



Butterflies-Voice Choir Keynsham Action Network

Arts & Health South West Prize 2016 Shortlisted Case Study



Name of organisation: Keynsham Action Network (KAN)

Title of project/programme: Butterflies-Voice Choir

Dates of project/programme: 12th November 2014 to 1st July 2015

Summary

The Butterflies-Voice project, inspired by the Gareth Malone BBC2 TV series, involved forming a new choir in Keynsham and using film to follow its development towards a high profile public performance. The project required a triple collaboration. Firstly, we worked with Trish Williams, from Butterflies-Haven, the Keynsham-based support organisation for families affected by the autism spectrum (ASD). Though keen to sing, the children lacked opportunities to develop their enthusiasm. Secondly, for the filming, we approached the nearby, creative arts-oriented, Bath Spa University. They helped us to recruit final year student, Tilly Karabina, to lead a three-person film crew to create a short documentary film. Thirdly, we worked closely with Ric Davison, director of Keynsham Music Festival, to enable the final concert. With generous support from the Quartet Community Foundation, our local Waitrose store and Keynsham Town Council, we recruited our choirmaster: Charlie Groves, Bristol-based musician and composer. Rehearsals started on 12th November 2014. Our repertoire was popular songs, several reflecting the challenges faced by the Butterflies families, particularly 'Something Inside', 'Lean on me' and 'Lovely Day'. We also sang two original songs with lyrics developed within the group and music composed by Charlie. At times it was hard. A few children struggled with the commitment and patience required and some parents had longish journeys to rehearsals, but we won through. The final performance on 1st July 2015, starting with Tilly's film premiere, was as exciting and heart-warming as it was revealing.

Overview

Identifying need and location

There is a severe shortage of inclusive social opportunities for children with autism in B&NES and surrounding authorities. Butterflies-Haven, the Keynsham-based support organisation for families affected by the autism spectrum, has had a waiting list since it was founded in 2009.

In B&NES, the proportion of school children with a confirmed ASD is above the national average: 8% locally; 6% nationally. For UK, children with known learning disabilities suffer over four times more mental health problems than typical children, yet many affected children have musical potential superior to the typical child [data from B&NES website]. From national surveys, though public awareness of 'autism' is high, awareness of Asperger' Syndrome is low, as is awareness of prevalence (approximately 1%). This leads to social exclusion of affected people whose behaviour is atypical. This is likely to improve with greater understanding.

Regarding the health of Keynsham community, a relative lack of social cohesion (despite much social activity) includes an invisible social barrier marked by the river. There has been a gradual loss of identity over many years, with the change from a market town with a fascinating heritage and a full range of commerce and employment, to a dormitory for Bath and Bristol. This has

accelerated since the closure of the Cadbury's factory in 2008. Social capital, through functioning networks and pride-of-place, helps prevent socially determined illness and exclusion of minorities.

Aims and Objectives

The overall aim of Keynsham Action Network (KAN) is to stimulate the building of community for health by connecting people and groups for purposes that inspire and empower them. This project's particular objective is, through the power of the creative arts, to draw people together in a way that promotes inclusion through awareness and understanding of ASD. For the choir members, our objective was to build confidence, realise musical interest and ability, and provide an experience of inclusion as equals.

What we did, partnerships, activities and dates

Inspired by the popular Gareth Malone choir programmes 2013 broadcasts on BBC2, we aimed to start a new choir, 'Butterflies-Voice', and document its development on film. Butterflies-Haven provides an opportunity to adapt the Malone formula. First, we assembled our collaborative team: Alastair Singleton, Christina Smith and Sarah Fox from KAN, Trish Williams from Butterflies-Haven; Ric Davison from Keynsham Music Festival; lecturer, Mimi Thebo from Bath Spa University (BSU); Jackie Edwards, with links to the National Autistic Society; Mary-Jane Middlehurst from B&NES family information service and Michael Auton, freelance fundraiser. Next, we identified our choirmaster, Charlie, and recruited three students from Bath Spa University to make the film and help with marketing and social media. Rehearsals started on 12th November 2014. The choir varied in numbers from a low of four to over twenty, with a mixture of children (aged seven to sixteen), parents, volunteers from Butterflies-Haven and supporters of KAN. At a very successful carol concert in the local Waitrose store on 17th December with about twenty singers, the documentary film crew introduced themselves through filming and photographing that event. They then attended rehearsals at intervals through five months until filming finished to allow submission by the university deadline. The leads of each of the Keynsham partners (Trish Williams, Ric Davison, William House) and Charlie Groves were interviewed on camera. The choir sang at a large concert in St Swithin's Church in Bath on 6th June 2015. The final gala solo concert with fifteen singers and almost capacity audience in 'The Space' in Keynsham's new Civic Centre on 1st July included the premiere of the documentary film.

Artforms and Artists

Choirmaster Charlie Groves, Bristol-based all-round musician and composer, experienced with children, has irrepressible enthusiasm even at difficult times when bad weather and dark evenings reduced rehearsal turnout. Fun warm-up games prepared for tackling difficult singing in parts. He chose repertoire very suited to the group, and he and the choir created two original songs included in the final concert.

