



## Guidebook 4: **Singing For Care**

Our final guidebook discusses singing in healthcare settings and is particularly focused on sharing the experiences of groups led by nursing staff and care staff who sing and share their singing with those in their care.



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# Ageing Voices Introduction

Singing connects us. Lullaby, vesper or pop song chorus. Week nights in school halls and community centres. Across pub or kitchen tables. In the cultural palaces. Interweaving voices coming together in song reflect and reinforce the threads of national life we're woven into.

In Ireland the fastest growing section of the population are people over 80. People living well in their 60's and 70's are a growing percentage of the population which will continue into this century. Traditionally attention has been given to the individual voice as it develops from baby's coo through teenage mumble to adult voice. Now that many of us are lucky enough to live longer and singing brings such pleasure, isn't it time attention is given to the older and the ageing voice?

Fun, therapeutic, social, and stimulating singing already takes place in groups, choirs, health centres, even hospitals. Older adults who sing might be fit as a fiddle or challenged by illness. Innovation connecting singing with care is happening across Ireland. With Ageing Voices we are sharing learnings from the practices of these groups in order to encourage other like-minded people to get involved and bring the joy of singing to their community. We are on a mission to map and connect a network of these great people who have quietly evolved these groups over many years. We thank those with the wisdom to start the work we are now continuing.

**Dominic Campbell**  
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# Introducing Our Ageing Voices Guidebooks

**Sing Ireland and Creative Aging International have come together to create a range of resources that will encourage and explore singing into older age, with support from The Creative Ireland Programme.**

We believe that singing is invaluable. That it is a vital tool in the health and wellbeing of older people in our communities. That is why we have created four guidebooks that have been designed to give people the tools they need to create, run and nurture singing groups for older people within their communities.

1.

**The Ageing Voice.** This guidebook focuses on the voice as an instrument. What happens as we age? How can we maintain and sustain our voices? What happens if we do?

2.

**Special Interest Choirs.** Here we look at choirs in the community that are friendly to, and made with, people living with conditions like Alzheimer's or Parkinson's. These choirs support people, their families, and carers.

3.

**Community Connections.** This guidebook shares learnings from projects where cultural leadership has been connecting organisations through song in pursuit of care.

4.

**Singing For Care.** Our final guidebook discusses singing in healthcare settings and is particularly focused on sharing the experiences of groups led by nursing staff and care staff who sing and share their singing with those in their care.

Each guidebook will provide you with information, expert advice, recommendations, case studies and resources, to guide you through the process of setting up and running a singing group for older people. Our resources are continuously being developed, so if you have information to add, or need specific details please contact Sing Ireland or Creative Aging International, we'd love to hear from you.

# Singing for Health and Happiness

## Why singing is so important as we move into older age.

We should state at the beginning that singing is important in older age for all the reasons it is at any other age. It's about connection and belonging, it's about finding a place for your voice amongst others, it's about listening and being heard, facing challenges and building confidence.

### */ Singing's secret weapon is joy.*

Singing is physically good for you. Your heart, lungs, and vocal cords get a work out every time you sing. The brain blossoms with the challenges of learning new parts and adapting to sing alongside others. The endorphin release of performance or the dopamine of practice are all fantastically good for the brain and the body.

Singing into older age can help to keep the body fit and healthy, to keep the mind sharp and the voice strong. It is an exercise regime that keeps you active. As we age group singing and choirs can begin to seem like a daunting prospect. Aspects of growing older can become obstacles that stand in the way. From failing hearing and eyesight, to unsure bladders and reduced bounce, our bodies can hold us back. Transport systems and architecture that are difficult to navigate make getting to practice more of an ordeal, and that's before we have to think about reading small fonts, standing for long rehearsals, remembering the words. These many challenges are often individually tiny but they can add up. However each and every one of them can be easily addressed by considerate choir members and thoughtful choir



leaders, and overcoming them will lead to enhanced confidence, self-awareness and mental strength in our participants.

### */ The value of the social interaction, support network and friendship that comes as part and parcel of joining a choir cannot be underestimated.*

The challenges of isolation, the insidious subtleties of ageism, the despair of loneliness can all be addressed when a singing group is vitally connected into, or is, the connector of its community. Our case studies illustrate that even the most difficult moments of ageing and vulnerability, like life with a diagnosis of Alzheimer's or living with Parkinson's, can be lessened and life enriched by a supportive singing group, led with attention and developed with care.

