



UNDER THE BRIDGE

The National Lottery
The People's Project
Evaluation

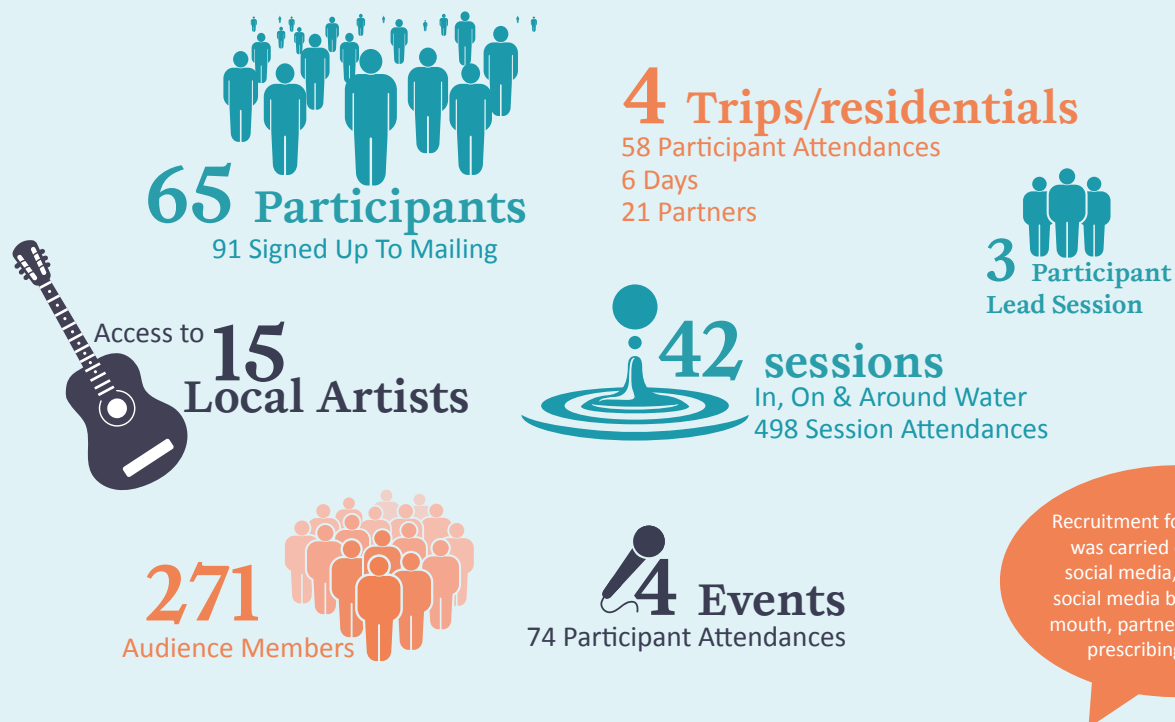


Written by
Dr. Frances Howard

Nottingham C.A.N & Bluetonic have teamed up again to offer Under the Bridge phase two. Building on the success of the first project, run between May and August 2022, this second phase has been funded by **The National Lottery Peoples Projects in Partnership with ITV, UTV and the Sunday Mail** for a total of 52 weeks.

Under the Bridge is a project for men of all ages to explore the positive mental health impacts of spending time in blue spaces. Alongside water-based sports activities and music-making opportunities, the project brought males together as a way of promoting social confidence, peer support networks and creativity. Free activities offered through this project included **Wild Swimming, Cold Water Dips, Wellbeing talks, Poetry Writing sessions, Oil Painting Sessions, Yoga, Meditation, Sound Baths, Group Walks, Choir Session, Special Guest Music Performances, Outdoor Climbing**. For the first time, local trips, and residential were organised, which included a camping residential to the Derbyshire Dales, a Surfing residential to Scarborough with the Wave Project, a River Trent Canal Boat Ride with Fellow, Morton and Clayton and a Matlock Day

