's lead musician, team, and trustees. Transcripts from these conversations formed the basis for a discussion on Friday 9 May 2025, in which Moving Music, Sound Resource, and Science Together representatives came together with the Old Fire Station to think about what the stories tell us about the impact of the concerts.

The discussion was divided into three parts. In the first, participants reflected on the stories without any predetermined criteria. In the second, they analysed study aims established by the Science Together research team. In the third, they considered future organisational priorities for Moving Music. The outcome of these discussions is summarised below.

Discussion 1: First impressions

Having read the stories in advance, participants shared their thoughts in small group discussions on tables, guided by three prompts:

- What is your general impression of the stories?
- Did anything stand out for you in particular?
- Are there any themes connecting the stories?

Each table then shared the outcomes of these small group discussions with the whole group.

The first discussion identified **6 key themes** in the stories:

1. Positive responses from participants
2. Inclusion of different ages, abilities, and roles
3. The importance of professional musicians
4. Expert non-musical facilitation
5. An ethos of warmth and welcome
6. Positive and negative features of the current venue

1. Positive responses from participants

Responses from storytellers were overwhelmingly positive. Audience members with dementia often behave differently at the concerts — singing along when they are usually non-verbal, remaining engaged when they often struggle to concentrate, and seeming happier than they do during other activities. Carers describe feeling a powerful sense of respite and community support. Volunteers, staff, and musicians say that they benefit personally and professionally from being involved.



There's one person there who I've known for a bit. She doesn't understand what's going on and has real difficulty in understanding, but she sits beaming through the whole concert, and that's not her general demeanour. (Moving Music volunteer)



We've got people in the group who are not quite non-verbal, but very reluctant, and yet they sing when they come to Moving Music, and it really it makes their day great. Some of our people living with dementia tend to lose concentration quite quickly, but they don't at the concerts. They're much more engaged than I see them in other settings. The people coming along as family members or carers say it helps. In a way it takes a responsibility off them for a little while, because everybody gets engaged in what's going on. It gives them a rest from the caring responsibilities. (Dementia Friendly Group Coordinator)



Moving Music is something we can all do together. It's absolutely brilliant. We never come away feeling anything but uplifted. I used to take my mum on her own. My dad had a stroke ten years ago and is in a wheelchair. Dad gets as much from the concerts as my mum does. My mum is getting more and more confused and just having them together singing is amazing - seeing them holding hands and singing along to My Fair Lady. It's the only thing I can take them to together, comfortably, with understanding people. It completely engages them both in the music and the songs. It's such a massive part of their lives. (Audience member)



My husband always seems to enjoy things like this. He won't be able to verbalise anything, but you can see he gets involved in tapping his feet and whatever, which you don't see in any other sort of thing. (Audience member)

2. Including different ages, abilities, and roles

Moving Music is for both the cared for and their carers. It has an intergenerational focus that comes from family groups in the audience, and the programming of student musicians and school groups alongside professionals. Older audience members especially value meeting young people during the event. This inclusive approach means that storytellers with different roles and relationships to Moving Music feel that they benefit in different ways from being involved, whether through the therapeutic effect of the concert itself, through respite from caring responsibilities, through belonging to a community with shared interests and experiences, through developing as musicians, or through meeting new people.



You meet people that you would never otherwise — it's lovely. And that's the whole meaning of community, really. It's really lovely to see a community of people who will keep coming. (Moving Music volunteer)



Our group really enjoy the young people when they come, particularly the young people who seem to have the confidence to come and talk to them before the performance. I don't think there's many opportunities to mix in with different generations. (Dementia Friendly Group Coordinator)



I think one of the worst things when you've got somebody along with dementia, is having to constantly explain it. So when you're in an environment where you don't have to explain it, you say, this is my husband, this is how he is. Nobody goes 'oh, how does that work?' I like seeing people from different walks of life, and different disabilities, all the people with dementia, you've got a bit of everything in there. And you know, at the end of the day, you're all there for the same reason, to try and enjoy yourself. (Audience member)



The social element is a huge part of the concert for my client, and I would imagine for many more. Often in care homes, it's hard to find people of an equal mental capacity to have conversations with, especially that might have the interest you have in, say, classical music. So it was a place for him to find other like-minded people - the volunteers or maybe some of the other audience members - and chat on an equal level. (Music therapist)

3. The importance of professional musicians

Moving Music audience members say that the benefit that they feel from the concerts is due to the quality of the professional musicians. Musical expertise contributes to a feeling of security in the audience, it enables tailored and responsive programming, it increases the range of music on offer - either familiar music to evoke memories or new music to stimulate neuroplasticity - and it creates richer and more complex opportunities for interaction with audience members.