Choirs nurture care. As this programme develops we're recognising that a choir's social function in communities and workplaces should not to be underestimated for their mental, physical and social benefits. They operate in parallel to formal health care services and in some enlightened initiatives offer models of collaboration between agencies that bring care to the heart of the republic.

Older age is filled with innovation as we adapt to physical and emotional changes. A wide repertoire of song helps all of us find the resilience needed for life's inevitable challenges. As more of us live longer lives perhaps we also need to make new music to help us explore this unprecedented experience.

# Singing For Care – An Introduction



*/ “When words fail music speaks.”  
Irena Huang*

According to the last Irish census about 195,263 people, 4% of the population, are family carers. Over 250,000 work in healthcare. People who have chosen to care live in every city, town and village. Caring for others lies at the heart of our Republic. Likewise in nearly every village and town there are choirs. This Guide Book grows from exploring the connections between the two.

There are community choirs, choirs in hospitals, and choirs in residential care settings like nursing homes. There are choirs made of doctors, nurses, consultants and clinicians. Singing groups of residents and porters and kitchen staff. There are people who sing specifically to address lung problems, brain health and strokes. Choirs that blur traditional divisions between health professionals and the patients.

*/ Singing, like health or illness,  
is a great leveller.*

As the case studies following illustrate, and as was reinforced in questionnaires and panels, singing together has multiple benefits both for the caring professions and those being cared for.

It brings joy. It creates community. It benefits team building and staff morale. And this spills out into behaviour and work place culture.

We heard stories of nurses working long shifts then making time for choir practice because of the relief from the stress it brings and of residential care workers coming in on days off to sing because it makes so much difference to their lives. Singing is an invisible connector and a place where the unspoken can find substance. Like care it has its spiritual side.

*/ Fundamentally singing is a gift we  
can offer each other.*

What seems key to successful choirs is where enthusiasm meets professionalism. A skilled teacher and music director who can adapt repertoire to ability is able to build on curiosity. Many people in our research noted that new participants would shyly arrive, convinced they were unable to sing a note, but with support, would find their voice. With practice this might lead to a performance, to each other, for family and friends, maybe even to a wider public. The venue seems less important than the opportunity to raise our voices with each other and benefit from the confidence this builds.

It's easy to forget in these times of national health programmes that health is the responsibility of all is us and care is something we share between us. We are now seeing just how important and helpful it can be to “sing our care”.

# Case studies

## Áine Murphy

Care Team, Moorhall Lodge, Ardee,  
Co Louth



Moorehall Lodge is home to 81 people and provides nursing, convalescent, respite and specialist dementia care. Their ethos is around providing an environment where every person feels empowered to choose how they wish to live and they are committed to creating a ‘home away from home’ and are dedicated to make the transition into care as easy as possible.

This is undoubtedly a special place, and clearly in no small part down to staff like Aine (a recipient of an ‘Unsung Heroes Award’ and finalist in the ‘Nursing Homes Carer of the Year Award,) who provide exceptional person-centred care.

***/ Music and singing are a huge part of people’s lives at Moorehall. Aine recommends singing as one the ‘simplest things’ one can do. As someone with a love for singing, she feels being able to bring something of herself to work enhances her role.***

She suggests that the ‘singing culture’ that has developed within Moorehall is partly because of the enthusiasm and openness of staff to try new things. She says everyday musical activities such as singalongs, local radio shows and musicals on TV get toes tapping but that there is a particular sense of ‘shared adventure’ between residents and staff in getting out of their comfort zones in trying something challenging or different together. That’s not to say it’s always plain sailing – this is a busy healthcare setting and working across teams on any collaborative activity requires planning and organisation. Even with singing though, the staff at Moorehall go the extra mile (or note!) and have been known to come in on their days off to rehearse for special events.

***/ “Singing is so much fun, for the staff as well as the residents”***

Moorehall actively engage in local festivals and events, they host schools at Christmas with children invited in to sing to residents. During lockdown in summer 2020, when normal visits were curtailed, the windows of the houses were opened wide to local singers and musicians who were invited to gather in the garden to entertain those isolated inside.

