

# **Evaluation of the Liberty Choir** **Programme**

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## Introduction

This report sets out to evaluate the effectiveness and impact of establishing a choir (Liberty Choir) for male inmates within the resettlement wing of London's HMP Wandsworth. Trinity wing is a newly constructed resettlement wing, intended to house prisoners who are in the final three months of their sentences and will be due for release into the local catchment area. It operates as a 'stand alone' category C establishment within HMP Wandsworth, which is a category B local male prison in South West London, accepting all suitable prisoners from courts in its catchment area. It is the largest prison in the UK, currently able to hold 1877 prisoners. The main prison has five wings, consisting of general population wings, holding remand and convicted prisoners, wings for vulnerable prisoners, prisoners with substance misuse issues and a First Night Centre and Care and Separation unit.

Liberty Choir was established through a partnership with an existing and long running secular community choir operating in South and South West London, Brighton and Hastings. Liberty choir sessions were led by the Director of the community choir and volunteers for the programme were recruited from within it. The format of the programme was three eight-week blocks, each consisting of a two hour, weekly session. Participants also performed three concerts, held after the first and third blocks.

Date	Event
11/03/14	Taster session on Trinity wing
01/04 to 20/05	First eight week programme
21/05/14	Choir performs a concert for the governor, prison staff and their guests (MoJ, other organisations etc)
03/06 to 22/07	Second eight week programme
09/09 to 28/10	Third eight week programme
04/11/14	Choir performs at concert for friends and family.
17/12/14	Choir performs for staff Christmas celebration

## 1. Background

### **The effects of music and/or singing on the health and wellbeing of prisoners/offenders.**

An important feature of the community choir's work has always been to undertake community outreach work with disadvantaged groups. This has ranged from charity concerts to longer term singing projects in care homes and psychiatric hospitals.

A number of studies have been conducted which demonstrate a strong link between involvement in music and/or singing and the wellbeing of prisoners. For example Tuastad and O'Grady (2013) observe how music programmes help prisoners develop connections to both the outside world and to personal emotions in what can otherwise be a dehumanising environment. In studies of male prison choir programmes in the United States, Cohen (2009 and 2012) identifies measured improvements in levels of mental wellbeing among inmates who attend to members of control groups who did not. Researching a prison choir in a women's prison in Israel, Sibling (2007) states

that it provided a therapeutic 'protected space' for 'reframing' even when the ostensive aim of the project is educational. Evaluating the Irene Taylor Trust's *Sounding Out* music in prisons programme in the United Kingdom, Cartright (2012) identifies 'multi-dimensional' benefits both for the individual offender and for society. These include increased social skills, successful resettlement on release and reduced reoffending. The programme also demonstrated a social return on investment of £4.85 for every £1 used to fund it.

### **The importance of having a range of rehabilitative activities within prison and pathways post release.**

It is an established principle within the justice system in England and Wales that the effective rehabilitation of offenders requires a range of activities to be targeted to address specific needs and issues. Following recommendations contained in the Carter Report (2003) a National Offender Management Service was created in 2005 to provide 'end to end' correctional services integrating prison and probation. Central to the model adopted is the identification of seven reducing reoffending 'pathways' (NOMS 2005) in order to coordinate targeted responses in the following areas: Accommodation; Education Training and Employment; Health; Drugs and Alcohol; Finance, Benefit and Debt; Children and Families; and, Attitudes, Thinking and Behaviour. From the evaluation of prison music and choral projects already cited, it is clear that their benefits are multiple and have a potential to help address needs across different reducing reoffending pathways, especially via projects which span the transition from prison to the community.

First efforts to pilot a prison based choir programme began over 10 years ago when conversations with HMP Lewes culminated in a few ad hoc sessions. In 2006, when the South London Choir was established, attempts were made to develop links with HMP Wandsworth and a one off session was held in the prison chapel. Key members of prison staff (including the chaplain, head of Trinity wing and the Governing Governor) were supportive and could see the potential benefits of developing a programme such that following a successful bid to the Arts Council, the Liberty Choir taster session was held in March 2014 and the first 8 week block began in April.

## **2. Method**

The twenty four weekly Liberty Choir sessions all took place in the chapel on Trinity wing and lasted for approximately two hours each. Sessions had to finish by 5.30pm in order to comply with the constraints of the prison regime. Efforts were made by gate staff each week to get all volunteers into the prison as quickly as possible, to facilitate a timely start to each session.

All but one of the sessions was led by the community choir director and accompanied by the choir's regular pianist, who also led the session that the choir director was unable to attend. The sessions all began with warm up exercises (a combination of vocal and physical exercises) lasting approximately half an hour. The pieces, which were selected by the choir director, were an eclectic mix of contemporary, classical, jazz, swing, musical theatre etc. Each week the choir rehearsed music previously learned and was introduced to new pieces.

Volunteers were recruited in sufficient numbers to ensure that 'one to one' engagement could be offered to participants should they require it. This enabled those with literacy and/or numeracy problems and those who could not read music to access the full programme without feeling they

were being singled out. It also maximised the chances for participants wishing to join a community choir post release of already having met at least one member of the choirs. All prisoners were given sheet music and encouraged to understand the patterns of notes and to decode musical symbols as a fun educational exercise to learn a new language of music and singing which they all seemed to enjoy.

