

Rising Voices Higher Rising Voices Wessex



Name of organisation: Rising Voices Wessex, community choirs for people affected by cancer

Title of project/programme: Rising Voices Higher

Dates of project/programme: Ongoing

Summary

A diagnosis of cancer, shatters peoples live and those of their family. Rising Voices Wessex community choirs present a unique way to help people affected by cancer to recover from their experience. The choirs are open to anyone who needs support and encouragement to regain their health and wellbeing following treatment for cancer, those who are carers or those who have lost a loved one to cancer. Members do not need to be able to read music. The project aims to help people achieve a 'new normality' in the above circumstances. Singing is recognised as improving self-confidence, wellbeing and quality of life.

The choir was initially set up for three months to 'test the concept' in 2013 and evaluation showed that people found the singing beneficial - the initial choir was established in Poole and now has over 60 members; a second Bournemouth-based choir commenced in June 2015 has over 20 members. A further survey of members in 2015 yielded overwhelmingly positive feedback as to the benefits of membership.

The choirs have a charismatic professional musical director, key to getting the best from participants. Management of the choir is by a group of five Trustees – each with a background in clinical care and experience of cancer – overseeing a steering group who coordinate the everyday functions of the choir and its engagements.

From its outset there has been a constructive, working partnership with the Lighthouse Arts Centre in Poole and Macmillan Cancer Support. Rising Voices Wessex became a Registered Charity in January 2016.

Overview

Presently there are 2.5 million people in the UK living with a diagnosis of cancer. This number is predicted to become 4.0 million by 2030 with the increased cancer incidence and lengthening survival as treatments improve. The need for support and rehabilitation of people affected by cancer was identified in the NHS Cancer Plan (2000). The National Cancer Survivorship Initiative (2008-10). Living With and Beyond Cancer: Taking Action to Improve Outcomes (2013) describes initiatives that show the potential of projects that focus on involvement in shared activity to improve wellbeing and quality of life. This also highlights the consequent ability to reduce medical dependency. Singing is a creative and social activity and recognised as offering health and wellbeing benefits - and requires no complex or expensive equipment for members. Clinical professionals living locally recognised the need and were instrumental in establishing a case to develop community-based choirs in the area to offer rehabilitative support for people affected by cancer.

Aims and objectives

- providing and promoting music participation through singing as a means of regaining confidence, health and wellbeing to complement rehabilitation during and following treatment for cancer;
- providing support to families and carers of people living with or affected by cancer;
- improving public awareness regarding the problems and circumstances of people living

with and beyond cancer as well as their families and carers through information and education;

- seeking to "normalise" post-cancer living by making available support through singing in the community;
- fostering mutual help, co-operation and friendship in an understanding and empathetic environment for those affected by cancer;
- making appropriate representations to relevant statutory bodies and other organisations on behalf of people affected by cancer;
- promoting, conducting, and engaging in research/evaluation as to the benefits of music and singing to those affected by cancer (publishing the useful results of which for the public benefit); and
- promoting a strategy that supports the development of other choirs within Dorset and Hampshire and forges appropriate musical and cultural links with other like-minded organisations.

What we did

The application to establish the choir was approved by Dorset Cancer Network in 2012 and secured initial funding for the project. Partnership with the Lighthouse Arts Centre in Poole was key to the effective launch of the choir in 2013 and received local publicity and a short feature on BBC South Today. A rigorous process of appointing a Choir Director was employed –an interview combined with an observed rehearsal with representative members. The charisma and engagement of the director with the choir were deemed to be a crucial for success.

Rising Voices has received support from Macmillan Cancer Support, Going for Bust and the National Lottery and a donation from our Patron Fiona Castle OBE. There were practical difficulties with guaranteed regular weekly accommodation in The Lighthouse. Alternatives were sought with St John's Church, Ashley Rd, Parkstone proving to be a hospitable and welcoming base for the Poole choir. The Bournemouth choir commenced in June 2015 and currently meets in the Community Room Tesco Superstore, a space it has outgrown and is currently looking for new affordable premises.

Artists

Ali Sharpe directs both Choirs - and this has consolidated a band of singers who powerfully display the benefits of and enjoyment of singing. She is supported by one of the members, a professional musician who deputises for her on occasions.

Intended health outcomes

Whatever the outcome of cancer treatment individuals generally consider themselves as "living with cancer". People live with the impact of the diagnosis and often with side effects of it, or its treatment. Some are "cured" but most will experience recurrence and further treatment - essentially cancer is a long-term condition.

The choirs combine for performances and there are many local community events during the year. In 2015 we were fortunate to be able to sing with Russell Watson at the Lighthouse and this year we will be singing with Blake at the Regent Centre in Christchurch.

Fantastic achievements for many of our members who have never sung or performed before.