The staff’s flexibility and creativity in continuing to programme throughout Covid 19 has been really tested. They see at first hand the spiralling effects of social isolation on their older residents from depression to dementia and they are motivated to counteract these with increased activities and maintenance of online social interactions with the outside world including family and friends.

For Bealtaine Festival, Moorehall traditionally takes part in the ‘Dawn Chorus’ – a national ‘gather and sing at dawn’ event. During May, Aine was determined for residents not to miss out on the opportunity to participate, despite lockdown. Consulting with residents and staff, it was decided Moorehall would make a video to share with friends and family of ‘The Parting Glass’.

The song touched people in different ways, they discussed it in terms of people who had passed and they practised once a week. One of the residents learnt the song on the keyboard and everyone got stuck into the karaoke version. Aine says she would come across people humming and singing the melody in preparation for recording the song – including staff. Everyone was encouraged to participate and get involved in the video. Those who could not sing held the lyrics printed on cards. Aine says there was tremendous satisfaction and pride when residents saw themselves at the grand viewing which they organised.

Whilst she acknowledges the environment can be incredibly challenging, Aine says she ‘loves her job’.

***/ She has seen magical moments with residents responding to music from their past and remains convinced that ‘everyone can relate to music.’***

She encourages people to start with something simple and just ‘give it a go’. A few motivated and enthusiastic staff members, she says, can make all the difference.

# Case study:

## Carol O'Neil

**Carol O'Neil is the Choir Director of the 'Healthy Harmony Choir' (the HSE Hospital choir for Ennis Hospital in Co Clare).**



The idea for the choir was hit upon three years over a cup of coffee as a 'bit of fun, to de-stress and to sing'. The idea was that if they sounded good, it would be a bonus. She and her dedicated colleagues Mary McInerney and Brenda Bleach have been pivotal to the development of the choir which has gone from strength to strength.

The choir quickly grew from ten members to forty members with new members being brought along and introduced by existing members. Carol echoes the words of every Musical Director throughout the land when she says new members invariably say 'I'm not really a singer' and/or 'I can't read music'.

***/ Building acceptance and confidence in new members is really crucial and she suggests flexibility to adapt to varying levels of ability is a must for all choir leaders in a similar role.***

Carol highlights that when one is part of a community choir or singing group, there is an equality about the fact that everyone there is there on the same terms - individually as singers but having a shared collective experience. She talks about doctors turning up in their scrubs beside admin staff which effectively 'flattens things out' in the organisation - a fascinating observation within formal hospital settings which are traditionally so hierarchical. She also comments that when choir members bump into each other in corridors at work, the talk is about learning their lines and not work!

A few key turning points for the 'Healthy Harmony Choir' included an early official performance where the choir travelled as a group to Athlone - the 'team' spirit and camaraderie really knitted the choir together as never before. Another key moment was when the choir received HSE funding after a year in operation. Easing the pressure on fundraising for the choir themselves, this investment had a huge psychological impact on the choir. They saw it as recognition of their contribution, it boosted their pride.

Carol's approach as a Musical Director is to aim to get the best out of everyone and insists that

for her the role is about what the choir needs and not about her. She recommends a few basics for those starting out - a leader with a strong musical background, a regular venue and a small team of supporters to handle admin, marketing and finance.

***/ "Tailor everything you do to the vocal forces you have."***

As a Musical Director she sees her role as one of encouraging, building confidence, picking the right songs, finding the right key and harmonies to suit the group. She feels encouraging an open and responsive approach is important for choir leaders. She recognises the importance of creating engaging rehearsals and acknowledges that the reality is that sometimes, they can be 'hard work'. Being prepared and organised is essential she suggests.

***/ Her goal is to ensure everyone goes home feeling good after a rehearsal.***

When asked what participants get out of the choir, Carol believes it can help people express an emotion 'you wouldn't normally be comfortable expressing'. She wonders is there something in 'collective breathing' in bringing people very close. During Covid 19's first lockdown in 2020, many choir members were on the frontline and while the choir could not meet to practice, the WhatsApp choir group was buzzing with shared messages and musical memories of their times together. This is a choir which has become so embedded in people's lives, that while they may retire as hospital staff, they continue attending as members of the choir. Many of the members are staff in the Geriatric Unit and every Christmas, the choir hosts a remembrance ceremony for people who have passed in their care - staff, families and community are invited.