Visit to the outdoor thermal pool. As a way of celebrating grassroots music-making and aligning with the theme of making music under bridges, Under the Bridge hosted its first ever **Walking Music Festival**, in a new partnership with Long Eaton sailing club, in which groups of participants walked a 5-mile route engaging with a range of local music artists along the way performing under a range of bridges. Local Artists included **Catmilk, Wilf Baker, Daudi Matsiko, Benjamin Zięć, Chai & Ben, Honey Williams**. Musical performances and public showcases for the Under the Bridge choir this year included **The Under the Bridge Walking Music Festival, The Many Men Performance, Binks Yard Choir Festival Celebrating World Water Day** hosted by the Canal and River Trust and **Matlock Thermal Pool**.



This impact report captures the activities from the project, alongside participant interviews and survey data. Dr Frances Howard from Nottingham Trent University was involved in evaluating this second phase, building on learning from the original project. She was able to interview participants and project organisers at various points during the 12 month period of the program and attend events, as well as administering and analysing the results from a pre- and post- participant survey, adapted from the Warwick Edinburgh mental health and wellbeing scale. Within the spirit of creativity of this project, Frances has also created a poetic response to the Walking Music Festival, in the form of an event review. The evaluation data has been supplemented by film and photography, which further captures the essence of the Under the Bridge project. Finally, an evaluation of organisational development for Nottingham C.A.N and Bluetonic is covered.

71hours
Music Making

33hours
Water Activity

115hours
Spent By Water

Outcomes for Participants

For the second phase of Under the Bridge, new participants found out about the project through both local media, such as the feature on East Midlands today and the Broadway event, and through social media, such as facebook and watching choir performance videos online. Word of mouth remained the most popular way of recruiting for the project, signifying that previous and current participants would/had recommended the project to others. Within the second phase, there was also an **intergenerational aspect**, with one father joining to come along with his son.

Men joined the project for various reasons, which were firmly rooted in **mental health struggles** they had faced such as relationship break ups, historic addictions, becoming sober, suicide attempts, being abused as a child and mental health breakdowns. Beyond these personalised experiences that impacted upon participants' mental health, the desire to seek out **male friendships** - particularly at a time in life where others are occupied with marriage and children - was strong in new people joining the project. One participant referred to the group as his '**social exercise**', coming regularly to the group each week as his reminder to 'do things with people' and avoid self-isolation.

It's about stepping out of my comfort zone. Obviously singing is stepping out of my comfort zone, but it's also just a way of connecting. Yeah, I've sung in my car alone before, but never with a group of guys. No one takes it too seriously, and no one judges, which is a good thing.

”

Being an open water swimming and choral singing project, participants were motivated to attend the sessions to take part in these, and other activities. New to this phase were new water activities such as tubing with Rapid Horizons, visiting Matlock Thermal and Emma Estrella breathing exercises. New music activities saw the launch of Jam sessions introducing instruments to music sessions and larger scale public performances. Participants reported the value of '**being pushed outside of their comfort zone**' by trying new activities.

Togetherness was a key theme within participants' stories of attending the group, signalling the project as being 'more than just a group of guys', but more importantly how they **support each other**. Participants who had been with the project from the first phase reported that they had been reaching out to others, outside of the organised sessions to take part in activities, such as paddleboarding, together. Participants reported the **non-toxic nature** of the mens group, and the **lack of commercial agenda**, in comparison with others.

I'm at a point in life where I'm sick of people taking money from me. It's like everybody wants a piece of your wallet. Don't they? But with this group, there is none of that. It's just nice because it's a bunch of guys that come together and there's nothing hidden. There's no commercial agenda.

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In some men's groups you can sort of see output behaviours and negative traits and so for me it's nice to be with a group of lads that are just nice people. Rather than being in a toxic environment or around toxic people.

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Singing and performing are aspects of the project where participants felt they achieved the most and surprised themselves. Within this phase, the Under the Bridge Choir has performed 4 shows in public, with 20 practice choir sessions, which has been audio recorded and filmed for our final project evaluation documentary. The following quotes show how well supported participants feel with the singing element of the project and their feelings in **developing confidence** and **overcoming anxiety** with both taking part and performing.

