

So Many Beauties Festival - report

1. Introduction

The **So Many Beauties** festival, held at **Bridgewater Hall** in September 2024, was a groundbreaking event that aimed to use music as a transformative tool to improve the lives of people living with dementia (PLWD) and their carers. This festival, which was co-created with over 20 Greater Manchester-based organisations, not only showcased the artistic talents of those living with dementia but also aimed to reduce social isolation, increase cultural representation, and provide meaningful access to cultural opportunities. This report evaluates the impact of the project, drawing from feedback, participation data, and qualitative insights, and offers recommendations for future improvements.

2. Project Overview

The 18-month **So Many Beauties** project was launched in May 2023 and was completed in December 2024. Its primary aim was to create a large-scale, culturally inclusive dementia-friendly music festival in Greater Manchester. The festival aimed to:

- **Reduce social isolation** for PLWD by engaging them in an 18-month co-creation process.
- **Increase representation** in dementia care by offering training and opportunities to ethnically diverse musicians.
- **Improve access to cultural opportunities** by showcasing a range of music, performances, and dementia care resources.

Key Partnerships:

The project was a collaborative effort involving numerous organisations, including:

- **African Caribbean Care Group**
- **Age UK Salford**
- **The Bridgewater Hall**
- **Create**
- **Creative Manchester (University of Manchester)**
- **Dementia United**
- **Dancing with Dementia**
- **Ethnic Communities Network**
- **Halle Connect**
- **Indian Senior Citizen Centre**
- **LGBT Foundation**
- **Lime**
- **Manchester Art Gallery**
- **Manchester Camerata**
- **Milap**
- **Music in Hospitals and Care**
- **RHS Bridgewater**
- **Royal Northern College of Music**
- **Shared Harmonies**
- **String of Hearts**
- **Tom Yum Sim Theatre Company**
- **Together Dementia Support**

3. Evaluation Methods

The general consensus from our discussions with stakeholders and participants was that creative forms of documentation—such as film, photography, and sound recordings—were more accessible and inclusive than traditional written reports. These mediums help to overcome language barriers and are easier for those who may not be accustomed to reading academic texts or for whom English is a second language. To ensure wider access, we have made a film, photo gallery, and sound collage available on our website at www.somanybeauties.com.

That said, we have also summarised the project's impact in this report, which employs a **mixed-methods approach** to provide a comprehensive evaluation. This includes:

- **Qualitative Feedback:** Insights gathered from testimonials provided by participants, stakeholders, musicians, and attendees.
- **Survey:** Distributed by Bridgewater Hall to audience members post-festival to measure changes in perceptions related to social inclusion, cultural representation, and access to cultural opportunities.
- **Informal Feedback Interviews:** Conducted with participants and stakeholders to gain deeper insights into the event's impact.
- **Attendance Tracking:** Data collected on engagement levels, attendee demographics, and the overall reach of the event.

Key Areas of Focus:

- Emotional and social impacts of participation for PLWD and carers.
- Cultural representation and diversity within the event.
- Accessibility and inclusivity of the festival, particularly for those with mobility issues.
- Wider community impact, including media coverage and stakeholder engagement.

4. Key Findings

A. Reducing Social Isolation for PLWD

The festival successfully addressed the first aim of **reducing social isolation** for PLWD by offering them a platform to engage with their community, explore their creativity, and contribute to a shared artistic experience. The process of co-creation was particularly significant, with participants sharing that being involved in the 18-month creative journey helped them feel more **connected** and **empowered**.

A participant reflected:

"What can I say – BRILLIANT! Thanks for organising this excellent event. It was fantastic to be part of something so special."

Another participant said:

"The festival gave us a new sense of purpose and belonging. We were able to showcase our talents in a way that was incredibly uplifting."

PLWD reported feeling **seen and valued**. The emotional upliftment was highlighted as a key benefit of participation, with several carers noting a significant **improvement in their loved ones' emotional well-being**.

B. Increasing Representation in Music for Dementia Groups

A key success of the project was its emphasis on increasing **ethnic diversity** within the music and dementia space. Over the 18-month project, **5 ethnically diverse musicians** were employed and trained to work with **PLWD** in co-creating new pieces of music. This increased cultural representation within dementia care, both artistically and professionally. The musicians were trained not only in dementia care practices but also in how to adapt their music and engagement techniques to meet the specific needs of PLWD.

The musicians' involvement helped create a festival that reflected the rich cultural diversity of Greater Manchester. The music featured **Bhangra dance**, **Egyptian instruments**, and **multilingual songs**, which were co-created in collaboration with **South Asian** and **Arabic-speaking dementia support groups**. This **cross-cultural exchange** allowed PLWD to explore music from different cultures, fostering an inclusive and joyful atmosphere.