***/ Who could have imagined that a chat over a cup of coffee would lead to so much more than simply something to do once a week in a room together for a bit of fun!***



# Case study:

## Fergal Fox

**Head of Stakeholder Engagement and Communications Health & Well-Being for the HSE.**



Fergal makes the bold suggestion that a Choir in every hospital in every major town would be a great way of integrating towns with their wider communities. It's not a bad idea at all.

The HSE's 'Values & Actions' Programme encompassing care, compassion, trust and learning is a great fit for the concept of a choir or singing group. Fergal estimates there are up to 15 HSE choirs running in hospitals currently of varying sizes and organisation across Ireland.

Fergal's experience in this area is both professional and personal. Whilst leading on staff well-being a few years ago, he became involved in the formation of a new staff choir in Tullamore. This happened to coincide with a move into a new building.

**/ He was aware of a few other choirs in hospitals through colleagues and what really intrigued him was the 'democratic' nature of it – reports of consultants and cleaners singing side by side.**

He began to wonder how this could be grown and incentivised within the organisation.

If Fergal needed evidence for the enthusiasm within the organisation for choirs, he had it at his fingertips. The first call out for new choir members for the Tullamore choir was expected to be somewhere in the region of 15 – about 40 turned up! It seems inevitable that Fergal was to become a member himself although he still says 'I can't believe I'm part of this!' He describes a flash mob in the new hospital by the newly established choir where staff, patients, visitors and families came out on the different levels of the building to hear them sing 'Fix You' by Coldplay as a magical experience and as an instant viral hit it reached national and international audiences.

**/ Patients seeing their doctors or nurses singing, Fergal says, offers them a different perspective on their caregivers. Singing with your colleagues is a very different way of building relationships with them.**

He absolutely concurs that members of the choir feel valued and invested in by the organisation and

it engenders a huge sense of pride. 'You give a lot' he says 'but you absolutely get it back'. It is not surprising to hear that sometimes one has to wait to get into one of the HSE Choirs because of their popularity.

Fergal probably echoes the feelings of everyone in a HSE Choir when he says he never walks away thinking we 'haven't done some good'. He cites Tullamore Choir's bereavement ceremonies as particularly special. These are when the choir invites families of those that have passed in the previous 6 months and sings for them. As a choir group, it's understood that there is joint ownership and responsibility – they agree on gigs and priorities. Fergal describes their unique bonding as 'free glue'. They host concerts in Nursing Homes, fundraise for the Simon Community and hold an annual Christmas concert. They welcome retirees coming back to sing with them.

From 2018, Fergal began to embed choral work more deeply in line with ongoing cultural change within the HSE. A research piece was commissioned by UL and a guide was designed to assist interested healthcare workers help set up a choir in their own area. One of the major organisational awareness raising pieces was a national invitation to HSE choirs to take part in a competition. This ran two consecutive years with huge attendances – the aspiration is to continue to grow the momentum post-Covid 19 and 2020.

In the absence of rehearsals, the Tullamore Choir, like many HSE Choirs continue to support each other online through their WhatsApp and Facebook groups. For the choir, sharing the memories of performances and rehearsals or simply sharing songs of hope and joy at a time when both are in short supply offers them a musical lifeline of well-being and support - as they offer all of us in our communities a lifeline of support and care.

**/ "Singing is not only great for self-care, when you share it, the joy spreads and it boosts everyone around you."**

# Recommendations



## 1. Be enthusiastic and ask for help

“Make Something, Make a Better Something” Enthusiasm will get you started, whoever and wherever you are, then finding professional support will sustain you.

## 2. Sing throughout the day

The deep seated learning mechanisms where song is stored in the brain are simply stimulated and can really help someone struggling with gait or balance or even to lighten spirits of one feeling a little depressed. Experiment with bringing singing to your caring.

## 3. Practice little and often

Regardless of where people start on their journey “a little and often” would seem to be the mantra. A regular time and date, consistent space to start in and pattern for practice all help to make it easy to get involved and stay involved. This seems especially important for care staff whose timetable can be unpredictable.

