

Ceol le Chéile Evaluation

Summary Report

This research explores the impact of the Donegal intergenerational choir through analysing the thoughts, opinions and attitudes of ‘Ceol le Chéile’ members and key personnel/agencies. Previous research indicates that singing in choirs can reduce social isolation, encourage positive aging, promote the development of relationships, promote intergenerational learning and intergenerational solidarity. Singing can also have many health benefits including improvements to respiratory, neurological and mental health.

About this Research

Since ‘Ceol le Chéile’ was established over eighteen months ago, they have had 13 successful public performances including 3 Christmas shows; visits to Community Hospitals and Nursing Homes during Bealtaine; recitals at the launch of TILDA, the Pan Celtic Festival, the National Convention for Older People and the Earagail Arts Festival. ‘Ceol le Chéile’ was runner-up in the National Pride of Place Awards 2018 and has been shortlisted for an Age Friendly Ireland Recognition Award 2019. This project is an action in the Donegal Age Friendly Strategy, designed to promote social inclusion and social participation among older people, and has been made possible due to it being delivered as a collaborative action by stakeholders of the Donegal Age Friendly Alliance.

This booklet presents key findings from the Qualitative Evaluation of ‘Ceol le Chéile’,   
the Donegal Intergenerational Choir. Fifty-three participants completed review questionnaires. Qualitative data was obtained from focus groups with choir members, interviews with key personnel/agencies and individual choir members. 11 older adults took part in the adult focus group and 5 children engaged in a child friendly focus group discussion. Information was sought about each interviewee’s involvement in the choir through one-to-one, semi-structured interviews. The data was analysed through thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006).

**Social Inclusion:**

*“Since I retired about 9 years ago, I’ve been looking for a choir to join… I just love that social aspect of singing together”. Older Adult*

*“It creates an appropriate positive connection between the children and older people, where they gain more respect for each other, building more cohesive relationships and communities”. Stakeholder*

*“We are like a big family because we have friends that are young and old”. Child*

*“Ceol le Cheile is intergenerational and multi-cultural. We learn from other cultures by interacting. This allows for a diversity in our social relationships”. Older Adult*

*“Ceol le Cheile is a comfortable, trustworthy environment”. Older Adult*

*“At rehearsals I always have a laugh. I think laughter is as good as singing. It really gels people together”. Older Adult*

*“I got to know so many people, meeting them at the tea breaks and having a chat”. Child*

Sense of Purpose

* Older adults appreciate the opportunity to engage in a scheduled social activity every week
* In the focus group many of the older adults declared that ‘Ceol le Chéile’ is the highlight of the week
* ‘Ceol le Chéile’ provides social support for those who are recently retired, suffering from loneliness or dealing with bereavement

Positive Social Contact

* The children revealed that the choir has enhanced their socialising skills through an increase in willingness and confidence to interact with others
* One of the parents indicated that their child greatly benefits from mixing with older and younger people

**Social Connection:**

Creation of Friendships

* 89% of the children revealed they had created new relationships with both the older and younger members

* Choir members suggested that ‘Ceol le Chéile’ helped expand their social network
* A sense of camaraderie had been generated, as many participants compared the choir to a big family
* ‘Ceol le Chéile’ was widely perceived as a social glue for participants

**Positive Health Benefits**:

*“Learning new songs, new harmonies... new words and the new languages such as Gaeilge and Italian helps keep your mind active”. Older Adult*

*“I would say my breathing has improved immensely. The warm-up exercises are excellent”. Older Adult*

*“Some of the older people were getting cancer treatment and it was helping them with their recovery, to take their mind of the recovery”. Stakeholder*

*“The choir has allowed the children to move outside themselves”. Parent*

*“Ceol le Chéile provides a feel good factor, where members feel more valued in their communities”. Stakeholder*

*“I enjoy it, I love music, every kind of music and love learning. I enjoy the learning aspect”. Child*

“*You don’t have a [choir director] in any other choir. She’s a big part of it. She is fabulous, amazing and an inspiration as she inspires confidence during performances”. Older Adult*

Physical Health

* Being a member of ‘Ceol le Chéile’ can help improve memory function
* Improvements in respiratory health was reported by most choir members
* Participants reported improvements in posture, stamina and energy levels
* Stakeholders implied that singing in the choir can reduce health issues and aid rehabilitation

Mental Health

* ‘Ceol le Chéile’ elevates the mood of participants and gives them the opportunity to wind down and relax, alleviating stress and anxiety
* Choir members reported increases in confidence and self-esteem, especially among the children
* A sense of satisfaction and achievement was linked with successful performances
* Many choir members enjoy the discipline and challenge associated with the choir