Documentary film director and producer

Tilly Kerabina, final year creative writing student at BSU; created the documentary film and a stunning 'butterfly' design, animated at the end of the

film and used in promotional literature and final concert t-shirts. This project was her Creative Enterprise submission for her final degree. She gained a high mark.

Video camera

Lewis Killick, student at BSU; also editing and other technical support. Butterflies children took their own video footage, some made the final cut.

Still camera and marketing

Frankie Towle, final year student at BSU, created and maintained Butterflies-Voice Facebook page and twitter feed, and created a folding flyer incorporating Tilly's butterfly design.

Intended health outcomes

- There is strong evidence for health benefit from music, especially group singing, listening to others, discipline and collaboration.
- At least some of the children to gain in social confidence; together with a sense of achievement. Both will promote health.
- For the wider population, attendance at the concerts and reading the publicity will produce a 'feel-good' factor, and hence wellbeing.
- Pride-of-place that this project was entirely undertaken in Keynsham will add to wellbeing.
- Similar reactions expected from film viewings online – that there is some good news in the world!

Beneficiaries

Direct involvement (numbers approximate):

- 30 people sang in the choir at least once;
- 180 Waitrose customers and staff at Christmas Carol concert;
- 200 people St Swithin's concert;
- 100 people at final concert/ film premiere;
- 5 BSU Students and staff.

Indirect involvement:

- pre final concert: through press releases to both local newspapers (delivered free or picked up – about 25,000 copies)
- post final concert – press release and pictures in Keynsham Voice (11,000 copies)
- social Media + website: each collaborating organisation has extensive social media networks promoting the project and final concert.

Outputs

- 3 public concerts

- film trailer 1min 26secs
- final film: 8min 44secs
- 2 original songs
- group of changed children + adults
- newspaper stories & photos
- employed musician 3hrs/wk for 8m
- contribution to experience and qualifications for 3 students.
- learning for the partner organisations.

Innovation

This project was innovative at three levels:

- We are not aware of any previous choir project expressly for children and families affected by autism; though there have been choirs elsewhere including people with a range of mental health problems.
- The documentary film not only enables the project to be shared across the world, but the children contributed directly by using an adapted iphone and their own filming is included in the final product.
- The members of the choir, especially the children, played an active role in the composition of two new songs: *What I want to say* and *The Miracle*. Both of these songs relate directly to the experience of the children affected by autism. The lyrics of *The Miracle* were written by Trish Williams, founder of Butterflies-Haven, and music composed by Charlie.

Added value: This was an additional opportunity for families affected by the autism spectrum who were already attending Butterflies-Haven. Because of the scarcity of such services, families living over a wide area are attracted to Butterflies-Haven. This includes B&NES, South Glos, Bristol and surrounding area. Although the choir did not become a permanent offer, during its life it was valued by its members, giving them new experience, skills and memories.

Participation

Participation was intrinsic to the project.

Children and families:

A nucleus of 8-10 singers regularly attended about 25 weekly rehearsals. Several other singers supported the choir intermittently. Of the nine children who attended at the beginning, seven were still there for the final concert, as well as two parents, two Butterflies volunteers, two members of KAN and two choir supporters – total final concert singers: fifteen. This is a considerable achievement, especially since some of the parents had a longish journey to attend rehearsals. One 11 year old boy, L, sang very little, but came to rehearsals, enjoyed the rhythm and movement games, played with his toys and by his sheer presence at the final concert became a moving testament to perseverance. Another child, E, sang joyfully and enthusiastically with her own special harmonies.

Other participation:

Ric Davison, lead for Keynsham Music Festival (KMF), was involved and enthusiastic from the outset. He is a strong believer in the therapeutic power of creative art, especially music. This extended participation to the whole KMF team and to Keynsham Town Council.

Many others became involved and enthused by the project including the BSU students and the staff with whom they relate; people running the venues for rehearsal and performance; Dave at KitCo who printed the t-shirts; Colourworks in Bath who printed the promotional literature; the vice-chair of B&NES council, Alan Hale, and many more.

Outcomes

We did not formally evaluate the project. We depend on views and impressions, with photographic and video evidence. We have already identified aims at three levels. First, the individual participant; second, the choir itself; third, the whole community. There were also five cross-cutting health objectives identified in the Intended Health Outcomes section. I will refer to these where relevant.

Individual participants:

KAN chair (WH) attended almost all rehearsals as a singing choir member, so was witness to these weekly events. Most of the time, the children were clearly enjoying themselves. Scenes from the final documentary film and numerous still photos are additional evidence for this. The adults enjoyed themselves in a more measured way, but were clearly warmed by the fun that was had by the children. At least two of the adults said they intended to start singing lessons.

Parent after early rehearsal Dec 2015:

Q: How do you find it?

A: It's really, really good..... It's a good thing, lots of people have come together and we've done a bit more singing this week which is good, really enjoyable.