With the singing, I've been doing a lot more complex songs, and I feel a bit more self-conscious about it. But I'm with three people who are doing the same parts as me, but I wouldn't dare to do it on my own. So it's quite weird to be able to get up and sing in front of people without worrying about it. But that's the power of doing things as a group. It just makes you stronger.

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When I went for the first practice session, obviously I didn't know anybody. I didn't know anything about it and I'd never sang in a choir in my life. And I stood outside and I nearly turned around, because I was nervous about people watching me. And when you go through trauma, you feel as if everyone is watching you and judging you. Ben and Scott were the first ones to greet me and make me feel welcome and instantly all the barriers came down.

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The singing is great. When we met, and Scott and Ben talked about what we would do together, I thought it was way out there. The singing and the performing is something I never thought I'd do. But we've done a few performances now and it was really good at the last one to see the amount of men that came to sing.

”

I'm musical. I've been in bands but I've not been involved in music for a long time. I've been out for five or six years, and because I'm a drummer, it's difficult and it's not the sort of thing to do on your own. You need other people. Plus our lives get in the way with family, kids and parents getting sick. I've had so many other people's needs to meet, I've forgotten about my own. Now I've had a chance to reconnect with that.

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The outdoor activities taking place in and around blue spaces also received positive feedback. Residents of Long Eaton, and the local area, had not had the opportunity to **connect with the natural resources on their doorstep**. For some, **having access to paddleboard equipment and boats through the sailing club** was something that had prevented them from undertaking these activities previously. The value of engaging with these activities on the water developed both **wellbeing and resilience** for participants, in response to stresses caused in daily life.

The other day, one of the guys who is part of the group, invited me out on his boat. So we went from Beeston down to Crawley Lock and I was blown away by how, when we stood at the back where the engine is, it felt great. So I went to sit at the front of the boat about a foot above the water. And I was blown away by how much of an effect it had on me. It made me realise, that I've come from a place where I was feeling like I'm a very chilled out person compared to what I used to be, and then I'll sit on the front of this narrowboat for like two or three minutes and I was so much less stressed out. And it's just mad how being next to water has such a positive effect.

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At work it had been a tough few weeks. I'd sort of lost my professional mojo and I don't feel particularly aligned with my work at the moment. And I was feeling a little bit adrift. So being out on the water just changed my focus a bit, you know. So I could forget about what happened that day because it's gone, and you need to go over it again and again.

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In this area, we've got all these rivers and canals, but I've never really done much on the water because I've never been in a position to own a boat or a lot of the equipment, like paddleboards and everything.

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Supporting Mental Health and Behaviour Change

Whether participants had been involved in the project for just a few weeks, or longer term - some up to 2 years - positive changes in their mental health and changes in behaviour were noted. These included reduced alcohol intake, breathing exercises as strategies for dealing with stress and communication developments, cold water exposure to counteract ADHD characteristics, opportunities for social awareness and personal reflection.

For 40% of the participants, joining a men's group was a new experience, whilst for the remaining 60% they had experienced other groups with a mental health focus, such as counselling, psychotherapy and cognitive behaviour therapy; with a physical activity focus, such as biking, running clubs, yoga and the gym; and with a social focus, such as the Masons.

I think the biggest thing this project has taught me is how to breathe. There is a thing we do with the choir where breathing needs to come from the diaphragm. And I'm not really good at talking anyway because of my autism, when I don't realise I'm mumbling. So the singing helped me speak so I can be properly understood. It's given me more help with my communications.

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The project has been about observing yourself and how you interact and how you are socially and it brings up things about yourself that perhaps you haven't noticed or been aware of.

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When I arrived for my first swim session, I was like "I can't go in" and I'm stood halfway in this water... but when I got into the water, everything just really calmed down. I've got ADHD and I found in the water everything's calm and I now know being around water helps me a lot. We also did breathing exercises in one session, did all that Wim Hof breathing and that was incredible. Then literally two days after, my grandma passed and if it wasn't for those breathing exercises, I honestly don't think I would have coped.