The professionalism of it was so nice. You know, it wasn't patronising in any way. It was like going to a mini proper concert, which I think most people and he certainly appreciated. And then to be able to request something that was a special piece of music that they did. It was a Barcarolle from an Offenbach opera, I think. And he loved that song. (Audience member)



I think I wouldn't have gone back if you hadn't had professional musicians. I don't think my client would have either. It's about that understanding of the competence of the players, and the comperes, and the organisers. People have an understanding of quality, and that comes down to the level of musicality. Everyone does their part professionally, and then you feel safe, and held. That really matters. (Music therapist)



The musicianship is crucial. And I often get very disappointed by funders who say, "Why did you think it necessary to involve professional musicians? Why can't you just have amateur music making?" And actually, at the heart of that, there's a deep ageism and prejudice against people with dementia, because it's saying people with dementia don't need this. They don't need high quality experiences. (Sound Resource trustee)



I'm still creating the programme even after the concert has started — I will move the sing along songs around to keep the energy going or to calm the mood as needed. Even within a day, you get a totally different reaction to morning and afternoon concerts. (Lead musician)

4. Expert non-musical facilitation

As well as the professionalism of the musicians, storytellers celebrate the expert non-musical facilitation of Moving Music. This includes the ability of lead musicians to engage an audience with diverse and complex needs, a well-designed concert programme and format, and the contribution of organised and empathetic volunteers. Musicians personalise their performance for individual audience members, including by celebrating birthdays and anniversaries. This attention to detail makes audience members feel special and creates multiple and varied opportunities for positive social and therapeutic interactions.



It was lovely to see people being professional at care — at understanding their client group. The length of the pieces, the interaction to regain engagement, the laughter — all of these things that are warming, and holding, and safe for the audience members. It wasn't just a usual concert - I felt that there was a deeper understanding of what the audience needed, and that was really impressive to me, as a music therapist who also understands that. (Music therapist)



The way Danielle [Moving Music coordinator] has it, volunteers are working in different places, but they sort of know their role, so it's very comfortable. You just get on with what you're doing. You know what you have to do, and that's where you go. (Moving Music volunteer)



Hannah [lead musician] moves around a bit and will be able to sing or do whatever to individual people, that's very, very meaningful, and you feel very special then. Bob certainly felt very special, that this man who wouldn't sing at all, was singing. (Audience member)



It is a happy occasion, because you are able to go to enjoy yourself, and know you're being looked after as well. And that's the feeling I got from the concert. It's obviously because of the programme, and Hannah [lead musician] — because she's very good with the audience. They obviously have a good feel for the sorts of people who come along. Each time the program has been slightly different. (Dorchester Abbey supervisor)

5. An ethos of warmth and welcome

In addition to excellent facilitation, storytellers identify an ethos of warmth and welcome that is fundamental to the organisational culture of Moving Music. This attitude informs planning and programming and is embodied by everyone involved in the concert, from the volunteers welcoming audience with tea and biscuits to the lead musicians connecting with individual audience members through their performances. This creates a relaxed atmosphere in which people can express themselves in whatever way feels most comfortable and enjoyable.



Making tea sounds like a very basic thing, but I know it isn't. It's hugely important to people actually, having tea and a biscuit. (Moving Music volunteer)



I try as best I can to include little bits of context with the songs we sing, if it's from a film, of a particular singer, if there's a memory. It makes you more human, doesn't it – adding in little bits of story? Not too much, but putting in little personal things can really help as well bring in that feeling of warmth - that's the feeling I want. (Lead musician)



And it's a friendly, warm, comfortable place. I think it's really, really special. People who want to dance, always. Hannah, who leads the music, is always willing to dance as well, and just allow people to be whoever they want to be. And that's really special as well. That's really important. And then, of course, Danielle [Moving Music coordinator] is marvellous coordinating it all and making it all feel very relaxed and enjoyable. (Moving Music volunteer)



Again, it's caring — caring for children, caring for each other, and caring for older people too. Just by giving that cup of coffee and looking them in the eye and saying 'it's so lovely to have you here'. And meaning it, you know? 'Thank you, I'm so pleased you're here! We couldn't be here without you. This is wonderful!' (Moving Music volunteer)

6. Positive and negative features of the venue

The storytellers had complex and ambivalent responses to the venue. Most found Dorchester Abbey cold, while some identified limited toilet facilities and parking. Others found the venue accessible, and said that the size of the space allowed for the movement and dancing that are central to the Moving Music experience. The Abbey's excellent acoustics also contributes to the high quality of the music, and many audience members found the building beautiful and evocative, its safety and familiarity adding to their sense of enjoyment and security.



