

AND THE CHOIR SANG ON

How and why the Kilbryde Community Choir continued singing together during the COVID-19 pandemic

Abbreviated Abstract:

Kilbryde Hospice Community Choir was established in 2015 and, prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, was held weekly in the hospice atrium.

Due to the growing body of evidence that singing regularly as part of a group is good for people's general health and wellbeing¹ it was decided to transfer the choir to an online platform so that members could continue to benefit from singing together.

The author examines the challenges, advantages and disadvantages of setting up and running an online community choir.

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References:

¹British Lung Foundation

www.blf.org.uk/support-for-you/singing-for-lung-health

² NHS Imperial College Healthcare Trust

<https://www.imperial.nhs.uk/about-us/news/enobreathe>



BACKGROUND

- The choir was established to help improve lung function, enhance mood, lower anxiety, strengthen the voice and increase social interaction for those accessing the hospice (patients, family members, carers, staff, volunteers etc.)
- Feedback is often extremely positive. The ‘Care Opinion’ quote (on the left) is typical of participant feedback.
- Choir members voiced disappointment when they had to stop meeting face to face, so a solution was sought to continue this service online.
- Due to the pandemic, many other local choirs have stopped completely so there is little or no opportunity in the area to sing together online.

WHY TRANSFER ONLINE?

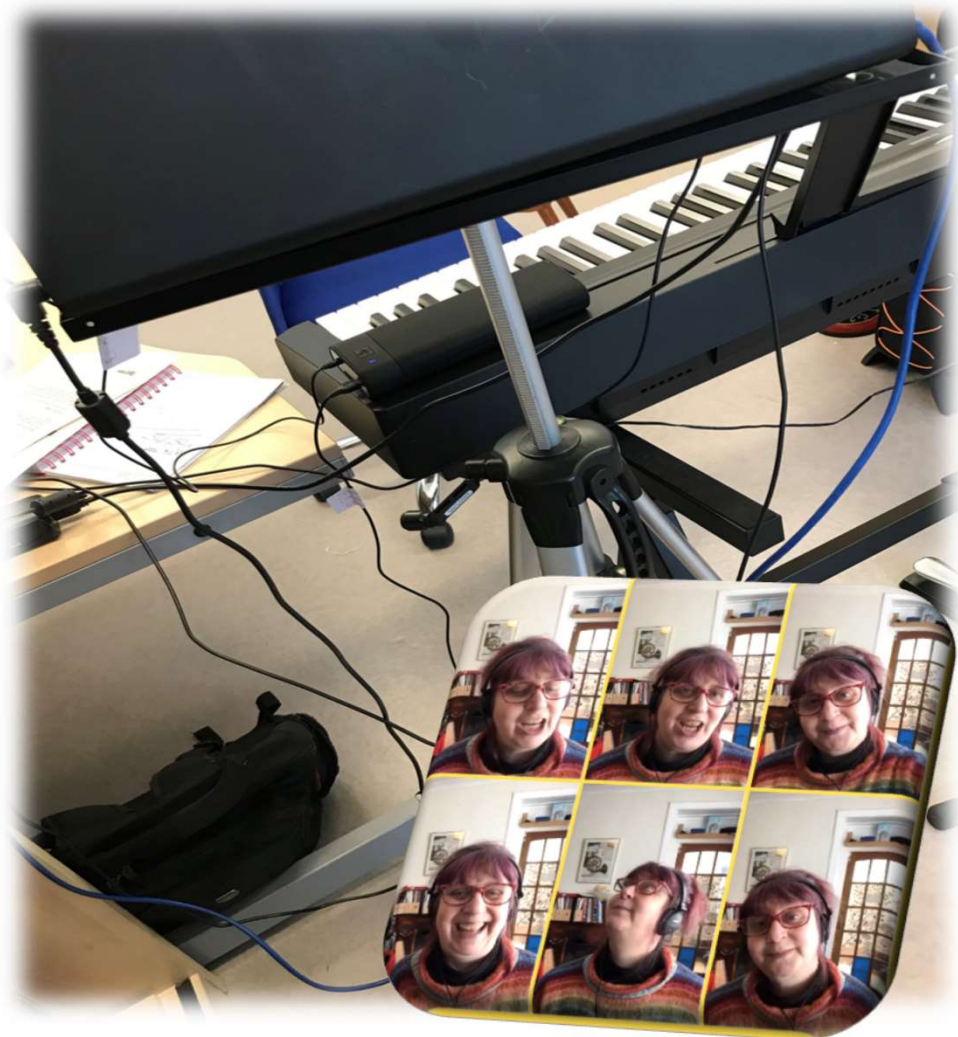
- The restrictions in place due to the pandemic have prevented people from meeting to sing together in a group.
- Although research is being carried out, it is currently not safe for a vulnerable group of people to meet and sing together.
- To retain the spirit of community participation and connection and to avoid social isolation.
- Singing benefits those with respiratory issues, including growing evidence of benefits to people recovering from COVID-19 (e.g. breathlessness & anxiety) ⁽²⁾

CARE OPINION FEEDBACK

“The session is very upbeat. It is the happiest hour of the week. Worries are forgotten for an hour each Wednesday.”

DESIGNING THE NEW NORMAL

- Use of the online video conferencing software 'ZOOM', supplemented with the app 'ACAPELLA'; following research, these were chosen as the most effective for both staff and participants.
- Existing technology and skills were utilised so there was little or no cost involved to allow the group to continue accessing the health and wellbeing benefits of singing weekly together.
- Experimenting with sound delays and how to get the most out of the available technology (e.g. necessary to mute everyone apart from the choir facilitator when singing together due to differing broadband speeds etc.).
- The virtual choir joining details are promoted via the Hospice Website and Social Media platforms.
- The local press have supported this initiative by publishing an article both praising and advertising the new service.
- The choir facilitator now makes instructional and fun videos to facilitate a virtual experience of singing in multiple parts, thus offering a richer choir experience.



ADVANTAGES

- The strong sense of participant togetherness and belonging has been retained with online sessions.
- Regular participants appear comfortable with the digital format, as it does not deviate too far from the face to face version and has the added benefit of not having to travel to the hospice.
- For some, the advantage of being muted while singing gives them more of a sense of freedom and confidence (no one can judge you).
- Chats before, during and after the session help to maintain social interaction and a feeling of connectedness.
- The relationship between the choir facilitator and the choir members remains strong.

DISADVANTAGES

- Online and technological accessibility for many of this group demographic.
- A sense of isolation (in particular for the choir facilitator).
- Not being able to hear people singing together.
- Reaction time is slower and there more need to check in with all members throughout the session to make sure everyone can still hear/see/is managing.

CHALLENGES

- Broadband connections and delays.
- Differences in technology between users and differences in capabilities.
- Not getting immediate feedback.
- Security – at the risk of being “zoom-bombed” Kilbryde has a strong security set up for groups meeting online, including pre-registration, passwords and waiting rooms.
- Working remotely but remaining “connected” to each other.

CONCLUSION

Online, the Kilbryde Hospice Community Choir continues to support choir members offering them the health and wellbeing benefits of singing together and helping to reduce the social isolation brought about due to the current COVID-19 pandemic.

Both versions of the choir have challenges, advantages and disadvantages so, when government guidelines allow, it is hoped to provide a ‘blended’ choir with participants accessing the face to face choir in the hospice or joining online.