Q: What do you think the children are getting from it?

A: Well it's nice to be part of a group, to belong to a group where they're all accepted in that group. It's doing something nice together that's actually making music .. it's really fun and enjoyable.

Q: So what do you think about performing one day?

A: Um, well (laughter), that's where we're aiming for, isn't it? So hopefully, the idea is to get everyone's confidence up, and if I can manage to get L to gain some confidence to join in, then that would be brilliant.

Group outcomes for choir

Despite difficulties and struggles, the choir came through and produced a brilliant performance before an almost capacity audience on 1st July 2016. The singing had real authenticity, and the atmosphere in the performance space was full of joy and achievement, and the shedding of tears.

Parent email after final concert 2nd July 2016:

Just wanted to say a huge thank you for last night. M had a brilliant time and the whole choir was fantastic. Thank you for all the hard work you have put in.

Email from choirmaster, Charlie, after final concert:

...thanks so much for all your hard work, good humour and dedication in helping to make last night one of the best of my life.

Whole community

Demonstrating outcomes here is difficult. The work that KAN is doing requires faith in the power of healthy networks with good conversations to generate healthy people. There is no doubt that Keynsham is changing (not least its built environment) but at this level, we will never be able to attribute effects to particular causes. The faith we have can be explicated through complexity theory, but ultimately rests in the human need to belong and to be loved. If we do what we do with love, especially involving the creative arts, then good will come of it.

Learning

The first challenge was maintaining attendance numbers at rehearsals. There was much initial excitement with the Christmas carol concert after just four rehearsals. The carols were familiar, Silent Night was sung in three part harmony and the filming was exciting. But soon after restarting in January, the reality of the long haul to July and the learning of unfamiliar songs took its toll. Rehearsals stopped for three weeks in February whilst Charlie was on leave. In March, two children dropped out and the filmed rehearsal on 22nd April had only eight singers. However, in May three additional adults joined and as the final concert approached there was a shift in energy and rehearsing took on new urgency.

The second challenge was communication. KAN led on project management, but communication with Butterflies-Haven and choir members between rehearsals became increasingly difficult. There were no crises, but relationships became strained. A simple example was getting sizes for the t-shirt order! When we asked one of the new adult singers to take charge of the t-shirts, the problem was solved.

We believe the underlying problems were the small size of Butterflies-Haven (about thirty families) with limited administrative capacity, the distance some families had to travel and the inexperience of KAN in organising a choir. Whilst the last of these is remediable, the other two are not. Rather than continue with the choir into the Autumn of 2015, we decided to go out on a high, and let the final concert mark the end of the project.

Critical success factors

Our main achievement was undertaking an ambitious project and seeing it through to its natural conclusion with a highly successful and moving public show. This is particularly gratifying because of the unusual remit of KAN. We undertake projects which emerge from the community – from conversations with individuals or with other organisations. So we must be creative, flexible, adaptable, improvisatory, rather than expert in a narrow field. This helps to ensure that our actions are guided by what the community wants, rather than what we or anyone else thinks they need. This attitude was also at the core of Charlie Groves' approach as choirmaster. He was responsive and creative with the children, encouraging them to show initiative, and knowing when to correct them, and when not to correct them.

The aspect of the project that ran most smoothly, and provided the most enduring and tangible output was the collaboration with Bath Spa University for the documentary film. The students were also demonstrating the same creative capacities – Tilly Karabina had never made a film before. This is in line with KAN's aims: we set an example to the public of the possibilities for empowerment – that ordinary folk can achieve extraordinary things. KAN's motto is: Empowering people to build community.

Regarding further work, there is some unspent funding which will be used at Community@67 (community space in a deprived area of Keynsham) for singing sessions for older people under the direction of Charlie Groves, which could be another choir in the making!

Funding and Resources

Our estimated expenditure was £7,500 (including a post-concert local choir tour over two terms, which did not take place). Most of this was the choirmaster fees (£4,600) and rehearsal room rental (£2,000). The remainder included event marketing, student expenses, t-shirts, admin etc.

Our first funding application for the full cost of the project was made to the Autism Innovation Fund (NHS). After delaying the announcement of the awards several times our bid was unsuccessful. This was two weeks before our scheduled start date in November 2014, which was critical to having the students involved because of the university timetable. By using reserves as bridging finance we opted to engage the choirmaster before an alternative funding stream was available.

Ultimately, the project was funded through four grants: Quartet Community Foundation - Express grant (£1,000); Quartet Community Foundation - Healthy lives, healthy people (£2,000); Waitrose - Music Matters (£1,000); Keynsham Town Council (£500); direct local fundraising (£139). This amounts to £4,639. At the time of the conclusion of the project we had spent £3,919. We have approval from Quartet Community Foundation to use the unspent funding of £720 for singing for older people as described above.

Image Credits

Title: An early rehearsal moment

Date: 12th November 2014 to 1st July 2015

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Title: Warming up for the final concert

Date: 12th November 2014 to 1st July 2015

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Title: Tilly with hug and flowers

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