

UNDER THE BRIDGE

PROJECT EVALUATION & EVENT REVIEW

by Dr. Frances Howard
Nottingham Trent University

PILOT PROJECT **2022**



PARTNERSHIP

BRIDGE

Bluetonic

Bluetonic are a charity dedicated to creating experiences in, on or around blue spaces. Blue spaces are areas that are close to water either inland or by the sea. Spending time by blue spaces can make us happier and healthier. Bluetonic offers resources, activity and information that helps anyone become more active in blue spaces.

Research has shown that being near, in, on or under water can provide a long list of benefits for our mind and body, including lowering stress and anxiety and increasing an overall sense of well-being and happiness. Bluetonic support local groups of people in the East Midlands, that struggle to gain access to blue spaces, due to factors such as age, sex, race, or economic hardship.

WHY IS JUST BEING AROUND WATER GOOD FOR US?

The Blue Mind is a phrase coined by Wallace J Nichols who is a marine biologist, author and movement creator. He has championed, studied, collaborated and pioneered the concept that water makes us happier, more connected and better at what you do.

He is the author of the brilliant book the Blue Mind. This is well worth a read and helps to understand the things that underpin the work of Bluetonic.

The theory of evolution states we came from water. We have settled near water, building cities by the coast and sea. We are predominately made of water. 60% of our bodies and 70% of our brain is water. We seek out water on our holidays by lakes, rivers and seas. Jumping in and playing in swimming pools Or sitting by the pool with a good book. The majority of photographs people take have blue spaces as a backdrop. People tend to take a glass of water to bed.

Water is such a big part of our lives already, but Bluetonic want people to be more conscious of its benefits. Lots of activity in blue space is free. Just sitting in a blue space and being present has a positive impact on our wellbeing.

Nottingham C.A.N

Nottingham C.A.N is a network of community artists, dedicated to exploring and developing how the arts can be best facilitated towards positively enriching and impacting local communities. Using the arts as the focus they aspire to support and nurture active community engagement between the local community and Artist.

They achieve their mission through two main streams;

The first being direct artist-led research, consultation and active engagement within local communities and the second being the training and development of aspiring and practicing community artists. By focusing on these two areas they aim to cultivate well-informed community arts workshops, sessions and events, that have direct impact upon participants and explore wider community issues through the lens of the arts.

Throughout history it has always been the Artist, ‘the Great Communicator’, who has been the storyteller, documenting our history through their craft.

Nottingham C.A.N believe strongly that the Artist, especially in the modern day, needs to play an important role within the development of our local communities and the individuals that live within them.

The Arts are a powerful tool for engaging and developing peoples creative expression, social development, confidence building, relationship building, sense of belonging and wellbeing.

Within our local communities there are many complex situations that result in many people feeling isolated and excluded. Nottingham C.A.N focuses on the belief that every member of our community deserves the access to the arts, to enrich their social and cultural expression, creating more unified, happy communities where people are free to express themselves, socialise, collectively explore issues and topics and also develop our individual creativity.



How the Partnership Bloomed...

Nottingham C.A.N's director Trekkah Benjamin has a strong connection to the Erewash area as he grew up in Long Eaton and would regularly spend time around the waterways - fishing, camping and walking with family and friends. As a Singer / Songwriter and Sonic Artist he was passionate about exploring the acoustics of various Bridges along the River Trent and River Soar. Accessed on canoes and kayaks he would paddle down the River with different instruments and musicians recording performances under different bridges - each bridge holding its own reverberant identity and sound characteristics.

In the October of 2020, Trekkah was pitching a project that supported young males dealing with mental health issues by facilitating creative writing and illustration sessions. The pitch was for DANSoup, a platform where audience members would all contribute a small amount of money and listen and vote upon a range of community-based projects, of which one was selected to receive the funding raised.

It was here that Trekkah (Nottingham C.A.N) met Scott Clayton (Bluetonic), who was also pitching at the event for a project ran by his charity called Swim Safe - a project that took young people out on the water, teaching them the importance of being in the water and how to do it safely.

Both winning and receiving grants on the night, the two community-leaders were drawn to each others work due to the geographical location of the Erewash area, the focus of mental-health within both organisations and also the strong link to the local waterways. After a number of meetings and project planning sessions the 'Under the Bridge' project was born. Blending elements from both Nottingham C.A.N and Bluetonic's work the project focused on supporting males in the Erewash area dealing with mental health issues, looking to strengthen support circles and offer much needed enrichment and social activity through creative arts and water-based activity.