”



When asked what made the Under the Bridge project different from others they had attended previously, participants reflected on the 'organic' feeling of the group, that although activities had been organised, the informal nature of the sessions were appreciated. Men felt that as the group is not as structured as others, there was no pressure to achieve an 'outcome'.

It's not a therapy group. We won't sit around talking about mental health, but I've noticed so many of the conversations between the lads. Therapeutic conversations, but because of the setting, the tone and the atmosphere, it doesn't feel intrusive. But what you see happening more and more, is people from different cultures and different areas and different walks of life coming together and realising that actually. 'Ohh, this guy's got similar things going off than I have'.

”

I don't think there's enough male orientated stuff out there. I think from the mental health point of view, males are always stereotyped that they should be macho and all that kind of thing. They're all different, but there's no pressure on anybody to just come and participate, come and just sit, come and just and like there's no pressure from anybody.

”

The outdoors and blue spaces activities also makes the group feel different from other men's groups. Participants appreciated opportunities to be outdoors, doing guided activities and be active beyond the summer months. The feeling of being by water was noted for wellbeing benefits, as were opportunities to socialise without alcohol. Participants were able to compare their experience of attending Under the Bridge with other groups.

Compared to other groups this is more about blue and green spaces, is more about focusing on yourself and trying to become a better person and returning to society.

”

Ice baths have been helping my head so much. I've tried therapy and these sorts of things, which made it worse, because they don't believe that I've actually done some thought processing myself. So now I think that ice baths are the best thing.

”

It would have been nice to have been in this group 20 years ago. Because I've done all my healing and got to a point where I want to share what I've learned and what's changed my life with others. I can see people on a similar journey and I see in others what people are personally benefiting from.

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Data from the participant pre- and post- questionnaire, which included questions about frequency of exercise, self-rating wellbeing and alcohol and substance intake corroborated these findings in relation to supporting better mental health and positive behaviour change.

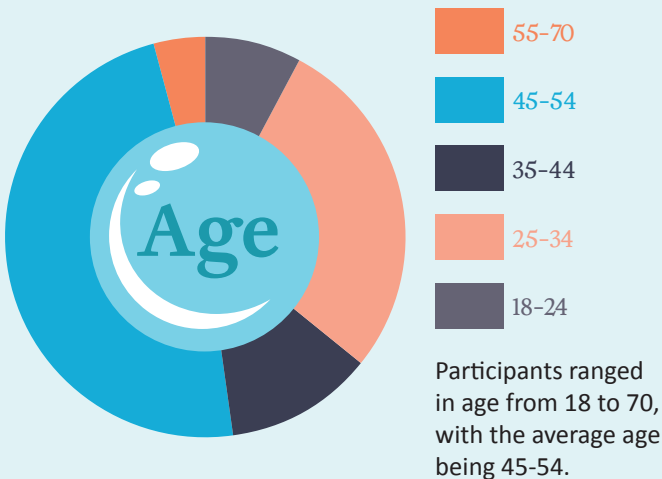
Survey Headlines

A pre- and post- project survey captured participant data (age, job and negative influences on wellbeing), rating of the activities (where done before and how felt afterwards), changes in lifestyle (including sleep, hours of activity, social and recreational life and holidays) and mental health, happiness and satisfaction. There was an open box for comments on changes during the project. From the survey it was gleaned that:





About the Participants

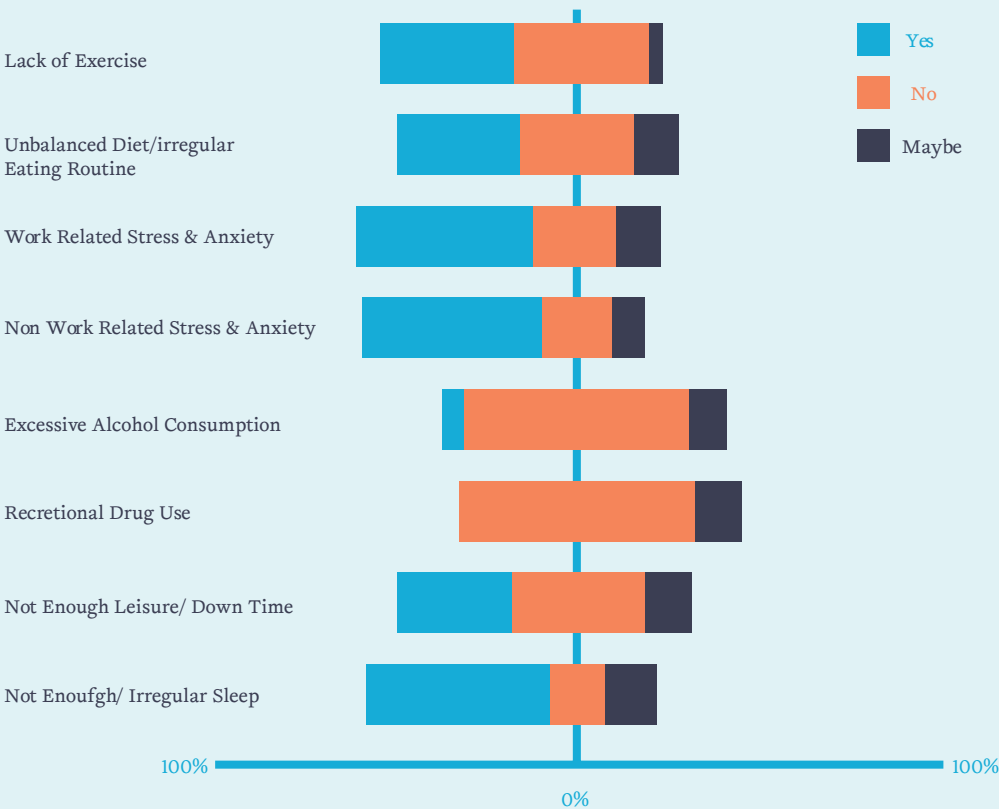


92% of participants were in work at the start of the project, with 17% of participants being in **managerial roles**, as demonstrated by the below graphic. 32% of participants had **moderately active jobs**, with the remaining split across highly active (20%) and minimal movement (20%). 61% of participants were working 30-45 hours per week, with 26% working more than 45 hours. By the end of the project, there was a **reduction in those working more than 45 hours to 14% indicating a better work/life balance.**

Job Roles within our participants included: Lighting Manufacturing, Social Services, Apprenticeships-enrollment, Team Leader, Self Employed, Building Inspector, Manager, MIS Team, Government Officer, barber, Project Manager, Local Manager, Voluntary Sector, Nurse, Quality Assurance.

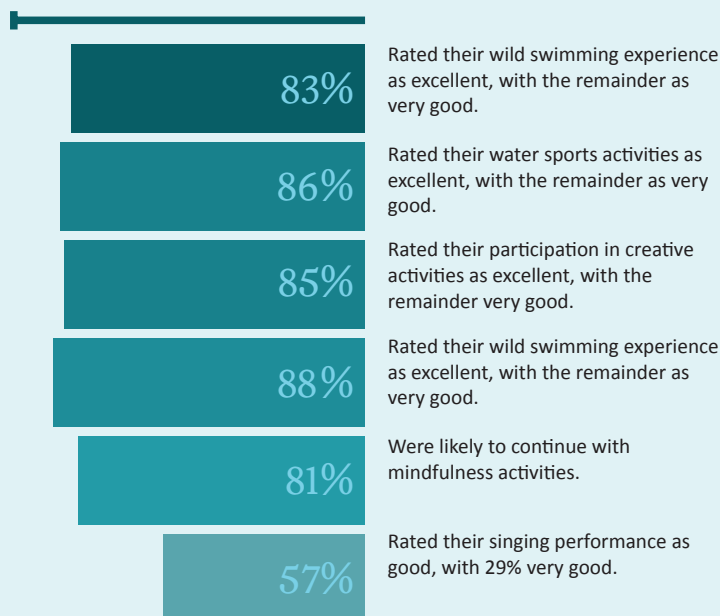
Pre-project things that negatively influence well being included

- Pre- stress and anxiety - work-related and non-work related (64%),
- Not enough sleep (64%), lack of exercise (48%),
- Not enough leisure / down time (40%).