Prison staff were routinely invited and encouraged to attend the sessions and several members of staff from Trinity wing were occasionally present though none attended regularly. The prison chaplain, a champion of the programme, chose a prisoner to facilitate the movement of participants to and from each session. This helped the prisoner to take a leadership role. In the third programme, another prisoner took this role and was equally effective. The chaplain would sometimes look in on sessions but for the most part left the chosen prison leader to be in charge. This leadership role was also evident in a third prisoner who helped with the procedures necessary for the concerts, working with the Governor of Trinity wing. These leadership roles were not only important for the individual prisoners concerned but also were an important element of the programme, contributing to the sense of prisoners willingly supporting the programme and wanting it to succeed in the spirit of collaboration.

An independent evaluation of the Liberty Choir pilot was commissioned as part of the programme. The researcher selected to undertake this has personal experience of singing in a community choir. Her role involved attending and participating in at least one session per eight week block, observing sessions, leading informal focus group discussions and developing and collating participant and volunteer questionnaires. She also attended the end of programme concert and interviewed staff, families, friends and other invited guests about the concert and the wider Liberty Choir programme.

Feedback via questionnaires was sought on a regular basis with participants being encouraged to complete one at the beginning and end of their attendance. Volunteers facilitated this process. The questionnaires asked about previous singing experience, why participants had decided to attend, and their expectations about what might be gained from attending sessions. Post participation questions covered whether expectations had been met, whether the choir had made any difference to participants, highlights, suggestions for improvement and whether or not participants intended to join a community choir following release from prison. Feedback via questionnaires and face to face discussion was also sought from all volunteers and from the staff and other guests attending the concerts.

Feedback from questionnaires, discussions and interviews is included in section 7. All quotes are from participants unless otherwise stated.

### **3. Headline data**

#### **Prisoners**

- 70 prisoners took part overall, attending for anything between 1 and 27 sessions (including 3 performances). Average attendance was 6 sessions.
- over the 27 sessions, there were total of 423 individual attendances
- 22 prisoners came to 8 or more sessions
- 15 prisoners formed a 'core', coming to 10 or more sessions

- An estimated 75% of those who stopped attending did so because they were released or transferred to other prisons.
- Approximately 45% of attendees were from black or ethnic minorities, including: Black British (African (mainly), Caribbean), Asian (Indian, Chinese)
- Approx 30% were mixed race
- Approx 25% were White or other – mainly British but including Irish, Spanish, South American
- Age range was from 19 to over 60 with a spread across that range.
- Average attendance per session was 16, with 50% of sessions being attended by between 17 and 21 prisoners
- Performances were attended by estimated audiences of 350 (May), 40 (November), 350 (December)
- To date, 3 participants have joined one of the mainstream community choirs post release

### **Volunteers**

- A total of 30 volunteers (27 women and 3 men) attended overall, with 11 volunteering for the entire 24 weeks plus the three concert performances
- The majority of volunteers attended at least 16 sessions with the average number per session being 18
- The group was predominantly white British, with 3 black British and 3 other European
- Age range was from mid twenties to 70
- All volunteers had to actively make time to take part in the programme - 50% were working (either employed or self-employed) and 50% had caring responsibilities or other commitments
- Volunteers travelled from the South East (East and West Sussex), South West (Dorset) and across London

### **4. Recruitment and retention**

Potential participants were initially recruited to a one off introductory 'taster' session held in the prison chapel within Trinity wing. While queuing for their evening meal, inmates were handed information sheets by the choir director, two volunteers and the evaluator who explained what the session would entail. The invitation was also extended to all staff on the wing.

At the end of the introductory session, participants were given the date of the first full, eight week programme and all were invited to attend. There were no inclusion or exclusion criteria for joining the choir other than that the participants had to be residing on Trinity wing and therefore (theoretically) coming towards the end of their sentences. This was to maximise the chance of participants engaging with one of the community choirs post release and to facilitate that process by meeting volunteers from those choirs.

The introductory session appeared to be a successful recruitment tool, with more than half of those at the first session having attended. Further recruitment was either through the chaplaincy orderly, word of mouth via a friend already attending the choir or repeat attendance. The Choir Director was also interviewed by a prisoner on the prison's Radio WANNNO programme as a further promotion.

A number of later joiners stated that they had enjoyed hearing the choir singing during Tuesday rehearsals and had joined as soon as space permitted. Every effort was made not to turn away any prospective participant although the capacity of the chapel dictated overall numbers. Where capacity was exceeded, a waiting list was created and places were offered as and when space became available. At the start of each session, a register was taken by the chaplaincy orderly and waiting lists had to be created for each of the eight week blocks. This was one of the significant indications that the programme was proving a success. This was also mentioned by the Governor at a meeting with the Directors of the programme.

Although attendance was always high, initially some attendees required a degree of encouragement to participate fully. Feedback suggests that this was due initially to inhibition associated with singing in a large group of peers and strangers but also to a lack of confidence about perceived singing ability.