Research has shown that singing improves self-confidence (Donnellan et al,2013) and wellbeing, encourages creativity, and improves memory and breathing techniques (valuable for people with cancer). It also increases relaxation and decreases fatigue in treated cancer survivors (Chuang et al, 2010). Benefits to health and wellbeing for Rising Voices Wessex participants were confirmed in a survey of members undertaken by a music psychologist in the first three months after the choir's formation. A further survey undertaken in August 2015 also gave very positive feedback.

Beneficiaries

The choir also benefits those who are carers and those who have been bereaved through cancer, one member described the support as a "lifesaver". There are community benefits - enhanced wellbeing reduces medical dependency.

Putting heart and soul into performances provide a positive image of "living with cancer" instead of the media-created cancer "victim".

Outputs

As well as the health and social benefits of the choir our outputs can be measured in its performances, further details available at www.risingvoices.org.uk. Our quantitative survey from 2015 is available on our website. Further work needs to be undertaken for qualitative benefits. Rising Voices Wessex has come a long way from its launch in January 2013. Core membership is around 80/90. Rising Voices Wessex became a Registered Charity in January 2016.

Partnerships

Include:

- Macmillan Cancer Support,
- Lewis Manning Hospice,
- Going for Bust,
- Lottery Fund
- and the Lighthouse Arts Centre in Poole.
- The choir is a member of Arts and Health South West and National Council for Voluntary Organisations.

Location

St John's Church, Ashley Road, Parkstone, Poole, BH14 0AA and Tesco Community Room, Riverside Avenue, Bournemouth BH7 7DY

Activities

The activity is that of singing and social interaction for people whose lives have been disadvantaged through health issues related to cancer. Members also take part in performances - this is not compulsory; those who just wish to join in with rehearsals or who just want to support us for performances are also welcome.

When the project happened

Ongoing since January 2013. The choirs meet every week at Bournemouth on a Monday and Poole on a Tuesday.

Innovation

The key innovation is the establishment of the choir specifically as a form of rehabilitation and a means to achieve wellbeing after having experienced the aspects of cancer described above. No such specific choir was in existence previously in the locality - that some key funding sources have been from the health sector represents further innovation and acknowledges the beneficial relationship between music-making, in this case singing, and wellbeing.

The choir combines the sense of achievement and joy in music-making and performance with providing a supportive, empathetic social environment, described by members as a 'family'. This provides a valuable platform for individuals to regain confidence and wellbeing. The choir seeks to present a culture change from the traditional "dying of cancer" image prevalent in society to one of living well with cancer.

Cancer may bring people together but it is not the main topic of conversation - that is about its music and social activities. This encourages people to be more outgoing and forward thinking; it enables people to have outings that they may not do on their own, giving them confidence to move on with their lives. We want to be able to share this magic and spread the word to encourage others to join the choirs but also share the innovation and build a network of choirs across the south.

Participation

The choir

Members participate in the regular weekly rehearsal – as many as possible are encouraged to take part in performances which raises the choir's profile and presents a positive image of living with cancer and is important in fund-raising. Performances provide satisfaction and a sense of achievement that enhances self-confidence and wellbeing for individual members. When people come to the choir rehearsals or see the choir perform they are experiencing a creative process – making music

The Trustees

There are five trustees for the choir all from a clinical background; all have had experience of cancer either personally or professionally. The Trustees are responsible for the strategic thinking and governance of the choir. They give their time voluntarily – and seek to raise the profile of singing for health as well as making the choir self-supporting. The choir has a steering group of two of the Trustees, the Choir Director and volunteer choir members. This group is responsible for organising rehearsals and events and ensuring that the members are kept informed.

The Choir Director

The only paid individual – having the services of a trained charismatic professional is critical to the success of the choir in achieving its objectives

Clinical Champions and Patrons

We have two clinical champions (cancer clinicians) and two patrons (from the arts) and a wide range of stakeholders who support our work.

Outcomes

When the choir was set up an independent evaluation from a Music Psychologist was commissioned. Health questionnaires were distributed to all choir members who assessed their own physical and psychological states on a scale of 1-10 monthly during its first 3 months. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with 5 choir members and these were analysed using Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis. Those interviewed felt overwhelmingly that they had experienced both social and psychological benefits. They valued the empathic nature of the group and a safe environment where they could share information, be supportive, or be inspired by others who were further into the recovery journey.

Key outcomes from 2015 survey, members feel:

- Uplifted
- Inspired
- A sense of achievement

Members comments:

One member said that Rising Voices “has made a huge difference to my life and my health my breathing is so much better” and another commented that Rising Voices was “ a tremendous help since my wife died. It has been inspiring and socially wonderful”. Several others talk about being a member of the choir as being part of a ‘family’.

Public performance enhanced self-esteem and personal confidence. The choir was perceived as having benefits for family relationships and as offering a means of transition between dealing with the effects of cancer and re-entering ‘normal’ life.