Self-Evaluation of Activities



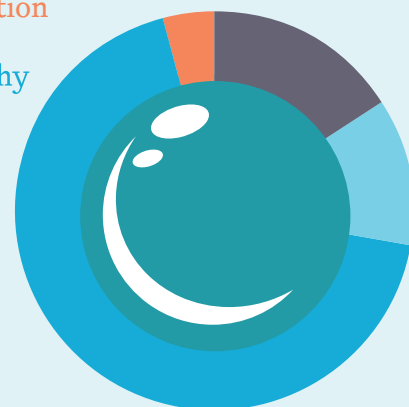
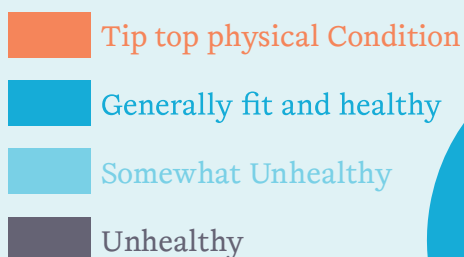
Whilst 80% of participants had taken part in water sports before this project, 48% of participants had not taken part in open water swimming before.

36% of participants had not taken part in creative activities and 29% had not taken part in mindfulness before the project.

64% of participants had not sung in a choir previously.

Lifestyle changes before and after the project

Increase rating of overall health: 68% generally fit and healthy, 12% somewhat unhealthy before the project. Increase in generally fit and healthy 71% with 6% in tip top physical condition following the project.



Increase in sleep: 48% responding that they 'never' get 8 hours of sleep per day, with 24% getting 8 hours sleep 1-3 days per week. 'never' dropped dramatically to 6%, with increases in 1-3 days per week (47%) and 4-6 days per week (41%).

Increase in hours of activity per week. Before the project 2-3 hours (28%), 4-5 hours (24%) and more than 5 hours (20%). Increase following the project in more than 5 hours (35%) with 4-5 hours being (29%).

Improved social and recreational life: Before the project 16% do nothing but sleep and work, 48% get together with family/friends and engage in a hobby once per week, 27% get together with family/friends and engage in a hobby 2-3 times per week. After the project there was a decrease in those that do nothing but sleep and work (6%) and an increase in getting together with family/friends and engaging in a hobby 2-3 times per week to 50% as majority response.

Increase in taking a holiday: Before the project, 28% more than 2 years ago, 20% this year. With increases to last three months 53%, with a further 18% this year following the project.