From the outset, the choir director gave a clear and consistent message about expected conduct during sessions. All attendees were supported to engage as fully as possible both by the director and by the volunteers. On a few occasions, a small number of participants engaged in disruptive or negative behaviour. This was addressed immediately by the director initially and over time the participants themselves also took responsibility for regulating group behaviour.

## **5. Safety issues**

From the outset, the need to create a relaxed and informal atmosphere, while not compromising the safety of any participants, was understood. All volunteers went through the standard prison security vetting procedure prior to commencing the programme. Confidentiality procedures were adhered to and none of the volunteers were given any information about the participants unless they themselves chose to volunteer this. Similarly, volunteers were made aware of the importance of being open and friendly without divulging personal details.

No specific protocols were established regarding contact between participants and volunteers but arrangements were such that participants were always seated next to a volunteer. This was to encourage interaction and to enable volunteers to support participants and assist them with difficulties they may be having following the music. Since one of the aims of the programme was to encourage participation in a community choir post release, it was deemed important to emulate that experience as far as possible within a prison environment.

## **6. Participant and volunteer feedback - themes**

One of the aims of this project was to challenge some of the negative assumptions that can exist in relation to prisoners in terms of the way they present and behave and their outlook and expectations of life. Another was to challenge assumptions that may be held about choirs, singing and the types of people that sing in choirs. Feedback from both participants and volunteers suggests that these aims were well met.

*'I'm blown away by the effort that you all make coming here every week, that's a lot of time to give, a real commitment.'*

*'I hoped to establish better social connections and associations with people from the community. I had preconceptions about the sort of people they would be but the openness and caring nature of the visitors surprised me.'*

*'I was a little nervous before starting the programme about what the men would be like, and what their reaction to the choir would be, but I was keen to take part as I think it's important that everyone gets the chance to do something positive and enjoyable, no matter who they are or what their circumstances.'* (volunteer)

*'I was quite judgemental before I went into the programme, but it has opened my eyes to the fact that although the guys are in prison for a reason, we can't possibly know what factors drove them to take the path that they did. I am a better person for the experience.'* (volunteer)

*'I expected the inmates to be unfriendly and to stick together and for it to be interesting but hard work to get them to sing with us. I found the men to be far friendlier, open minded and ready to enjoy the experience that I expected. The experience has taught me to judge people less from appearances, and be more compassionate to those who have made bad choices and/or come from difficult backgrounds.'* (volunteer)

*'Whilst I was keen to participate it was with some trepidation that I volunteered. I guess my fears were based on stereotypes of the offending population especially violence. My worries were totally unnecessary as the men attending the choir were mostly well behaved and very appreciative of the time and interest us volunteers gave to the programme.'* (volunteer)

Very few participants had had any singing experience since school other than singing in the shower or karaoke. A small number had previously sung in church and a further two had drummed and DJ'ed in the past. One had experienced a workshop run by the London Symphony Orchestra in another prison.

### **Breaking down barriers**

The choir director established an early rapport with the prison participants and her open, relaxed manner was both disarming and highly valued by them. She learned the names of each participant and addressed them and the volunteers by their first names. She encouraged and cajoled, occasionally raised her voice if she felt people were not achieving their potential or making enough effort and had the same high expectations of everyone present to participate fully and pay attention. She also showed genuine compassion, patience and sensitivity to those who were struggling on occasion for whatever reason. It was clear that the success of the choir mattered to her and no one refused to participate. This approach appeared to be highly valued by participants.

*'There is something very special about MJ [choir director] her energy is unique.'*

*'MJ [choir director] is a powerful and motivating force. You can tell she really cares about us and thinks we can do it.'*

*'The best things is having a very talented individual as our teacher and leader and meeting all the wonderful and blessed choir members who take their time to come and sing with us.'*

Efforts to emulate the community choir experience, despite being in a prison setting, seemed to be important to participants and the choir director and volunteers appeared to be universally respected and appreciated.

*'It is good to be treated like an adult and makes you behave more like one. It definitely teaches people respect among other things.'*

*'To encourage strong social bonds within the group increases rehabilitation into society and will decrease our chance of coming back to prison.'*

*'You get to interact with people from the outside so it gets you ready for interacting normally when you get out.'*

The appeal of the open and genuine approach also seemed to be borne out in comments made by participants in relation to what they hoped to get out of attending choir sessions.