Dorchester Abbey — we were lucky that it wasn't a really cold winter day, like it could have been, but the temperature in there was okay, yes, nice place to have it. We can drive to Dorchester Abbey, so that's okay. We've managed to park out on the road. (Audience member)



Although the Abbey can be cold, they haven't been unhappy. They wear appropriate clothes. I brought hand warmers last time but they didn't need them. If you're happy and enjoying the surroundings, the music and the company then the cold isn't a problem. (Audience member)



Well for me, personally, it's oldie worldie, so you get echoes and everything all around, and it seems to bring you more together with the music. You know, you can sort of bounce off anything in the room, and you can get that little bit extra. (Audience member)



And as for Dorchester Abbey, well, we've had a few issues there, which we've already spoken about with the access and, you know, being so cold in there and the lack of toilet facilities. So although we love the concerts we have had a few issues with the venues over the years, but we do enjoy the concerts, they are worth going to, definitely. (Care home professional)



The space at the Abbey is wonderful. The building is incredibly beautiful and open, but it has walls – it's a broad but boundaried space. There wasn't a lot of clatter or noise, just the calmness of the space and the clear openness to move within it. That broadness is important for wheelchairs, or for people that move a lot, if they've got neurodiversity. And as you enter into a therapeutic area, that journey into it matters as well. You're going through that wonderful courtyard of the Abbey, and then you enter into this really impressive, ancient, atmospheric space. (Music therapist)

Discussion 2: Study assumptions

In the second discussion, participants analysed the parameters of Moving Music's research with Science Together. This research aimed to test three assumptions:

1. Coming together to share music in a safe, accessible space is what helps and has value
2. The concerts are enjoyable and beneficial to everyone
3. Everyone enjoys singing along, and the format of the concert is currently appropriate

The discussion group rewrote each assumption, aiming to add detail and specificity based on the information gathered from storytellers.

1. 'Coming together to share music in a safe, accessible space is what helps and has value'

The group wanted to add to this assumption a clearer acknowledgement of the intentional curation of Moving Music and the range and depth of positive experiences that different storytellers report.

A revised version might read: 'Bringing together people who live with dementia, other disabled and neurodivergent people, their carers, friends, and family, to listen to and participate in high-quality music in a space that is physically accessible, welcoming, and musically inclusive has significant social and therapeutic value for everyone who attends'

2. 'The concerts are enjoyable and beneficial to everyone'

The group wanted to add specificity to the kinds of enjoyment and benefit that concert-goers experience.

A revised version might read: 'Moving Music offers both individual and shared benefits and enjoyment to its audience members, depending on their needs and their reason for being there. Listening to music together is a levelling experience that facilitates communication between people with different abilities. It stimulates memory and neuroplasticity and provides respite for carers.'

Study assumptions (continued)

3. 'Everyone enjoys singing along, and the format of the concerts is currently appropriate'

The group wanted to make clear that Moving Music created many different opportunities for audience members to engage in different ways, including but not limited to singing along.

A revised version might read: *'The audience can engage with the music in many different ways — listening, singing along, dancing, foot tapping, and following words in songbooks. They can also find different kinds of meaningful social interaction — meeting people with similar experience, interests, or struggles, and meeting people of different ages.'*

Discussion 3: Organisational priorities

In the third discussion, participants considered three organisational priorities of Moving Music. Based on their own experience and the information gathered from storytellers, they suggested future priorities for the organisation.

The three organisational priorities were:

- Concert practicalities
- Audience reach
- Funding

Concert practicalities

Venue

There are concerns about the accessibility of Dorchester Abbey, notwithstanding the positive qualities described in the stories. This will inevitably limit the range of people who can access Moving Music.

However, there is a very limited choice of venues to suit the concert and audience needs, so finding a replacement is not straightforward. Changes to the format of the concert could increase access for some - for example smaller, more frequent concerts in a range of locations - but this would compromise other valued aspects of Moving Music, such as the sense of scale and occasion provided by the four large annual concert days (with morning and afternoon options) at Dorchester Abbey. The Oxfordshire location also suits rural communities that are affected by isolation.

Storytellers are aware that finding the perfect venue is difficult, and make a special effort to attend because they value other aspects of the venue and the type of concert that it enables. Discussion participants felt that supporting people with dementia to spend time in architecturally interesting spaces and well-equipped concert venues (e.g. with a good grand piano) was similarly important to providing access to high quality music, and that lowering expectations around such experience constitutes ableism and ageism.

Format

The stories suggest that four annual concert days that require some extra effort to attend complement more regular and accessible provision in dementia cafes and memory clubs. Storytellers appreciate an opportunity to go out for something special, and to feel that they are going to a 'normal' cultural event.

While the larger, less frequent concert days are valued for the sense of occasion that they create, storytellers also enjoy the concerts so much that they would like more Moving Music activities to engage with.

