

Sound It Out Community Music

Sound It Out is the Birmingham based Community Music Development Agency for the West Midlands, and has been providing a support service to help exiled musicians develop their skills for work in the UK music and education sector.

“Being a musician is not the easiest career choice for people born here, let alone for refugees and asylum seekers. Relatively few new arrivals are professional musicians, and even when they are, have said this is the vocational path they want to pursue, they get railroaded into other options,” explains Sound It Out Chief Executive Officer, Matthew Daniels.

Sound It Out started working with refugees and asylum seekers in 2002 as part of the organisation’s *Inclusion Strand*, developed in partnership with local refugee service providers like the Midlands refugee Consortium, and linking with schools in local communities of Birmingham.

The project worked with a group of refugees and asylum seekers developing their own musical, facilitation, workshop and leadership skills, as well as providing a positive and proactive avenue through which they could engage with local communities and develop their wider language, communication and associated skills. Sound It Out has always been committed to long-term sustainable support where possible, and some members of this original project have gone on to become mentors of other incoming musicians, and facilitators of workshop programmes for schools.

Its current programme, *Infusion*, has worked with 10 refugees and asylum seekers on a 20-week development course. This project has evolved into a new musical group – the *Infusion Ensemble* – that is currently delivering participatory workshops with four communities in Birmingham with low levels of income and diversity and high levels of racial tension to promote inclusion, interculturality and a positive attitude to multiculturalism.

Through the ‘*Integrate and Create*’ project, an additional strand of Sound It Out’s work, the newly trained community musicians are going into schools in these challenging areas to make music and promote awareness of refugee issues and help prevent negative opinions forming at an early age.

Sound It Out secured a one-off grant from the Baring Foundation to help support the costs of appointing an Inclusion Officer to help develop this programme. “Without that we would not have been able to get involved with the depth that we have done, especially in terms of developing strategic and regional partnerships,” says Daniels.

Sound It Out's work is bringing a whole new generation of musical traditions and talents to the city. The impact of the work with refugee and asylum seeker musicians has, said Daniels, given additional confidence to migrant communities in the city. "Once refugee communities saw this work happening it had a tremendous snowball effect. The more we do the greater impact we have," says Daniels. One of the early participants, Zirak Hamad, is a well respected leader of his local Kurdish community and has gone on to become a trainer, mentor, workshop facilitator and music leader through Sound It Out. Another of the early participants, Mira Yugai, a classically trained pianist, has become a trainee Programme Officer with the organisation.

Critically, for the musicians themselves, the project has provided a support system and a rare opportunity to develop. "It is one of the few projects that does this," says Daniels. "The musicians feel they have been given an enormous opportunity and are so grateful to be given the chance to develop their music and learn from one another.

"We try to create a family among our musicians and one of the benefits of that is that we also provide a support system and as our original participants move on to become leaders and mentors through sustained support, development opportunities and signposting from Sound It Out, this is now expanding to provide committed and continuing support to other refugee and asylum seeker musicians."

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