*'Singing is a leveller. The atmosphere was non-judgemental and you can feel creative. It engenders a feeling of self achievement.'*

*'I seek the simple joy of singing and the opportunity to gain a spiritual 'escape' from my current surroundings.'*

*'I hope to get some happy times and be myself. Sometimes the little things in life can do so, so much.'*

*'It could be life changing and could lead to other things that might even be a different way to stay out of prison.'*

*'I hoped that the men in the prison would enjoy singing in a choir and also that it would be a way of moving towards life back in the outside world.'* (volunteer)

### **Confidence and self esteem**

The experience of participating in the choir appears to have had a very positive impact on all those who submitted feedback, both in writing or verbally. Some spoke about a new found confidence at having acquired a new skill and having challenged themselves in unfamiliar ways:

*'It's good, clean fun and I've found a new confidence in myself and my voice.'*

*'It's a great new interest/activity that I can take with me wherever I go.'*

*'It's a great chance to interact with others but mainly it's a massive confidence boost an I am amazed how much I am learning about MUSIC.'*

*'I'm not great with reading but I am learning to read music. I've improved my singing ability and learnt about harmonies, notes and keys.'*

*'Every Tuesday I look forward to it. That day I feel good because I know it's going to be a good day. I don't get worried about screwing up my notes as I'm learning new things each time that I never thought I could do.'*



*'It has given me the opportunity to be of service in an enjoyable way. It has been no hardship to spend time singing while at the same time getting to know in a small way people I would not ordinarily have met.'* (volunteer)

*'To see men who for various reasons struggled initially with general demeanour and confidence change quite remarkably over time through coming regularly to the weekly choir sessions and then perform in a concert.'* (volunteer)

*'Some of the pieces were quite challenging especially for people who have not sung in a choir before. There were a number of excellent singers and those who were not so good joined in without any embarrassment. Universally, the men brought a huge amount of energy and commitment to do a good job. For those that I spoke to each week, and therefore got to know, their confidence increased considerably; through finding a skill they didn't know they had and by being a member of a positive peer group.'* (volunteer)

*'One of the most important things to come out of the program is the pride and confidence that the guys have found in themselves. Some have learned by listening, some of them are beginning to understand how the written music works. I think all of them have been surprised and very pleased with the music we have made.'* (volunteer)

In addition to feelings engendered through the acquisition of new skills, the choir experience as a whole appeared to have a profound and far reaching effect on some members. Participation in this shared, group experience seemed to enable them to transcend their current situation and either remember previous, more positive times or consider more hopeful possibilities in the future.

*'I have a new found feeling like a real person who is a loving, caring, positive, helpful person I know I used to be. I've found my inner self with the help of Liberty Choir. This is something in my life I take very seriously with passion and love. I have always wanted to sing and this is my chance.'*

*'I have seen self harmers, needy and vulnerable people increase in self confidence and have a greater outlook on life with smiles rather than frowns on their faces because they are part of the choir.'*

*'This has brought me way, way more than I ever expected. This feels like I've got a new found family. I am so overwhelmed to be part of this choir. My children and family would be so proud of me right now.'*

*'The visible impact on the men over the 8 weeks was actually wonderful to see.'* (volunteer)

*I can't think of any prisoner I met who wasn't getting something important from singing in the choir in terms of their rehabilitation. They told me they really looked forward to the experience of singing, meeting and chatting to a range of different people from the community on a weekly basis. Seeing the men get up and perform in 3 different concerts was just fantastic and they told us that this shared experience made a big difference to how they related to each other on their wings.'* (volunteer)

## Challenging expectations and assumptions

It was clear from the feedback that some participants had initially approached the choir sessions with a mixture of trepidation and scepticism.

*'At first I laughed and thought it was a joke. I didn't think people in here would sing like what I heard from my cell window.'*

*'I came because I wanted to give singing a go but I didn't expect it to be anything like as good as it was.'*

*'I only came along to the first one to support my friend but I saw myself singing and dancing to 'Down by the Riverside' and surprisingly I was enjoying it!'*

A number of participants also appeared initially to have misgivings about what singing in a choir might mean. The secular nature of the Liberty Choir and the wide range of music selected and shared seemed to be reassuring and appreciated.

*'A lot of people think choir equates to church. You have to get over that it's not a religious group.'*

*'I was sceptical at first because I didn't think choir was for me. I didn't see myself like people who sing in choirs but I was persuaded to try it and feel so thankful that I did.'*

*'I love to sing and was particularly happy to join a choir that was secular and community based.'*

*'I even was a little embarrassed to go into the chapel with all those people. I never felt comfortable in church, however I am so HAPPY that I did go because I really loved it and want to be a part of it. It is a new found LOVE and family in my life.'*

What is also clear is that, for most, any misgivings were very quickly dispelled.

*'I heard about it from the chaplaincy department and I'll be honest, I thought it sounded mad but you know there is a real buzz around the prison. Prisoners that are locked in their cells sing along when they hear the choir rehearsing. I'm on the waiting list.'*

*'When you done the concert it was really good and it made me want to be a part of it.'*

*'It is so much more than I expected. It has been an inspirational experience that has really encouraged me to be my best.'*

*'Everyone is friendly, welcoming and non-judgemental. I feel I am being treated as an equal by positive people who lead normal lives. It makes me determined to carry on when I leave here.'*

*'I kept coming because of the sense of being amid the warmth of the group.'*

*'I am even considering coming to a choir when I am released which is very soon. I told my mum and my sister and they can't believe it.'*

## Connection and communication

Singing together created a strong sense of community and promoted a connection between all choir participants. Participants recognised that choir sessions created a unique and secure environment within which they could let down their guards, develop, be themselves and connect with others over a shared experience.