Concert practicalities



There's something about just acknowledging how few opportunities there are, for people with dementia in particular, to be in 'normal' settings, or in settings where they would have gone if they're interested in music. So that's really special. It's really important. (Moving Music volunteer)



It's not a problem to drive to Moving Music as yours is only four times a year. It's like missing once something regular to go to Moving Music. They are so good. When we leave Moving Music it was just as if he had this uplift feeling the rest of that day. (Audience member)



There are a couple of other cafes who meet up, perhaps on a monthly basis. People go to other groups where they can sing or listen to music, and so it fits in with that. If you could do it more often, I think that would be lovely. Obviously, that's quite difficult. (Dementia Friendly Group Coordinator)



Illustration: Merlin Porter

Audience reach

Discussion participants felt that people from a range of socioeconomic backgrounds attend Moving Music concerts, mainly due to relationships with care homes and community support services. Concerts held in community hospitals also reach more diverse demographics. The programme caters to different tastes, including classical, pop music from different decades, dance hall music, and football songs.

Audience members with Global Majority backgrounds are less well represented in the audience, and the group felt that this was partly to do with the demographics of rural Oxfordshire, but also the Anglo/European content of the programme.

Actions that could broaden appeal and build relationships with Global Majority communities include:

- Building trusting relationships with organisations or individuals from e.g. Black or South Asian communities in Oxfordshire who could act as ambassadors
- Programming musicians from other musical cultures. This could be introduced in the same carefully thought out way that Moving Music currently introduces less familiar music. It is also the case that, for example, Caribbean and African American music is a significant element of twentieth century UK music and will be familiar and important to many existing audience members, as well as making potential Black audience members feel more welcome.
- Working with Oxford Hub link workers to build relationships with people in OX4

The group emphasised the importance of word-of-mouth advertising and long-term community building, to advertise Moving Music. They cited the music therapist who recommended Moving Music to colleagues, as well as relationships with Dementia Oxfordshire and Carers Oxfordshire (both under the umbrella of Age UK Oxfordshire) and other informed unofficial ambassadors.

The stories also identified challenges around engaging with social prescribing services, as some experience these as poorly tailored and superficial. Moving Music could seek to identify and build relationships with link workers that take a more person centred approach, for example in community groups or charities such as Oxford Hub and Age UK Oxfordshire.

Audience reach



Illustration: Merlin Porter



There's a cohort of men who quite like the football songs, and that does bring, you know, 'Sweet Caroline', and it's just great to see them really responding. 'I'm forever blowing bubbles' — which I gather these are all football club songs. (Audience member)



It's perfect to have for social prescribing, and so I've shared it with my Oxfordshire area group of music therapists. We have about 40 members so that potentially then reaches hundreds of people. (Music therapist)



I was immediately referred to the social prescriber. They were trialing her there. She was very good and sort of signposted us. But I think the problem is of 100 people who go in, they've got 100 different issues, haven't they? You can't say, 'this normally works so I'll hand you all these leaflets' because 90% of them probably aren't applicable to you. And so it's a shame, really, that they haven't got time to say 'Well, what exactly interests you?'. But if her role had been enhanced then that's the sort of person you need to be saying: 'You know what? If your husband or wife likes getting out and about and meeting people, then this is quite a nice thing to do. And do you like music? What do you enjoy doing? What does your husband enjoy?' It's very much a case of trying to personalise care in a way, and find out what's suitable for each person. But you always know nobody's got the time or the money or whatever. (Audience member)

Funding

Storytellers identify the pay-what-you-can/donation model as essential for accessibility and a reason that they first attended Moving Music. This model was also a factor in securing funding from Oxfordshire Community Foundation.

At the same time, some storytellers think that Sound Resource charity should request higher contributions from audience members that choose to donate. Other possible models for this could be:

- 'Suggested donation £8'
- 'Suggested donation: £5/£10/£20 depending on what you want to pay. Higher donations support others to access Moving Music. All payments voluntary.'

A previous unsuccessful funding application included feedback that the format of eight concerts per year was less desirable than other models. The stories suggest that this format complements other smaller, more regular provisions, and that people feel that less frequent opportunities to go out to a special, larger scale event is hugely valuable and not available elsewhere.

Another previous unsuccessful application questioned the need for professional musicians. The stories repeatedly identify this as one of the core elements of Moving Music's therapeutic value.



I tell you one thing, I think you could put the price up a bit. You put on your poster five pounds or more if you can afford it. I mean, most of our residents have been very happy to pay about eight, eight pounds the last few cases, because they actually pay for it themselves. It's really good value for money, (Care home activity coordinator)



I don't like to spend my clients' money unless I have to, so the fact that it was donations only really helped. That's really good for getting people to make that first step. (Music therapist)

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Illustrations by Merlin Porter



Illustration: Merlin Porter

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