The lunchtime showcase performance at the festival brought these musicians together with musicians from a Western Classical background including players from the Halle and Camerata orchestras and students from the RNCM.

A player from the Halle shared:

"I particularly liked the non-western instruments and dancing, especially the Egyptian instruments and belly dancing! It was wonderful to see so many different cultures represented."

"It was wonderful to be part of such an eclectic group of musicians, it felt really inclusive and so interesting to chat with people with different life paths."

"It is one of the best things I've been involved in."

By employing and training **ethnically diverse musicians**, the project not only enriched the artistic offering but also helped **bridge cultural gaps**. This approach allowed the festival to engage groups for whom **English is a second language**, thus ensuring that the music was relevant and accessible to a wider community.

One stakeholder remarked:

"The event really showcased how music can transcend cultural boundaries. It was a wonderful representation of Greater Manchester's diversity."

C. Improving Access to Cultural Opportunities for PLWD

The third aim of the project was to **improve PLWD's access to cultural opportunities** by introducing them to cultural spaces like **Bridgewater Hall**. For many PLWD, visiting such a prestigious venue was a **once-in-a-lifetime experience**. The festival provided a rare opportunity for PLWD to experience **live music** and the **arts**, enhancing their social inclusion and cultural participation.

Several participants noted that the festival marked their first visit to **Bridgewater Hall**, which they described as an unforgettable experience. One participant said:

"It felt so special to be able to perform and be in such a grand venue. I've never felt like this before!"

Through the festival, many **PLWD** were able to experience **cultural events** that were previously out of reach, not only because of **logistical barriers** but also due to **social isolation**. The event also helped to raise the **visibility of music in dementia care**, positioning it as a vital tool in enhancing well-being.

D. Accessibility and Inclusion Challenges

Despite the overwhelming success, **accessibility challenges** were identified, particularly for those with **severe mobility issues**. Feedback highlighted that the lack of **Changing Places facilities** was a significant barrier for some attendees, and logistical issues around **transportation** created difficulties for participants with complex care needs.

One attendee commented:

"I had to rush off and wish I'd seen more of the events around the building. It would have been great if transport options were more accessible for those with mobility needs."

Future events would benefit from the introduction of **live-streaming** options and enhanced **transportation** solutions, especially for attendees with severe mobility challenges. Ensuring that all venues are fully **accessible** would also make a significant difference in ensuring inclusivity for all participants.

E. Community Impact and Media Coverage

The festival not only had a significant impact on those who attended, but it also reached a **wider audience** through extensive **media coverage**, including a segment on **BBC Breakfast**, which helped to raise **awareness about dementia** and the role of **music in dementia care**. The festival's success positioned it as a model for future initiatives in dementia care, highlighting the power of **collaboration** and **creative inclusion**.

One stakeholder noted:

"The festival was a triumph! It showcased the importance of collaborative efforts in dementia care and highlighted how creativity can enhance the quality of life for those living with dementia."

5. Quantitative Data and Participation Metrics

- **110 hours** of stakeholder co-production meetings.
- **90 hours** of creative co-production with PLWD and carers.
- **63 creative artists** employed, including ethnically diverse musicians.
- **8 new pieces of scored music** created in collaboration with **6 different dementia support groups**.
- **650 attendees** across the event day, including **190 elders**, **54 staff**, and **78 volunteers**.
- Media coverage reached over **7 million viewers**.

6. Recommendations for Future Events

1. Improve Accessibility

- **Live streaming** options for those unable to attend in person.
- Ensure venues are equipped with **Changing Places facilities** and accessible transport options for attendees with complex needs.

2. Expand Community Engagement and Training

- Continue providing training for **ethnically diverse musicians** to enhance cultural representation in dementia care.
- Build on the success of the co-creation process by expanding **community partnerships** and involving more **PLWD** and carers in the creative process.

3. Enhance Stakeholder Collaboration

- Foster **long-term collaborations** with local dementia care providers and cultural organisations to ensure ongoing access to cultural opportunities for **PLWD**.
- Expand the **Power of Music Network** to create a sustainable platform for sharing resources and knowledge about **music in dementia care**.

7. Conclusion

The **So Many Beauties** festival was a resounding success, meeting its three primary aims of reducing social isolation, increasing cultural representation, and improving access to cultural opportunities for **PLWD**. The event not only demonstrated the power of **music** to transform lives but also showcased the importance of **ethnic diversity** and **cultural inclusivity** in dementia care. While accessibility remains an area for improvement, the festival's success is a powerful reminder of the potential for **community-driven, inclusive** initiatives to make a significant impact on the lives of **vulnerable individuals**.

“Lots of fun. Lots of love. A reminder of the **good** in the world x”

(Festival feedback quote)