*'After just one meeting I realised I will connect with the inmates in the choir on a more profound level than I could achieve normally.'*

*'Choir is fantastic. It helps unite individuals. We are learning and doing something together that is powerful but we are equal in that.'*

*'This could be so exposing but it doesn't feel that way. I feel energised and closer to the rest of the group. That feeling spills over onto the wing. We are different people because of this experience.'*

*'It has made me feel like I belong to something refreshing and positive. I have learnt about music, harmony, what happens when you work together. It helps me relax when I'm back on the wing and gives me something to look forward to each week.'*

*'From a singing perspective, this experience has reminded me what a powerful way of communicating and engaging with people singing is.'* (volunteer)

Some participants commented on the mixed nature of the group and the opportunity afforded by the sessions to engage with individuals with whom they might not ordinarily spend time.

*'It's good for prisoners who don't normally have anything to do with each other to come together and work as a group.'*

*'You think we all know each other because we are all in prison together, on the same wing together but we don't. It is so good to get to really know people.'*

*'You can let your guard down in choir and there are not many other times when you can do that here.'*

*'I feel comfortable in here. I can let a different side of me show and it feels good.'*

*'One of the things I have really enjoyed is singing in a small choir that is so enthusiastic and also the rare treat of it being 50/50 men and women. Far fewer men sing in the community choirs and all those male voices have allowed harmonies to work very differently and as intended.'* (volunteer)

## Happiness and wellbeing

Participants reported considerable benefits of being part of the choir, in terms of happiness and wellbeing.

*'It's not exactly quantifiable. It's kind of ethereal, it lifts the spirits, brings positivity and makes you feel joyful.'*

*'It works well on so many levels and always leaves me feeling invigorated.'*

*'Singing is a great release and makes you feel energised and happy.'*

*'Every week this group of wonderful people spread a lot of joy, it brings me unquantifiable joy.'*

A common theme reported on was that of feeling able to temporarily forget one's physical environment and be transported elsewhere.

*'This is my first experience of prison. This all male environment is difficult, there's not usually much emotional intelligence but this is a really positive experience.'*

*'It gives me a different focus. For two hours I didn't think about being in prison, I am taken out of myself.'*

*'Our doubts and misconceptions, gloomy and depressing thoughts are eradicated. MJ and her team teach us to be enthusiastic and positive and to value ourselves and our abilities. These are easy things to lose in this environment.'*

*'The impact the programme had on me was not the singing per se, but the importance of singing for lifting the spirits for any one and especially for the prisoners. I think it was like a breath of fresh air for them or as one man said to me "it's like being outside for two hours", i.e free and mingling with normal people.'* (volunteer)

### **Relaxation and de-stressing**

Every choir session took place in the chapel in Trinity wing. Initially there was some concern that this environment might reinforce the negative perceptions held by some participants about the religious nature of choral singing. Once the secular nature of liberty Choir had been established, the religious setting did not appear to have any detrimental impact. In fact, some participants found it a welcome respite from the usual wing environment.

*'It's peaceful and energising at the same time. It feels calm and you can relax in here.'*

*'In that environment we can relax and have a joke, be ourselves without causing offence.'*

Others spoke about the relaxing effects of choir both within the sessions and afterwards, back on the wing.

*'From my first experience with the choir I loved it and it really helped me forget about the stress of being away from my family and loved ones.'*

*'I think the prison choir is fantastic. It helps unite very different individuals and sometimes it takes away stress after a session with the choir.'*

*'I find solace in doing something that is both fun and productive. I always feel better afterwards.'*

## Impact on behaviour

With the exception of one or two minor incidents in which a small number of participants engaged in disruptive or negative behaviour, conduct and attitude within sessions was of a high standard. Over time the participants themselves took responsibility for regulating behaviour that was considered overly boisterous or that had become unfocussed. This role was commented on by volunteers and staff alike.

*'They control each other. There is never any hint of a problem.'* (volunteer)

*'There were a couple of incidents involving childish behaviour and this was swiftly calmed by either MJ or other prisoners.'* (volunteer)

*'I've never seen this level of focus or enthusiasm before. They are often bored so go along to things because there's nothing else to do but this is far more than that. They behave accordingly because they don't want to lose the opportunity'* (member of staff)

Interestingly, a number of participants commented on the impact of attending choir on wider behaviour and conduct on the wing.

*'I feel like there is now something positive in my life. I'm more focussed and determined when I'm back on the wing.'*

*'After choir, I found my attitude towards the staff and other prisoners was much better.'*

*'This makes me a bigger person. I have definitely turned the other cheek where before I would have waded in.'*

This perceived impact on behaviour was echoed by a number of members of staff.

*'The guys are happier, more cheerful after practice. They are enthusiastic and it does seem to be something special for them. It does seem to have an effect on the wing.'*

*'The choir members are a calming influence on others on the wing. They just act more calmly but also they sing in their cells and that can be calming for others.'*

*'I believe having the choir has helped settle Trinity wing down as a new unit more quickly than otherwise. The guys have developed confidence and have a more positive outlook. They engage with people they wouldn't otherwise and that has an impact on the wing atmosphere.'*

One choir member received a letter of thanks from the Deputy Governor after having helped de-escalate a situation on a wing landing in which two officers were being assaulted. He credited his actions to having become involved with Liberty Choir and recognised the positive impact it had had on him.