## 4. Keep it short and sweet

This is the recommendation from health care teams to musicians. Trial a short series if that’s possible. Be clear about the ambition at the beginning and discuss its success and weaknesses at the end, it is the best way to get better. Start out with the goal of ensuring engagement and enjoyment, musical development can be thread into the process later.

## 5. Remember the 6 Cs

Health care is a challenging, emotional and physical environment for those that work in it and those that need its services. Applying the 6Cs of nursing – care, compassion, courage, communication, commitment and competence to the creation of a choir is a useful reminder. Primarily singing in here is about enjoyment, so keep your eyes and ears on that prize.

## 6. Don’t underestimate the benefits of performance

The Five Ways To Wellbeing are Connect, Be Active, Keep Learning, Give to others, and Take Notice of the moment you’re in - and each is addressed in preparing for and giving a performance. The recognition that singing for an audience brings, the process of being seen, is beyond value.

## 7. Talk to us

There are a number of ways to get started, Whether you are a professional musician or singer seeking to work within healthcare, or you are a healthcare worker seeking to work with musicians you’ll find help at Sing Ireland or the HSE Choir programme. Both have tools and supports (links below).

# Singing For Care Resources

**There are plenty of resources available for anyone interested in getting involved with singing in a care environment. Below are some online sources to get you started.**

Additional resources regularly updated are available at [www.singireland.ie/participation/ageing-voices-resources](http://www.singireland.ie/participation/ageing-voices-resources) including

The Singing For Care panel discussion featuring people mentioned above can be found here <https://youtu.be/5uoQrkPkm54>

Sing Ireland have several guides and useful tools for singing groups [www.singireland.ie/participation/useful-tools](http://www.singireland.ie/participation/useful-tools)

HSE have a handy guide to setting up a staff choir <https://www.hse.ie/eng/about/who/healthwellbeing/healthy-ireland/national-policy-priority-programmes/how-to-set-up-a-choir-for-hse-staff-health-wellbeing-april-2019.pdf>

The Arts And Health Handbook published by Arts Council of Ireland is a useful guide to setting up an arts project in a health or social care setting in Ireland [http://www.artsandhealth.ie/wp-content/uploads/2011/09/The-arts\\_health\\_handbook-a-practical-guide.pdf](http://www.artsandhealth.ie/wp-content/uploads/2011/09/The-arts_health_handbook-a-practical-guide.pdf)

Participatory Arts practice in Healthcare Settings contains useful guidance and checklists though its contacts are out of date <http://www.artsandhealth.ie/wp-content/uploads/2011/09/Participatory-Arts-in-Health-Guidelines-09.pdf>

A Choir in Every Care Home is a UK initiative to do what it says in the title in residential care <https://a choir in every care home.wordpress.com/>

The Singing Hospital is an example of collaboration between singing specialists and healthcare specialists in acute care

University of Limerick has a growing body of research into singing and health, in particular Dr Hilary Moss's work including Sing Yourself Better which looks at the health and wellbeing benefits of singing in a choir. <https://ulir.ul.ie/handle/10344/6217>

Sound Health is a source of studies and learning in the USA <https://www.nih.gov/research-training/medical-research-initiatives/sound-health>

# Get Started

**Singing is fun, therapeutic, social, and stimulating and is a great tool to help older people keep active and involved in the community. If you are currently involved and would like some advice or support, or if you are considering starting a choir in your area, please get in touch.**

## About this Initiative

Sing Ireland is the national development agency for group singing in Ireland. We lead, enable and connect communities of singers in Ireland.

Creative Ageing International celebrates ageing. We work creatively with communities, companies, individuals and organisations worldwide to transform for the better how we view and approach old age.

In the early stages of the pandemic both organisations connected on **[www.dawnchorus.ie](http://www.dawnchorus.ie)** with the aim of connecting isolated older people through song. This started a conversation about the wider role of group singing and its connection to the growing number of older people in Irish society.

This led to involvement with generous support from the Creative Ireland programme. This five-year programme connects people, creativity and wellbeing is an all-of-government programme committed to the vision that every person in Ireland should have the opportunity to realise their full creative potential.

Ageing Voices was conceived as a way for all of these agencies to work together to ensure that choirs aimed at our older generation have the support, resources and expertise they need to keep singing.

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**CREATIVE AGING  
INTERNATIONAL**

Clár Éire Ildánach  
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