**Enjoyment:**

Recognition of Opportunity

* A number of the younger children were grateful for the performing experience for their future musical career
* Participants highlighted the role of the indispensable choir director.Her professionalism was greatly admired

**Intergenerational Learning:**

*“It’s the respect they would have for a lot of us. I was dancing with the two young people and they were looking out for me”. Older Adult*

*“The confidence that the children have, inspires me to perform the best that I can”. Older Adult*

*“I like the songs we sing. All the songs, new and old”. Child*

*“They learn how to interact and respect the adults, particularly senior citizens. We learn from each other. The children learn to work at a different pace”.   
Choir Director*

Change in Attitudes

* Many of the participants believe that the children have gained more respect for the older adults
* The older adults remarked on the development in the children’s ability to converse with others
* Some older choir members revealed that the younger choir members keep them young at heart through their energy, enthusiasm and attitudes of the children

Appreciation

* The children greatly benefited from the general life experience and knowledge from the older participants
* The children became more considerate of the age gap, promoting mutual learning
* Participants appreciated the variety of music, catering for all the different age groups

**Key Messages:**

* ‘Ceol le Chéile’ helps create more inclusive communities.
* ‘Ceol le Chéile’ has generated a profile from their many successful performances to date. This profile has given the choir members a status within their communities.
* This project has a societal benefit for older people, as they are able to play a more active role in their communities, by getting out and being more confident in society.
* The Donegal community benefits from a reduction in social isolation, encouraging active engagement, promoting positive relationships between the generations.
* This choir improves social, relational, physical and mental health.
* ‘Ceol le Chéile’ members have formed valuable friendships, increasing confidence, self-esteem and assurance.

**Recommendations:**

* Ensure there is strong interagency collaboration. Interagency collaboration brings together critical stakeholders to achieve a common goal, where they can cooperate contributing services and supports to achieve the best possible outcome.
* Commitment from the partners, both financial and in-kind funding, is essential. Securing financial funding is important to pay for the costs of running the project. In-kind funding is also essential, where organisations provide their goods or services free of charge.
* For future research, a long-term evaluation of the choir should be carried out, to measure the physical and mental health benefits. Physiological testing would evidence the health benefits.
* As an intergenerational project, it is essential to build in additional activities, to ensure interaction between the generations. These additional activities will encourage social connectedness and underpin the concept of intergenerational learning, dispelling ageism and stereotypes of aging.
* In recruiting, a greater emphasis should be placed on the hard-to-reach older people in the county. Those who experience a greater degree of isolation and may be marginalised/excluded due to factors including poverty, reduced mobility, rural isolation, social exclusion and disability may require a different entry point. Donegal has a well-established Social Prescribing Programme and links between these two initiatives should be forged.
* It is advised to have no shortcuts in regard to preparations when implementing the project. Key areas to focus on include child protection, methodology, required resources and it is important to understand the model and be competent in delivery.
* The concept of ‘Social Singing’ is an alternative but complimentary model. This choir would have zero-commitment, designed for people of all singing abilities. The “turn-up and sing” approach would encourage singing for feeling good. Social singing sessions would emphasise fun as opposed to performance and musical excellence. This is an alternative model to consider.

**Further Comments:**

The following comments were noted by older adult choir members and parents of the children, regarding the success of the choir and their continued commitment:

*“Thank you for setting up this wonderful project. In all my years I never experienced the way I felt after the concert. I couldn’t imagine I would ever perform on stage, never mind performing with Moya Brennan.”*

*“Getting old can be scary and lonely but the choir creates a whole new excitement feeling in my life, which I love. Thank you for keeping that young feeling in me, the excitement I had after the concert was an amazing feeling and I will miss the choir during the summer.”*

*“I was so proud of the kids on Sunday night, their confidence has grown so much in the last year.”*

*“All our work in the last few weeks was worth it. It’s really beneficial having this break from the choir - time to recharge and give time to other interests which may have felt a bit neglected!  Time also, to reflect on the choir and the significant difference it has made to my life. I juggle ‘everything else’ AROUND the practices, which speaks volumes!”*

*“Delighted to hear they are back in September. It is amazing how much my child has missed the choir. I think she had withdrawal symptoms after the concert!”*

*“Really looking forward to (for me) 20th September. Veronica’s passion and enthusiasm inspires us. Mairead is the motivating factor which drives us on, week after week. I observe so many positive changes in so many of the members since the choir began, so thank you all for continuing to make it happen.”*

*“Is choir rehearsals staying on Fridays?  My child doesn’t want to take on any other activity that is going to clash with it."*

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