## Feedback from the concerts

The first concert was part of a staff awards ceremony that was attended by over three hundred people. The body language of some members of staff at the beginning of the concert was quite

closed and suggested a degree of embarrassment as well as scepticism. By the end, it was noticeably more relaxed and open. Opportunities to feedback on this occasion were limited but one member of staff said:

*'I did not know they had it in them.'*

Liberty choir members subsequently fed back that:

*'Staff have said that the choir was the highlight of the staff awards. The best thing would be if we could perform more.'*

*'Lots of staff have given positive feedback about our performance. Relationships outside have improved because of it.'*

The second concert was a 'stand alone' event attended by the Governing Governor, Head of Trinity wing, the Chaplain, several prison staff and a number of external agencies providing support in HMP Wandsworth. Liberty choir participants and volunteers had invited friends and family members to attend, including the three ex participants that have now been released. The total audience size was approximately seventy.

The programme was very participative and the choir director worked hard to involve all audience members in the actions that accompanied the songs as well as some singing. At the end of the concert, the Governing Governor made a speech about his passion for rehabilitation and the positive impact of the Liberty choir on participants in this respect. He began by stating that:

*'This has been the best afternoon in my 28 years in the service.'*

In addition to this, each of the three ex Liberty choir members spoke about the dramatic effect that participation in the choir programme had had on them and the support they receive through being involved with the community choirs post release.

Family members and friends were also interviewed about the concert and about the wider impact of the Liberty choir programme.

*'My son's up there [on stage] and it's great to have something to feel proud of. When he wrote to us about the choir I couldn't believe it was him.'*

*'I know a few of the boys up there – I never knew they had voices like that. It's been a good afternoon.'*

*'I'm here supporting my boyfriend. He's going to be a dad soon and I'm pleased he's doing this. I want him to stay out of prison for our baby.'*

Two of the volunteers, who had participated in the whole 24 week programme, summed up the finale as follows:

*'The concert at the end of the programme was amazing. I had to keep pinching myself that I was actually in a prison. It must have been a huge challenge for the staff to allow so many visitors access. And then the appreciation of the concert and the amazing words from the*

*Prison Governor. It was wonderful to see the pride on the prisoners' faces and the importance for them to perform to their families. The two former prisoners who now sing in Balham spoke so beautifully, without any scripts and from the heart. I like to think that the concert really made a difference to the prisoners, families and staff present and that with will (and of course funding) the programme can become a permanent fixture.'*

*'The fact that prisoners on release were prepared to come back to the prison and stand up in front of a large crowd of prison staff and visitors and talk about their positive experience of the choir was rather amazing and was a reflection of the true impact of the programme.'*

Some staff members from Trinity wing gave their views about the impact of the choir on participants.

*'That was a great concert. It was a release for them – it's important for them to have something positive. Did you see all the smiles?'*

*'The atmosphere in here was electric.'*

*'This has enabled them to find their voice in a non aggressive way. For some that will be the first time they've done that so it's a big deal.'*

*'These guys are happy and calmer since becoming involved. It has definitely had a positive effect.'*

*'They tend to sing on the wings on a Monday, practising I suppose and then Tuesday evenings are always quite noisy but in a good way.'*

*'One of the guys told me he looks forward to next week as soon as the session is over. I don't think they feel that way about many things in here.'*

The third choir performance formed part of the entertainment for the staff Christmas celebrations and awards. It was challenging because there had been a five week break between the finish of the last programme and this performance. However, during the pre-rehearsal the men learnt a new song from scratch and performed with gusto at the celebrations. The Governor remarked *"I have never seen so many prison officers dancing"*. During one particular song, almost every member of staff was on his or her feet. With this third performance the staff in the audience were at their most relaxed and responsive to the Choir Director and the choir.

## **8) Discussion**

In this final section, two main areas have been highlighted for reflection:

- Wider learning from the programme with a view to potential future replication; and
- Consideration of the potential impact on reoffending of the Liberty Choir programme

### **Wider learning**

Trinity wing was selected as the location for the Liberty Choir programme because it is intended to exist as a 'stand alone' resettlement wing within the wider prison establishment. The expectation

therefore, was that as participants in the programme would be within the final three months of their sentences and would mainly be due for release to local boroughs, this would be a relatively stable cohort with which to work. As the programme progressed, it became evident that not all inmates housed on Trinity wing actually formed the target group for the programme as not all were coming to the end of their sentences and some still had relatively long periods to serve. More prisoners than expected were transferred to other prisons during the programme and some, who were on remand, were released straight from court. Often it was difficult to find out exactly what had happened to a choir member that suddenly stopped attending and this was particularly so for those that didn't attend many sessions. It was also impossible to obtain feedback on the programme from these participants.

These issues meant that it was harder to follow up with prisoners post release, with a view to engaging with one of the community choirs. The likelihood of post release engagement was further diminished for those not being released to local boroughs and for whom the location of the community choirs was therefore not convenient.