UNDER THE

THE NEED

UNDER THE BRIDGE

THE PROJECT



highest male suicide rate in two Decades

Information from ONS has shown that the suicide rate for men in England and Wales in 2019 was the highest for two decades,



males accounted for three quarters of registered suicides

With 5,691 suicides registered, men account for about three-quarters of deaths.



1.5 million Estimated to access mental health services

Coming out of the Covid-19 pandemic it was estimated that in the U.K. alone 1.5 million people would access extra mental health services.



males aged 45-50 years old being at most risk

Data shows that in the U.K. males aged between 45-50 years old are the highest age bracket of male suicides



In the Spring of 2022 we launched a 15 Week pilot 'Under the Bridge' Project funded by the National Lottery Community Fund.

The pilot project was originally set up to act as a support network, aiding the recovery of local males who felt isolated during the pandemic. Promoted mainly on social media and through some local support services, we quickly recruited a sizeable group of participants.

Targetting males aged 18-65 years old, living in the Erewash area, the project facilitated 15 sessions and workshops that will run throughout the summer. Led by professional arts, music and outdoor practitioners from both Nottingham C.A.N & Bluetonic, the program would include:

- 5 sessions on the water - kayaking, wakeboarding and swimming.
- 5 sessions by the water - creative writing, mindfulness and group walks
- 5 sessions in a local music studio with a professional Choir Leader

To celebrate the project, promote males mental health and to showcase our newly formed Choir, the group would then take part in a performance, Under the Bridge on the River Trent

The project looked to explore the positive mental health impacts of spending time in blue spaces, bringing together targetted groups and individuals, promoting togetherness, strengthening support circles and developing confidence - all whilst exploring creativity. Offering an active, social therapy where males feel comfortable to share their mental health experiences whilst trying new activities and encouraging healthy living within mind, body and soul.



Core Aims

The pilot project aims set out with the intention of participants;

- connecting with their natural surroundings with a focus on blue spaces
- forming new support networks creating safe spaces for males to talk about their mental health journeys
- upskilling participants towards spending time safely in, on and around the water
- collectively exploring creative arts and music making sessions, resulting in showcases and performances



BRIDGE

UNDER THE BRIDGE

THE REVIEW



UNDER THE BRIDGE: Debut Choir Performance

“The activities we’ve been doing, just to get away from everything and just do something for yourself gives me a good sense of achievement.”

In blazing sunshine, friends and family eagerly wait, along the banks of the River Trent. Located under a steel railway bridge at the Lock Keepers Rest, Sawley, in Long Eaton, they have come to hear a performance. A choral performance from a group of men, who first met 16 weeks ago.

The brainchild of Trekkah Benjamin (Director of Nottingham C.A.N) and Scott Clayton (Founder of Bluetonic), the ‘Under the Bridge’ project has been organising 10 weeks of water-based, creative and mindful activities to support men’s mental health.

Starting in early May 2022, participants have enjoyed water activities at Spring Lakes such as inflatable assault courses, paddle boarding and open water swimming, and various creative writing and mindfulness activities across various locations along the river Trent.

Following their time spent in and alongside the water, there has been singing. The group spent 5 weeks working alongside professional Choir-leader Edward Reisner, getting ready for a debut ‘Under the Bridge Choir performance and that is what the audience is here to experience today.

“At the end of this project, I really feel like I’ve broken down some of my own personal boundaries and done something that is out of my comfort zone.”

A WW2 Landing Craft – used to film D-Day landings, rounds the bend of the river and the men disembark to applause. Guitars, microphones and speakers are also unloaded from the boats. The group have spent the last five weeks attending (name) studio in Long Eaton. Working with Edward Reisner (Choir Leader), they have been singing a number of songs which they will share today, this is a completely new endeavour and something completely outside of their comfort zone.

We can get very stuck in mundane life, where you’ll just go to work and then go home, go to work, go home... and it’s just breaking that cycle and finding something different.

The performance starts with a round of ‘Sweet Chariot’ and ‘When the Saints’. Low voices echo off the bridge rafters. For this group of men, swimming and singing has provided an alternative therapy, a social outlet for this summer.

