

# Music Labs 2021

**A report by Playlist for Life**  
December 2021





# 1. Introduction

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The Music Labs project is our way of involving people living with dementia and those who care for them in shaping the future of our services and resources through a model of co-design and peer support.

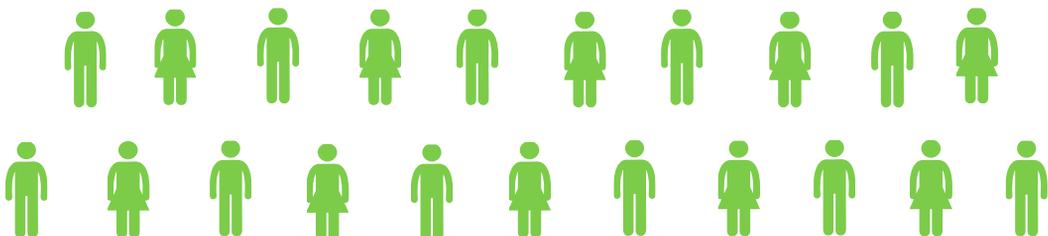
We bring people together to tell us more about the issues and barriers they face when using personal music. We then work together on developing ways to solve these issues.

RS Macdonald funded the continuation of the Music Labs project into its third year. After a year of learning from and adapting to the pandemic we entered 2021 with a focus on shifting Music Lab work into a virtual setting. Throughout the year, we ran 4 projects, which were facilitated remotely. The projects were chosen based on participants' needs and gaps in our existing resource provision, with methods including surveys, group device testing and individual projects.

## 2. The testers

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We began by establishing a new, simpler recruitment process for Music Labs, creating an open call for participants online. Participants could sign up as virtual panel members and indicate the types of projects they would be interested in. Through this method we engaged a panel of 40 virtual testers, 21 of whom were unpaid carers or people living with dementia, with others from Help Point and healthcare organisations. Initial discussions with each participant around how they accessed music informed and shaped the projects we worked on, and panel members could choose with opportunities they wanted to get involved with.



# 3. The projects

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## Smart Speaker Testing project

Playlist for Life had often been asked for advice on listening to music through voice activated technology or for advice on listening to music for people who are not able to use physical devices. We worked with 5 people living with dementia and 2 family carers to explore how Alexa enabled devices could be used to listen to playlists. We created a project report, a 'How To' guide, top tips guide in participants' own words and a video sharing participants experience to promote the resources.

View the smart speaker resources [here](#).

## Creation and testing of the Playlist Maker

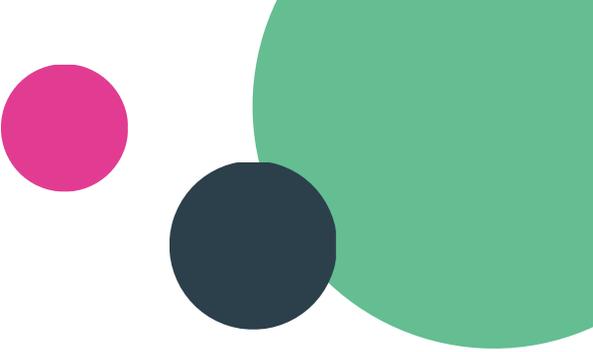
During previous Music Lab work we had created an Automatic Playlist Maker tool, designed to make building a playlist on online music streaming platforms simpler and more accessible. While we saw value in the tool the lack of uptake in use showed that improvements needed to be made. Participants from our virtual panel tested the Automatic Playlist Maker and reported their experience through online surveys. Feedback allowed us to implement changes and improve the tool. We have made the new Playlist Maker available on our website resources page, alongside new instructions based on feedback and learning from the project.

You can find the Automatic Playlist Maker [here](#).

## Testing of Mighty Player

We ran a one-to-one device testing project with an unpaid carer and her husband who lives with dementia. The carer tested the Mighty Player, a type of portable streaming player. While the player had benefits, the carer's experience showed that the device was not particularly user friendly for people with dementia or who are inexperienced with technology. There had been plans to test this device with further users, however due to the initial critical feedback on the device we did not extend the project. We shared the carer's experience in a project evaluation blog, and will make people aware of the device where suitable, but will not be recommending it officially.

You can view the Mighty Player blog [here](#).



## Creation and testing of webinar for people living with dementia

We worked with 4 virtual panel members living with dementia and 1 family carer to create a webinar for people living with dementia. We already offered a suite of webinars for Help Points and unpaid carers but through consultation sessions with Music Lab participants living with dementia we were able to improve the content, facilitation and visual accessibility of our webinar format to create a more dementia friendly session. This session focused on how a playlist helps someone live well with dementia and the format included more breaks and opportunities for questions and sharing between participants. We have created slides and a script which can be used by Playlist for Life staff members and will be shared with Help Point partners to help them engage the people they support in Playlist for Life.

You can view the dementia friendly webinar feedback [here](#).

## Other projects

Throughout the course of the year, we also consulted participants on smaller scale projects including a survey on an updated website design and consultations on the importance of peer support within our Help Point network. These consultations helped us get fast feedback on smaller projects and our wider participation engagement strategies.