An unintended positive consequence of working with prisoners with more than three months to serve was that many were able to access all twenty four weeks and so were able to benefit for longer than intended and make a lot of progress. However, this did reduce the 'throughput' and might have meant that fewer individuals were able to access the programme at all. Waiting lists existed for all three blocks and feedback from participants often included a request for additional and longer choir sessions. This would strongly indicate a demand for the programme and its continuation.

HMP Wandsworth, like most prisons, operates to a strict regime where time is tight and flexibility fairly minimal. The importance of having genuine support for the programme from the prison was evident from the outset. This support was felt in very practical ways, such as the gate staff attempting to get the large number of volunteers through the gate as efficiently and quickly as possible each week or the chaplaincy department ensuring that the participant register was accurately and consistently taken every session. The logistical success of the programme was certainly in part due to this practical, facilitative approach. Support at the highest level in the prison was also evident throughout and displayed publicly at the final concert, both in terms of what was said by members of senior management, including the Governing Governor, and also through permitting access to invited guests, including ex-inmates. It is clear from discussions following completion of the pilot programme that the Governing Governor values the Liberty Choir programme such that he is committed to continuing to host the programme in HMP Wandsworth with the ongoing support of the Chaplaincy department.

Given this support, the lack of regular and consistent involvement of staff in the programme was disappointing. The prison chaplain and his chosen prisoner leaders were instrumental in ensuring the smooth running of the sessions each week and facilitated inmates' access to the chapel. The chaplain would call in from time to time and a number of staff from Trinity wing also popped in and out of some sessions, but no member of prison staff ever engaged in the programme as an active participant. It was not possible to gather information about the possible systemic, organisational or personal barriers to engagement but when the programme is repeated, it will be important to try and capture data in this area.



As is evident from much of the feedback, the unique character of the choir Director was key to the success of the programme and to the degree to which participants actively engaged with and enjoyed the sessions. This will be an important factor to consider in terms of future development. Simply replicating the model without really understanding the nature of the leader's role and character could lead to significantly different results.

Another aspect of the programme that appears to have been important is the nature of the personal and emotional interaction between participants and volunteers. The decision was taken to actively replicate the community choir model as far as is possible within the confines of a prison environment. This openness, honesty and non judgmental approach seems to have been highly valued by participants and volunteers alike and stood out for many as being markedly different from some other rehabilitative programmes previously experienced in prisons.

### **Potential impact on reoffending**

In evaluating the Liberty Choir programme, we have sought to examine potential links to the existing NOMS reducing reoffending pathways and wider thinking about desistance from crime. Desistance, or the process of abstaining from crime among those who previously engaged in a sustained pattern of offending, seems to be related to both external/social aspects of a person's life (such as the supportiveness of those around them) as well as to internal/psychological factors (such as what they believe in and what they want from life) - LeBel, T.P et al (2008).

People are most likely to desist from crime if they feel they are believed in and are encouraged by someone else to see that they have something to offer society and that they are good people (McNeill, F. et al, 2005). Similarly those who feel they have a place within a social group and feel connected to others in a non criminal community of some sort are more likely to stay away from crime (Farrall, S. 2004). Individuals who are made to feel that they have something to give and who find a way of contributing to society, their community, their family or a positive social group, appear to be more successful at giving up crime (Maruna, S. 2001). Research (Bottoms, A. & Shapland, J. 2010) suggests activities that focus on strong and meaningful relationships; that give strong and optimistic messages that avoid labelling; that focus on strengths; that recognise and mark achievements; that work with parents and partners; and that work with and support communities, are most likely to support desistance from crime.

Feedback obtained from participants in the programme certainly suggests that most experienced feelings of belonging, felt they were contributing to something positive and valuable and felt encouraged by others in their efforts. The sustained interaction with non judgmental and 'normal' people from the community was viewed by participants as important and helped them to think about themselves as more than just their current circumstances. Several participants made reference to the positive reactions they had received from family members for their involvement in the choir and how hopeful they were that this participation might continue post release. The vast majority of choir members had at least one friend or family member in the audience at the final concert. The fact that most of the participants who submitted feedback are considering joining one of the community choirs post release, and that three ex prisoners have already done so must be seen as a real success. Further, one of the ex prisoners has since joined the community choir organisation as a member of the team whose role it will be to support the further development of a Liberty Choir programme in prisons. This is a robust example of engaging an expert by experience

who understands the values of the programme, can contribute in a unique way to the further development of the programme, including the business plan and can be the voice of experience in promoting the rehabilitative benefits of the programme to other ex offenders.

Finally, consideration has also been given to the extent to which the programme has met some of the broad objective of the Arts Council. In terms of social exclusion, we know that prisoners constitute some of the most socially excluded members of society and have disproportionate levels of ill health (Stern, 2001). While data was not collected on the health of participants in the programme, wider research shows that most prisoners have either a mental health problem (including serious mental illness and more moderate problems), a personality disorder or a substance misuse problem. Seven out of ten have one or more of the above problems (Singleton *et al* - 1998).

