

REPORT AND RECOMMENDATIONS BASED ON FINDINGS FROM QUESTIONNAIRES AND DISCUSSIONS WITH SECONDARY HEADS OF MUSIC IN SWINDON

Paul Rowe on behalf of Swindon Music Service

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CONTEXT

Swindon Music Service (SMS) is the lead organisation for the music hub for the Swindon area. The hub is called Swindon Music Education Partnership. SMS is very well established in the borough's Primary schools and provides a range of services, including a great deal of whole class tuition (the 'wider opportunities' first access programme).

Another well-established arm of the music service is Swindon Young Musicians (SYM) which operates on Saturday mornings and some evenings. This provides a range of musical experiences for young people from Swindon and the surrounding area, including a variety of ensembles, both traditional/classical and jazz/rock.

Swindon's secondary school music departments have not bought into SMS programmes in the same way as primary schools. This is because secondary schools already have their own established music curriculum time and dedicated teaching staff, unlike the primaries. One of the aims of this report is to consider what could be done to enhance the relationship between SMS and secondary music departments by developing new lines of collaboration, provision and communication.

I began the process by sending questionnaires to the borough's secondary music heads of department i.e. 'HoDs'. (Please note I use this as a term of convenience to encompass a variety of positions as defined by different schools including 'teacher in charge of music', 'head of music', 'director of music', 'head of faculty' etc.)

The questionnaires were followed up with face-to-face discussions. There were four main headings to the questionnaire: sharing, networking and training; able gifted and talented provision; communications and information; finance. 10 schools returned questionnaires. There were 9 face-to-face discussions. Of the 11 main-stream secondary schools in the borough only one did not provide a response to the questionnaire and I believe this was simply because there was no head of music in place at the time this was sent.

Below are summaries of key points from both the questionnaires and the face-to-face discussions I had with the HoDs.

VIEWS OF THE SECONDARY MUSIC HEADS OF MUSIC DEPARTMENTS

Sharing / networking / training

- 1 All agree that networking and meeting with peers is a good thing in principle, but there are common provisos. Advance notice of agendas and meetings is critical to attendance and active participation. Time is the biggest enemy, and those that struggle to attend such meetings note that extra-curricular rehearsal pressures on music teachers greatly limit their availability. Creating more localised clusters / working groups rather than all trying to meet together is suggested as a possible model. The content of meetings is important too. Agendas have to feel relevant and valuable to the participants. Key stage 4 related topics are generally considered amongst the most useful. Varying locations may also help.
- 2 All agree that the music hub and Swindon Music Service could and should play a greater role in the musical lives of secondary schools. Specific examples cited include: collating and disseminating information, including minutes and newsletters; working together to promote and develop new instrumental learners; helping to facilitate more liaison with feeder primary schools; organising CPD sessions; involving more HoDs at hub-related meetings; making it known who to contact about what (e.g. clarifying roles within the Music Service and who has expertise in particular areas); working more closely with other schools / HoDs that need help and advice in specific areas; more regular visits to the secondary school music departments by music service staff; using electronic communications more frequently and effectively; facilitating peer visits to each other's schools.
- 3 A number of specific training priorities are listed by the HoDs as areas which the Music Service could perhaps help with or facilitate. These include: GCSE related music areas such as world music (e.g. Samba); inspirational national speakers; experts in the field; composition; how to help rock musician students develop notation and composing skills; exam specification / marking / moderation training (e.g. AQA); specialised training on best use of software including options for Cubase, Sibelius and Logic; planning and executing effective music lessons. It is worth noting here that most secondary music departments are currently running AQA GCSE music, with a minority following Edexcel. None appear to follow the OCR course.
- 4 Getting timescales right for CPD opportunities is mentioned by most of the HoDs. There is a general feeling that occasional high quality opportunities are better than trying to run regular sessions. 3 times a year, during the day-time (to avoid after school rehearsal clashes) is suggested by several. Twilight sessions would only work if they coincided with schools calendared network meetings, and this can be difficult to coordinate. Another suggestion is to try and synchronise with the cross-borough CPD days (usually in term 2).

Provision for AGT students

- 1 Developing the skills and opportunities of their musically talented students is a key issue for the secondary HoDs. There is a general feeling that if the Music Service could develop mechanisms for helping these sorts of students more, this would be beneficial. Occasional workshops and master-classes or one-off 'specials' are suggested as a preferred model for this. But it is critical that these are arranged well in advance (as much as a year for school calendaring purposes) to make take-up possible for the HoDs. Other developments suggested include SMS organised concerts (e.g. showcasing best key stage 4 work) and an annual borough-wide music competition incorporating both performance and composition.
- 2 'Losing the initiative' (my expression not theirs) with talented students in the transition between years 6 and 7 is a strong theme with the secondary HoDs. Frequent remarks in conversation were around the problem of how to keep these students musically motivated & skilled as they progress into years 8 and 9 and how to create mechanisms for making this happen. There were various suggestions for organising opportunities for musically talented students, including: grouping students of similar age; providing drop-in sessions for help and advice; using both central (e.g. the Platform) and localised venues; promoting musical opportunities and take-up in schools (e.g. through assemblies which include the showcasing of talented students from across the borough).
- 3 SYM as a vehicle for supporting able and talented musicians was remarked on by nearly everyone. There was a widely held view that detailed information about SYM activity is not disseminated to HoDs. There was a desire for SYM to engage more actively with the secondary schools in sharing information, promoting instruments and developing new opportunities for ensemble work. Developing more localised SYM centres was suggested by some of the HoDs. Nearly all schools remarked on the gradual decline in numbers taking up instrumental tuition at secondary level (with some exceptions such as guitar). There was recognition that 'traditional' instruments were probably less popular, with economic factors cited as the most likely reason for the current decline. A second reason commonly cited was the change of culture in which students are now more accustomed to 'instant results' and thus drop-away more quickly from learning orchestral/traditional instruments. The HoDs were keen that everyone in the Swindon music community did what they could to proactively address this problem.