# 4. Results

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## 5.1 Increasing confidence and understanding

Testing devices in the Music Lab environment, with the support of a Playlist for Life facilitator helped increase participants' confidence in discovering new products and giving them a try.

***“I don’t know if I would have had the patience or the drive to go through this process if it wasn’t for knowing you were there to help me.”***

***“I had toyed with the idea of [ a smart speaker] but had never heard one in action. So, I took advantage of [ the facilitator’s] kind offer to try one out. I absolutely loved the way she quickly replied to emails, and always extended offers of help.”***

Most devices being tested were new to the participants and some were daunted at the prospect of using new technology. With mentoring and support from Playlist for Life and other virtual panel members, participants were able to develop their skills and increase their confidence in accessing a playlist. 4 out of 5 participants testing smart speakers reported that using the devices made listening to their music easier and all participants reported that the devices helped them listen to music more regularly.

***“It’s so simple I could even add music to my playlist. I didn’t think I would like it because I’m a touchy-feely person and I like my CDs but I find I’m playing more music with the Alexa than getting up to put a CD on”***

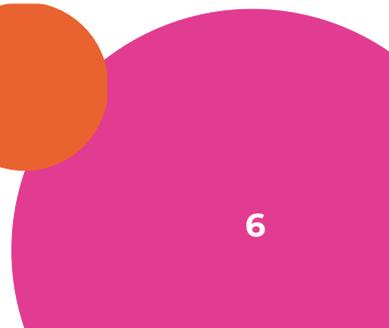
The collaborative nature of the projects gave participants a sense of ownership over the work and beyond taking part in the testing process they were encouraged to feed into development of resources. The resources developed from the smart speaker testing project include a guide solely in the words of participants and our dementia webinar features stories and tips directly from participants' experience. Taking part in this process gave participants a sense of empowerment with participants reporting that they were proud that sharing their experience could help others in similar situations.

***“I felt that I was helping others by taking part in the project, it made me feel special.”***

***“I think I can speak from experience, and I am so very keen to help because I know what's ahead of me and I want to give something back. If I relay how I feel to someone else or give them advice how to make a playlist I would willingly do that”***

Beyond testing if tools and devices were user friendly for people living with dementia, we encouraged participants to explore how tools could make building a playlist easier. All participants testing the Automatic Playlist Maker agreed that they were able to find songs they liked easily, and all recommended it as a tool for other people living with dementia and carers.

***“This is a great way to do the music detective work for our family members”***





## Online Communication

The majority of communication during projects took place through Zoom calls, which were mostly successful. Group feedback sessions had their challenges, including participants lacking confidence to join in conversation on zoom and some small technical difficulties. However, by having multiple facilitators and allowing time for all participants to share their thoughts and feedback, online communications worked well and participants enjoyed the opportunities to connect with other testers.

***“It helps to see how other people deal with problems you have or expect to have in the future as things progress.”***

The creation of the online dementia friendly webinar will also help us support more people with dementia to make and use playlists through online engagement. With many organisations in our Help Point network having moved to providing online support, this resource will allow them to introduce playlists to the people they support in a virtual setting.

## Sharing tools and resources

Working with the experts, people with dementia and unpaid carers, to develop tools and resources allows us to ensure our support materials are accessible and useful for our target audience. As well as allowing us to recommend new tools and devices, the testing process can help us identify where devices may not be suitable for people with dementia and sharing this information allows people to make an informed decision about what technology they are choosing to use.

The tools and resources created in the Music Labs projects can be highlighted in training and webinars run by Playlist for Life. Sharing the tools and evidence reports with our partner organisations helps them improve their skills and knowledge and helps them support the people they work with to use playlists.

# 5. Learning

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Taking a virtual approach opened up opportunities, such as helping us engage a wider range of participants from a wider range of locations. Virtual participation also helped us to overcome some of the challenges presented by the COVID-19 pandemic. However, we did miss some of the benefits that face-to-face participation brings. When working with complex technological devices, providing support over video calls or through written guidance is not as effective as face-to-face, hands-on support. Trust and connection between facilitator and participants can also be harder to build when working remotely. There was one participant who lived in an accessible geographic location who benefited from some face-to-face meetings to discuss the projects he was taking part in. Both methods have their benefits and in future we will consider approaching similar projects with a blended model where possible.

We also found that the level of support required for some of the projects was greater than anticipated. During the smart speaker testing project in particular, participants needed considerable support with the initial set up phase of the project, which in turn delayed the testing phase. Participants also needed substantial support at the end of the project when transitioning to using the devices themselves. The need for this extra support extended the length of the project, meaning that other projects, such as the Mighty Player testing were delayed or had to be scaled down. In future we will build in extra time and capacity for the potential extra support required. While the delays impacted the time scales of other projects the extra calls, group discussions and conversations helped us learn even more about the extra challenges facing our testers and the importance of peer support when working with new technology.

As with previous Music Lab work, we observed that there is no one size fits all approach to accessing music and that suitability of tools and devices will always be dependent on individuals' existing understanding of technology and experience of living dementia. We will continue to explore new solutions to help people overcome the barriers to accessing playlists.



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**Music Labs**  
from Playlist for Life