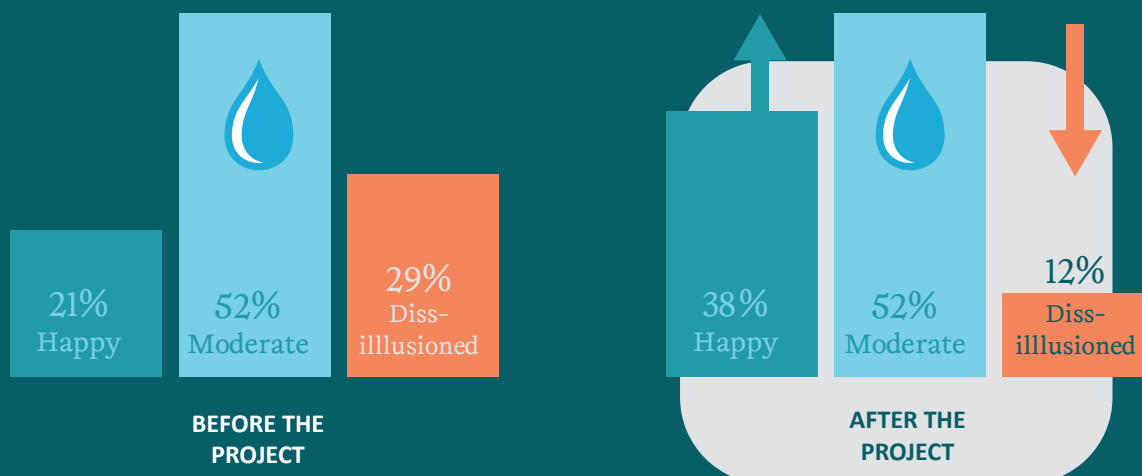


Self-Reported Mental Health, Happiness & Life Satisfaction

Mental Health, Happiness



Life Satisfaction



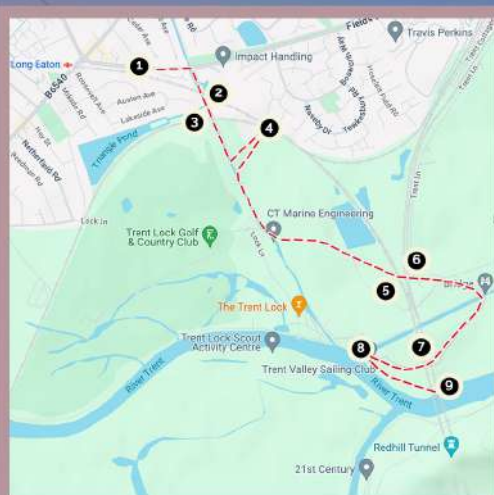
Open comments reported positive behaviour and mental health change, where participants feel 'alive and energised', have new friends in which they can confide they were upset, and felt more confident and 'in a better place'. Participants shared their new gravitation towards water and intentions to 'get out in nature' more frequently, with higher levels of motivation and anticipation for the evening of the project. One participant reported that he'd come away from toxic people, who drink and use drugs, and is now able to socialise in a group of 'normal people'. Participants responded positively to new friendship networks, where shared interests could develop and the positivity of group belonging. One participant with OCD commented that the wellbeing qualities of nature had improved his mental health significantly during the project.



Walking Music Festival



Along the Long Eaton canal and through muddy fields the audience encounters a series of bridges. Seven in total, each different sizes and made with different materials, but with a different singer under each. This is a music festival with a difference – one where the audience walks to see the acts, rather than being static around a stage. We are warned that trains might come over head at any point, as the musicians adapt to the acoustics of each bridge. The water wild is rushing all around us, with clear pools and cool fountains, as we experience each singer, building towards the Under the Bridge choir, as the festival headliner.



- 1 Roy Pidcocks - Starting Point
- 2 Sheet Stores - Boaters Cave
- 3 Trent Lock Canal - Mooring Manor
- 4 Fields Farm - Natures Way
- 5 Fletchers Pond - Fishermans Friend
- 6 Trent Lane Farm - Wilfred's Way
- 7 Trent Valley Sailing Club - Sheep Pass
- 8 Trent Valley Sailing Club - Walkers Rest
- 9 Red Hill - Weary Waters



Bridge 1: Chai & Ben

The sound of an acoustic guitar drifts on the fresh breeze, We are surrounded by weeds growing out of old brickwork, Whilst being immersed in the soulful singing of two musicians. A small group walking along canal path pause and applause at the end of the song, The applause echoes under the bridge, As a train passes over head. "Feeling something special under this bridge" chimes the singer, Whilst the tenors in the audience sing "No diggidy".



Bridge 2: Wilf Baker

A solo musician performs using three different acoustic guitars, More rock and country, interspersed with bird song. There are references to the river in the songs, As singing along brings the audience joy. Two original songs and then one cover, where we can sing too. Bramble vines creep across the ground, in between the feet of the captured audience. The story of 'Old Blue', refers to both the open spaces of water, But also a blueness within the soul.