This project just connects everyone together. Obviously, you start not knowing anyone, but within 5 minutes you’ve spoken to someone new because you’re all in this group. And everyone is happy to talk about their lives and to help each other. It’s kind of like an escape from life, from

the stresses of work, the reality of the 9 to 5. Everyone, just everyone just gets along and it’s like we’re a team all together. We’re all here for the same things. We’re here to explore, to see new things, like tonight we’re having a barbeque and a swim and it’s just been brilliant.

Statements such as this, reflect the key aim of the project to bring males together to try new activities and to meet new people.

The first song ‘Down by the Riverside’ reflects the water-based activities that the group have faced physical challenge from. Scott from Blue Tonic, describes the benefits of being by and in the water:

We use the water-based activities just to engage people with the power of water. Getting out and about on the water is so important for doing something different, for accessing the magic of water to “unplug your brain”. Plus water is a free and easily accessible resource and that’s what the charity Blue Tonic aims to bring people’s attention to”

But the songs chosen also share lyrics of mental health struggles: ‘lay down your burden’, ‘I won’t cry, I won’t shed a tear’: all allude to the stigma

that men can feel in talking about poor mental health. One participant stated that:

Sometimes I go through stages where I’m a bit like doomy, gloomy and this just something to look forward to. It stops you from even getting to think about having them bad days so, I think it’s brilliant. I think you need more of these and I think everyone needs to do something like this, like whether there’s two sessions or whether there’s 22! It’s nice to be with people that you don’t know outside your circle because you’re meeting new people, you’re learning new things and you go new places every week. I think it’s really good and I think there should be more of these groups for people to interact with other and do different things. I think that would make everyone feel a bit better.

UNDER THE BRIDGE: Debut Choir Performance cont.

“**We need more community based activities that are multi-generational. Spaces and places where we can communicate, share our thoughts, learn from each other, laugh and have fun.**”

The audience are impressed:

“I’ve come down to see my brother sing”, “I never thought he’d sing in public”, “he told us he was singing and we didn’t believe him”

Pride emanates from the crowd. The singing and the setting are captivating as the audience applaud a version of ‘Stand by me’ arrange with different harmonies. The power of things group of men singing in unison takes the audience’s breath away as the voices reverberate across the water. After the performance, some reflect on how nervous they were, and how they thought they’d never accomplish an event such as this:

I really did feel nervous, but the boat journey, the whole experience was fantastic. One of the other men had said to me that we’re going to survive the performance together. Just stopping under the bridge, plugging the mics and speaker in and harmonizing our different parts together has been excellent.

Having had on 4 to 5 hours training as a choir, the group sing with force and passion, timing and teamwork. The third song, James’ Sit Down is an obvious favourite as there are whoops and shouts from the choir and the audience joins in the singing. People on the river on kayaks pause as they pass by, singing and dancing to themselves. Filming on their phones. The choice of the James song feels particularly pertinent to the group as they have struggled and supported each other through various challenges: open water swimming, hiking to swim spots and water obstacle courses:

One of the first things that we did together was taking part in this obstacle course, with inflatables on the water. Throwing you in at the deep end sort of scenario! And I’d never done anything this before. So, we got on quite well pretty quickly because we just got really competitive! And even just singing under the bridges is all quite crazy ready because I never thought I’d be doing that in public.

For their last song, reprising Down by the Riverside, the whole choir and audience is clapping now. Hugs and handshakes are shared between the group showing the social connectedness generated by the project:

Singing is something that I’ve not done for a long time and I used to do a lot of singing years and years ago. But when I stopped doing it, it just became a thing of getting too embarrassed to do it. But when we started singing as a group together,