People from Black and minority ethnic (BME) communities represent about 10% of the UK population (Singleton *et al*, 2001) but in prison this rises to approximately 20% (Rickford & Edgar, 2005). Our data indicates that approximately 45% of participants in the programme described themselves as being from a BME background and a further 30% were mixed race.

In terms of opening up the arts to wider audiences, most participants had never previously sung in a choir or had any musical experience since being at school. An estimated 50% of participants were under thirty years of age. This is different from the demography of the community choirs, which tends to be significantly older. Feedback from friends and family members attending the final concert showed that most had not attended anything similar since school concerts and none had ever previously witnessed the person they were supporting performing in a concert.

Seventy prisoners overall and thirty volunteers participated in the programme. Of these volunteers, at least three needed to negotiate with their employers to have time off to participate, meaning that a degree corporate responsibility was involved. Approximately three hundred members of staff attended the concert held in May. The final concert was attended by approximately forty friends and family members.

The following quotes neatly sum up the impact of having brought a branch of the arts to this section of society that might otherwise be unlikely to access it:

*'The gift you bring is almost beyond words, but I'm going to try anyway. To have that kind of joy that only music brings, every Tuesday is nothing short of a miracle. It's been such a beautiful surprise to have this in my life.'* - **a prisoner**

*"Liberty choir has made a very positive impact for a number of prisoners within Wandsworth. Both MJ and Ginny are inspirational individuals determined to make a difference with some of societies most challenging citizens. For prisoners, I have observed a new found confidence, an enhancement of comradeship, with a sense of pride to achieve positive outcomes. What these guys achieve in such a short period of time is truly impressive!!"* – **Kenny Brown, OBE, Governor, HMP Wandsworth**

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## 9) Appendices

### Testimonials

#### 'Before and After' feedback from one participant, via questionnaire.

##### WHEN YOU START

- 1) Have you done any singing in the past, for example in a choir, at school, in a band?

*No, I have no prior singing experience. Sadly it shows but I am trying hard!*

- 2) How did you hear about this project?

*A fellow inmate, who spoke well of the choir group. It was also separately mentioned to me by chaplaincy.*

- 3) What did you think about the idea of a prison choir and what made you decide to put your name down for the programme?

*I had mixed feelings about singing as I had no previous experience. A choir group is odd due to the general nature of how choir groups are perceived. However, like all aspects of life, try before you comment.*

- 4) What do you hope/expect to gain from taking part in the programme?

*I don't have any expectations. After just three sessions, I have bettered my understanding of music, enjoyed the group and have exited the session in a positive and happy way. So, from being sceptical, I now suggest to people to join the group.'*

##### WHEN YOU FINISH

- 1) Has the choir been what you expected?

*The choir sessions go way beyond all my expectations. The dedication of MJ, the volunteers, the health of the relationships between inmates has been nothing short of fantastic.'*

- 2) Has it helped you or made you feel different in any way? How?

*Yes, it is like a little recluse within this hectic prison life. After the sessions I feel happier, more upbeat and in a weird way I feel of worth. It is very rewarding with a calming effect. It is hard to get across but I believe it is critical to try a class to understand this.*

- 3) What has been the best thing?

*The natural benefits that are obtained by attending, singing, doing, following the instructions of the experienced choir leader and volunteers. Also, feeling I am more than who I am allowed to be in prison – I have hope.*

- 4) Is there anything you would want to be different?

*Increase the session to twice per week.*

- 5) Do you think you might join one of MJ's community choirs when you leave prison?

*Definitely, I have already suggested it to my wife as something we can do together.*

**Extract from a letter written by a choir participant to MJ**

Dear MJ,

I wanted to write this letter just in case I fail to make it to choir practice next week. It won't be for lack of trying, I can assure you, but sometimes the system will put its boot on your neck (don't worry, it's a metaphor!)

I write this to say thank you in a number of different ways, and to tell you to keep heart if people like me are barred from coming due to bad rule making, they leave prison or are moved on, or are simply apathetic.

What you and your choir are doing is nothing short of amazing. To have fought the system, the paperwork, the resistance of individuals who just don't understand what this means and then to actually do it is Herculean. Lots of people say they want to help others, but the commitment and effort being given to us, just in terms of time and travel by everyone is truly humbling.

We have been given feedback forms to 'evaluate' the choir but how can you totally express something as precious as music? I can't really get across how profound and ephemeral this experience is to me. What you have brought to me and the other men in the choir is nothing short of pure freedom for 2 hours on a Tuesday and I thank you from the bottom of my soul.

**Extract from an email sent to MJ by the wife of a Liberty Choir participant**

Dear MJ,

My husband is a prisoner at Wandsworth, and a very enthusiastic member of your choir.....You and your group have had such a positive impact on him and I thank you with all of my heart. Not only have you given him something so uplifting to look forward to each week, you have also made Tuesday afternoons pretty much the highlight of my week too, as I can just imagine him there, singing away with gusto. It's one of the few times of the week when I know, undoubtedly, that my husband is happy and fulfilled and that gives me such a huge sense of peace.

**A letter to MJ, signed by 9 participants**

Dear MJ,

Thank you for bringing the choir to us at HMP Wandsworth.

Kind regards,

DRAFT