Communications and information

- 1 The HoDs are keen and willing to engage in music-related dialogue and communication but pressure of time acts against this. (Everyone comments on the pressure of rehearsals after school reducing the opportunity to meet others). They are aware of national initiatives and documents but would value alerts, communications and opportunities for dialogue around these. Many suggested that a regular electronic newsletter from the music service would be valued; this to include not simply what has happened already, but a diary of opportunities for the following academic year and alerts about key initiatives and documents, both locally and nationally. Key events should ideally be publicised a year in advance so that they could be

placed and 'protected' on school diaries. On-line forums was one suggestion for promoting dialogue without the need to meet in person. One suggestion for improved communications and information was for SMS to have a stall at school open evenings.

- 2 Cluster meetings are cited by many HoDs as a way forward which is both geographically convenient and valuable for developing relationships both with their nearby primary schools and the nearer secondary school music departments. Nearly all remarked on the lack of information they received, from any source, about their new year 7 students in respect of their previous musical experience. This meant that most people felt they were not capitalising sufficiently from term 1 of year 7 on the musical skills of their new students.
- 3 There is a lack of clarity around what the new Swindon Music Hub is, who is in it, how it is organised and what its core purposes, benefits and funding arrangements are. Some secondary HoDs would like to be more directly involved but are not sure how to do so. Most are aware of this new structure in principle but feel a little remote and disconnected from it.

Finance

- 1 Several HoDs commented on the pressures of operating with limited budgets. Nevertheless there was a general sense that if musical offers and opportunities were valuable for their students they would consider them. Understandably, sharing, networking, economies of scale and reducing distance travelled as methods for reducing costs were cited by a number of people.
- 2 In some instances loan / hire of specialist equipment was mentioned, but budgets for this purpose were limited.
- 3 Advance notice of offers is critical (ideally up to a year in advance) in order to make it possible for the financial case to be made by the HoDs to their school managers.

SUMMARY & CONCLUSIONS

- 1 The secondary Heads of Music (HoDs) would welcome and consider initiatives from Swindon Music Service (SMS) which would help them improve the provision and outcomes for their students, especially at key stage 4.
- 2 They would like to see an improvement in communications between SMS and themselves, both in terms of regularity of contact and quality and quantity of information.
- 3 The HoDs would like to see SMS taking a bigger role in coordinating music-related meetings and training across the borough.
- 4 The HoDs would like to work more with each other but time is a major constraint on meeting. For this reason many would value SMS helping to facilitate communication and exchange of information, so that if people cannot meet physically, they can at least stay in touch and in the loop on latest initiatives.

- 5 Take-up of instrumental/vocal tuition by their students is key for the HoDs. They acknowledge that the Swindon Music Cooperative operates as their principle provider of individual tuition.
- 6 The HoDs all commented on the lack of detail, timely and regular information forthcoming from SYM.
- 7 They feel that new models of SYM delivery need to be explored, for example, using more clustered and localised SYM centres, in order to promote instrument take-up.
- 8 The HoDs most frequently cited change of cultural attitude to 'traditional' instruments (on the part of students) and current economic constraints as the chief reasons for the drop in instrumental take-up.
- 9 The HoDs lack musical information about their new year 7 students each year (i.e. information on what their students' primary school musical experience was). At present they do not receive this unless they already operate within a cluster with partner primaries that are willing to share it.
- 10 They see information about previous musical experience as linked to the issue of instrumental take-up. If they had the best possible information and could therefore 'hit the ground running' with more tailored provision and opportunities for their new year 7 students (especially for the most musical and those who already play instruments), this would improve musical skill progression as the students move up through the school.
- 11 The HoDs acknowledge the value of the 'Wider Opportunities' programme delivered by SMS in the borough's primary schools and want to capitalise more effectively on this previous learning. However, they do feel that the long-term value of this experience is reduced because of the difficulty of 'translating' primary musical skills into on-going secondary school activity. This is why the bullet point 11 above is seen as so important.
- 12 Clearly, the HoDs operate under financial constraints but would nevertheless consider buying into activities which are demonstrably of benefit to their students. These need to be activities which provide something over and above what they can deliver themselves, which is why one-off sessions (such as workshops for students or specialist training for teachers) are suggested by many. Advance notice of this – ideally a calendar year in advance – is critical to making such buy-ins possible.
- 13 A range of training and workshop style activities, as well as concerts, assemblies and competitions were suggested by the HoDs as areas for which they would welcome SMS taking a coordinating role.
- 14 The HoDs in general are not clear about the structure, purpose or financial arrangements of the new Swindon music hub (the Swindon Music Education Partnership) and would like to be more involved, if they knew how to do so.

In conclusion.....

Buy-in to SMS provision from the secondary music departments will never be of the same scale as that of the primary schools. This is because staffing, resources and curriculum time are already built into the secondary model in a way that is not the case in most primary schools. Nevertheless (as outlined in various points above) there is range of services, provision and support that SMS could offer secondary schools. Over time developing these should help SMS and these schools to become closer partners. More broadly, involving secondary school music departments more actively in the Swindon Music Education Partnership (i.e. the music hub) is an area for development. In time this could perhaps be extended to include aspects of Federation of Music Services development as well. The borough's secondary school music departments are key to the musical progression and aspirations of Swindon's teenagers and in this sense hold the potential for much greater interaction and impact on both the music service and the hub.

Paul Rowe November 2012