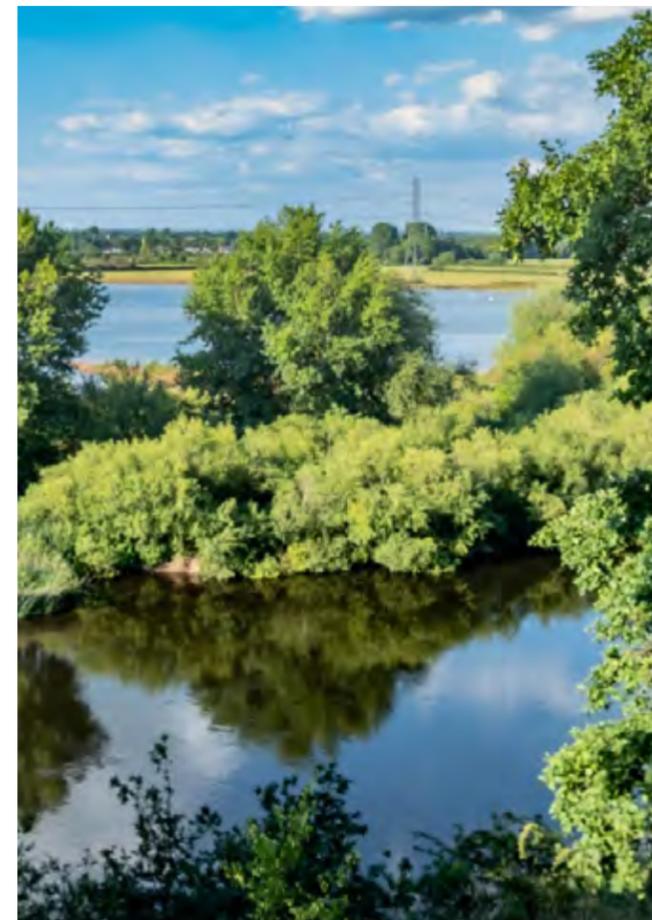
we actually sang together and it was really strange how natural it felt. I didn’t get that feeling of embarrassment. Everyone was just singing and it didn’t matter if you were felt as though you were out of tune or anything like that, you were all just singing.

This pilot project, the first of a kind, a collaboration between Nottingham CAN and Blue Tonic has supported men’s mental health through water-based activity and creativity. For Blue Tonic, Scott (name) said the group have been exploring the five ways to wellbeing - connecting with nature, connecting with others, sharing things, trying something new and giving something back:

Culturally, we as blokes, we don’t connect socially unless we go to the pub and this is an alternative, an alternative in nature, where we get out and do stuff to go through the whole thing of doing something together.

And for Nottingham CAN, their work with community-based artists and community groups has led to this point, having been funded to deliver youth music-making, creative industries mentorship and poetry workshops in the past. Following this debut performance, it is clear that this model, this way of working, the partnership between swimming and singing is here to stay. Onwards and upwards – or downstream – to the next collaborative project.

UNDER THE BRIDGE



Poem from a session by Frances Howard

Roadside walk to open field,
Chatting and excitement as everyone carries something,
Towels, guitars and food for the BBQ,
Off to the swim spot but first adventure.
Teamwork, negotiating nettles and cows,
Group cohesion, mystery and discovery,
Into the stillness and openness of the countryside,
Clearing the mind.

Arriving at the caves, the fire is lit,
The smell of wood and people change to swim,
The sun, the sound of splashing in the water,
Chatting, laughing and joy.
Not known each other long,
But friendship and shared experience are apparent,
Each man taking the time that everyone needs,
Out of their busy days, their busy lives.

Stories of being together, of pastures new,
Of up days and down days,
But most of all, why this time matters.
Time for togetherness, time for being brave,
Time for solidarity, time for the fresh cool,
Time for swimming and singing, under those bridges.

STATS

Throughout the pilot project we saw an high number of participation. With people signing up for a variety of different reasons The project was promoted mainly on social media and through various local mental health support services



15 SESSIONS DELIVERED

The project delivered 15 sessions and workshops in total, ranging from Water-based activities at Spring Lakes, Guided walks and meditations, Creative Writing sessions and music sessions at Balack Dog studios

30 PARTICIPANTS ENGAGED

In total the project recruited 30 participants that took part in the project. In consultation participants signed up for a variety of reasons such as impacting mental health, strengthening friendship circles and taking part in new activities

12 AVERAGE SESSION ATTENDANCE

The average session attendance of participants was well over the original remit, averaging at 12 participants per session

39% PARTICIPANTS OVER 35 Y/O

39% of Participants recruited for the pilot were over the age of 35 years old which was a great outcome taking into consideration the age range statistics of highest rate of suicides in males

1 CELEBRATION PERFORMANCE

The Project held their debut celebration Event under the Trent Lock / Sawley Bridge at the Lock Keepers Rest, open for all to attend

93 AUDIENCE MEMBERS

The turnout for the Celebration event was 93 audience members, made up of family, friends and local media

OUTCOMES

The Under the Bridge Pilot Project exceeded our initial expectations on multiple fronts. We were blown away with the participation, audience sizes and support from local press .