The venues and general organisation of the choir were regarded as excellent. The Choir Director was seen as having played a significant role in the success of the choir. The Rising Voices video on www.risingvoices.org.uk where people talk positively about their experience of cancer and the choir confirms for the choir has a place in people’s lives.

The diagnosis of cancer shatters people’s lives and creates enormous physical, social and emotional upheavals for them, their carers and other family members. Developments in the management of cancer have significantly increased life expectancy. As survival rates increase, so does the need for psychosocial support and initiatives to optimise quality of life. Medical care is predominantly focused on diagnosing and “measuring” cancer in individuals

– with a more limited focus on holistic aspects of care. Research has shown that group singing has several physiological, psychological and social components that can interact to create a feeling of wellbeing.

The media depict people living with cancer as 'victims', people 'battling' with the disease. We want to show that something positive can come out of the experience of cancer that people can go on to live a 'new normal' life. The choir helps rebuild people's confidence as well as their health and we have had members fit enough to return to work, or take a holiday abroad and others go on to sing with other choirs.

Learning

Setting up the choirs has been a significant learning curve for us – from initiation of the choir, dealing with the dynamic of running the choir, handling requests for public performance, financial management, registering as a charity and the need to develop a strategy for longer term viability - key learning includes: -

- Practicalities of setting up and running a choir - the benefits of partnership and support from the Lighthouse Arts Centre and linking with local Arts organisations and similar choirs in other localities
- Importance of engaging choir members in running of the choir – establishing a monthly "operational steering group" enhanced all round efficiency, especially in handling and organising performances.
- Importance of a stable, accessible and welcoming venue with appropriate facilities -- comfort, acoustics, access for all, disabled toilet and kitchen facilities.
- Challenges of fund raising - understanding and achieving balance between members' donations and grant support.
- Development of overall governance - the choir started on a relatively small scale and in an informal way. It was recognised that there was a need for formal underpinning governance processes, which are now in place.
- Development of Policies and Risk Assessment - to support overall governance and ensure smooth running of the choirs.
- Securing public and clinical engagement - engaging with cancer teams locally, development of website and social media and promoting the choir's message at performances and through the local media.
- Broader community benefits – value of presenting a positive image and understanding about living with cancer – potential for volunteer involvement.

Critical success factors

The critical success of the choir is its ability to enable members to regain health and wellbeing. It has been possible to observe the visible improvement in many individuals' self-confidence. The positive feedback received from members and the description of benefits in the surveys all point to the choir achieving this fundamental and primary objective. Success has been manifest in the following -

- Public performances at a range of local events - all have generated positive feedback

from audiences and benefitted choir members.

- The successful application for a Big Lottery Grant in 2014. This designated funding has enabled the choir to wear simple 'uniforms' for performances
- An appearance by the choir on Radio Solent in May 2015
- The appearance as the supportive choir for Russell Watson at The Poole Lighthouse in June 2015
- Joining with the Wessex Cancer Trust in a carol concert at Lyndhurst in December 2015
- A request to appear with Blake in May 2016.
- A DVD/weblink (www.risingvoices.org.uk) and website enhancement to promote the choir (Note this now needs funding to update).
- Grants from Macmillan Cancer Support and Going for Bust for PA equipment are also evidence of success.
- Ongoing partnership and liaison with the Poole Arts Centre
- Becoming a registered charity in England and Wales January 2016 registration number 1165953
- Being a member of the National Council for Voluntary Organisations and Arts & Health South West.
- Being finalist in the Lottery Peoples Project shown on ITV
- Increasing membership offering further support to people affected by cancer.

Funding and Resources

Since the initial priming grant from the now defunct Dorset Cancer Network the choir is independent of the NHS with an aim to achieve long term financial viability through a combination of members' donations, appropriate grant support and local sponsorship. Members make a suggested weekly donation of £3 towards the cost of refreshments and venue costs at rehearsals. They also contribute to the costs of their 'uniform'. Funds are also raised by raffles. For performances a donation is requested and collections are made at these events. We also have other fundraising planned for 2016. The initial funding from the Dorset Cancer Network and a grant from Macmillan Cancer Support covered set up costs. The Lottery grant was used to help with the cost of 'uniforms' for choir performances and raising the choir's "marketing" profile through an enhanced website and professionally made video clip for the website and a shortened version for YouTube. The principal cost for the choir is payment to the Musical Director – the current and future strategy is that the Musical Director will be a freelance professional engaged by Rising Voices Wessex to take rehearsals and performances on an agreed term basis. The choir also incurs costs for musical equipment, lyric sheets, banners, collection boxes and leaflets and travel costs for performances, as well as insurance cover and other expenses. Trustees and members of the steering group provide their services on a voluntary basis.

Image Credits

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