Bridge 3: Catmilk

A cover to start, where members of the Under the Bridge Choir can join in. The wind picks up and gusts mirror the tempo of the song, Followed by an inevitable stillness, as the bridge protects those who sing underneath, A stillness, reflected in the emotions of those who have ever suffered with mental health.



Bridge 4: Daudi Matsiko

Under the fourth bridge, the audience experience sad songs, From the musician's own journey with bipolar. The small painted tunnel offers an intimate setting, to hear lyrics of lostness, Of being cold and alone, but that are beautifully and emotively sang.



Bridge 5: Benjamin Zięc

Moss and cobwebs adorn this singer's folk style, Singing the original song 'the Island', offering a story of hope and support, Encouraging us to reach out and 'build a window into our minds'. At the end of Wilfred's way, we are reminded that there is a light at the end of the tunnel.



Bridge 6: Honey Williams

Crossing a wide open field, to settle under a modern steel raftered railway bridge, The singer explains the song we are about to hear, A story about finding a home inside yourself, And with a small keyboard accompaniment, her soulful voice fills the whole space.

Bridge 7: Under the final bridge, for the final performance of the Walking Music Festival, the Under the Bridge Choir, complete their vocal warm up. Deep men's voices reverberate under the metal framework of the bridge. A medley of Swing low Sweet Chariot and Oh When the Saints builds, with the fast moving river behind. The choir conductor, with one acoustic guitar, arranges the mens' voices together, signalling different choral parts, faster pace and audience clapping. As the Choir finish on the class James song 'sit down', the feelings of brotherhood, of togetherness are unmistakable. Under this bridge, a safe space is embraced by this group of men, in support of each other, often through difficult times.





Organisational Development

Under the Bridge phase two has supported Nottingham C.A.N and Blue Tonic's organisational development through **more sustained funding** which has enabled them to organise four 10 week blocks of seasonal programs that take into consideration, light, weather, and school holidays. **New partnerships** have been created with Fellows Morton and Clayton, Boatyard Bouldering, the Wave Project, Scarborough Youth Hostel and Buddhist Centre, Binks Yard, and the Canal and River Trust, with whom the project will continue to work. Existing partnerships with the Long Eaton Sailing Club, musical choir leader, Elephant Rooms and Honey Hope Farm were strengthened.

The second phase has also allowed the charity time to embed within a **collaborative network** that comprises of five distinct not-for-profit organisations.. This operates in the Erewash area, with each organisation involved offering different levels of intervention and specialism to support peoples health and wellbeing. Bluetonic was invited to join the network after being recognised for pioneering work with mental health relating to the under the bridge project.

The four other providers in the network are:

elephantrooms.co.uk

honeyhopefarm.org

longeatoncommunitygarden.org.uk

whisperingtrees.org.uk

Through the introduction of the Warwick Edinburgh scale to the evaluation methodology, this new way of measuring impact has recognised that there was **a gap in mental health support** for men reaching crisis with alcohol, substance misuse or domestic violence. This program is now a key part in filling that gap of engaging and encouraging men to be proactive in looking after their mental health and their overall wellbeing. The network allows **cross-referral between organisations**, taking a person centred approach to signposting individual service-users towards the correct provider. This allows service users prompt access to specialist counselling/therapy if they feel things are escalating.

The project also **provided CPD** for Ben and Scott in Kayak and SUP paddleboard instructor training, including funding for insurance, Walk leader training and First aid training to support future Under the Bridge programmes.

For **future Under the Bridge programmes** participants were asked if there were any skills or specialisms that they could offer the project, so that it could be more participant-led. Suggestions included strength training, photography of nature during walks / swims, breath work, poetry, biking near to water i.e. Carsington water, foraging / bush craft, group kayak /canoe, drumming and recording with a range of instruments. Others who have management roles at work responded that they enjoy the group as a break from running things and managing others.