- NEW SUPPORT NETWORKS FORMED BETWEEN PARTICIPANTS
- PARTICIPANTS MEETING FOR SOCIAL ACTIVITIES OUTSIDE OF SESSIONS
- 85% OF PARTICIPANTS WANTING TO CONTINUE TAKING PART IN SESSIONS
- A KEEN INTEREST FROM PARTICIPANTS TO MENTOR ON FUTURE PROGRAMS
- COVERAGE OF OUR PERFORMANCE ON NOTTS TV
- COVERAGE OF OUR PROJECT ON BBC RADIO NOTTINGHAM
- COVERAGE OF OUR PERFORMANCE ON BBC EAST MIDLANDS
- COVERAGE OF OUR PERFORMANCE ON WELLBEING BLOG
- INTEREST FOR OUR CHOIRS TO PERFORM AT A NUMBER OF COMMUNITY EVENTS
- PROJECT WINS EREWASH ACTIVE LIVES 'PROJECT INNOVATION' AWARD



FEEDBACK



Sean Gore
Participant

"Its surpassed my expectations, the comradery was incredible. I would recommend the project to anyone. There is a stigma around masculinity and its been a huge thing for us to have this safe space. Also the singing has been great, its been good for the soul and most people would never of performed in front of people before "



Chris Cutforth
Participant

" I found it challenging, rewarding and sociable. Not something that I would usually do but i really enjoyed it. I think the BBQ cookout and wild swim session was my favourite. Overall it was great to see people showing support. Even the small things like having a group chat allow people to support each other and express feelings "



Paul Dickens
Participant

" The sessions were really helpful for me and I enjoyed being in the water. Surprisingly, I think i enjoyed the singing the most. Even my wife was amazed to hear me singing around the house and practicing. I do have social groups, but alot of them revolve around football, beer and meeting in pubs. So to do something outside of that with a new group of people was refreshing "



Ashley Kirk
Participant

" I think projects like this help massively with mental health. Even today, for me, just having something to come along to and to be involved in helps me focus my mind. Just being around other people with a shared goal and drive. The projects showed me the importance of being around Bluespaces and its something I will continue to do for my own mental health "



Scott Clayton
Project Coordinator

" The projects is all about getting people in, on and around the water. Getting guys to think of the five ways of wellbeing - Connecting people to each other, connecting them to nature, promoting community cohesion and inclusion and getting people active. All broad activities that can contribute to giving people a solid platform of resilience. "



Trekkah Benjamin
Project Coordinator

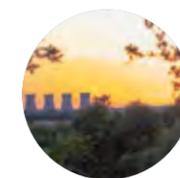
" After a successful pilot project, I feel the main goal now is to financially sustain the project over a longer time period. The impact and need is clearly evident and I would love for our project to be the first portal of call for males in the local area to access a safe space where they can take part in active creative arts and water based activity "

LEARNING

Drawn from consultation and evaluation with Project Leaders, Participants and also Audience members and Family Members of Participants we have learned alot from our 'Under the birdge' Pilot Project

- PARTICIPANTS REPORTED THEY WOULD LOVE TO SEE THE PROJECT RUN THROUGH THE YEAR
- PARTICIPANTS REPORTED THEIR INTEREST IN WEEKEND RESIDENTIALS
- 80% OF PARTICIPANTS REPORTED THAT THEY ENJOYED THE MUSIC/SIGNING ACTIVITIES
- 100% OF PARTICIPANTS REPORTED THAT THEY ENJOYED THE WATERBASED ACTIVITIES
- 75% OF PARTICIPANTS REPORTED THAT THEY ENJOYED THE CREATIVE ARTS ACTIVITIES
- PARTICIPANTS REPORTED THAT THEY ARE KEEN TO EXPLORE MORE HOLISTIC, WELLBEING ACTIVITIES BY THE WATER
- PROJECT LEADERS REPORTED THE NEED FOR CPD IN HEALTH & SAFETY, SAFEGUARDING
- PROJECT LEADERS REPORTED THE NEED FOR STRONGER PARTNERSHIP WITH LOCAL MENTAL HEALTH SERVICES

WATCH
BBC EAST MIDLAND



WATCH
FULL DOCUMENTARY

LISTEN
AUDIO FROM PERFORMANCE

WATCH
EVERYDAY ATHLETE BLOG

