

Digital Inclusion Project:

Forest of Dean Community Choir and Forest Sensory Services



Bringing people together through digital connectivity and music

“Singing really lifts the spirits – it really helps” - Project participant

- **Date:** January-June 2024
 - **Author:** Jim Bell
 - **Organization:** Artspace Cinderford
 - **Contact Information:** jim@artspacecinderford.org
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Executive Summary

Project Overview

As part of the initial discussion between partner organisations for the Digital Inclusion project, the digitally-linked choir began as a request from Forest Sensory Services (FSS) service users for singing classes at a similar time that Artspace began an in-house choir. The service users at FSS were unable to access the Artspace building in central Cinderford mostly because of transport difficulties, and so we wanted to look at ways to overcome the access barriers with digital technology and allow the learners to sing together.

Linking the two choirs digitally allowed them to develop their own styles of singing and work on similar songs in a different way. The benefit to participants was evaluated in terms of their reported wellbeing, confidence and improved skills (particularly performance skills), and both choirs have continued after the initial funding period, so continue to benefit participants.

Key Achievements

Number of participants– 11 individuals enrolled in 12 sessions at FSS for a total of 81 participations, 21 individuals participated in 12 sessions at Artspace for a total of 151 participations. 30 participants across two groups identified as having a disability, mental health condition or as neurodivergent.

Key events – sessions completed **January – April 2024**, joint rehearsal/sharing event for both choirs at Artspace on **Saturday 18 May**, planned joint performance for both choirs at The Wesley Arts Centre **Friday 19 July 2024**

Impact

The reported wellbeing, confidence and skills benefit for participants in the project was marked.

Participants showed an increase in their reported mood, not just as a result of participating in singing sessions, but also appeared to report that their mood was improved over the course of the sessions.

Qualitative feedback emphasised the skills and confidence improvements, and participants were keen not only to continue to participate in singing sessions but also to perform publicly as a result of participating in the project.

There were a wide range of unexpected positive outcomes as a result of the sessions, ranging from additional volunteering, participation in external creative activities (two participants making their own performance duo at local open mic nights) and application of the technology used in the project to other organisation activities (planned hybrid creative sessions using the link technology).

Whilst there were some issues in using the technology as originally intended, it was the people involved in the project that were able to make use of the tools available to them to overcome digital exclusion.

Introduction

Background

According to Gloucestershire County Council (2023):

“In Gloucestershire, it is estimated that between 30,000 and 40,000 (6-8%) adults in the county are effectively offline and a further 80,000 - 100,000 adults are online but are likely to be missing the full benefits of the internet.”

And in the Forest of Dean there are specific areas where, according to Digital Divides (2022) areas like Cinderford, Newnham and Blakeney are at high risk of Digital Exclusion.

Coupled with this geographical challenge in the Forest of Dean, according to the RNIB Sight Loss and Technology Briefing (2021) visually impaired people are twice as likely to be digitally excluded compared with the general population, which compounds the issue for visually impaired people in the Forest of Dean.

A strong link has been demonstrated between participatory arts or creative activity and wellbeing, including evidence from the 2017 Creative Health Inquiry Report. According to the report, after engaging in participatory arts activities in health and social care settings, 82% of people enjoyed greater wellbeing. The report also shows that participatory arts activities help to alleviate anxiety, depression and stress.

In 2019 the Office for National Statistics (ONS) reported that adults with a disability were nearly twice as likely to report feeling anxious as adults without a disability (4.27 out of 10 compared to 2.66 out of 10).

This project aimed to make use of digital technology to allow people with visual impairments to access creative activities, in order to benefit participants wellbeing. Specifically, digitally linking Forest Sensory Services users with the Artspace choir.

Objectives

Barnwood Evaluation measures

- Benefit disabled people and people with mental health conditions.
- Involve disabled people and people with mental health conditions in the planning, delivery and/or evaluation of your project.
- The project is accessible to a wide range of people.
- Consider the sustainability of your project beyond the life of the funding.

Numerical Targets

Number of disabled people and people with mental health conditions involved in co-producing the work – Target 4 people

Number of disabled people and people with mental health conditions that take part in/accessed the activities or services delivered - Target 30 people

Stakeholders

Funders – Barnwood Trust Digital Inclusion Fund

Partners – Artspace Cinderford, Forest Sensory Services (FSS) and Forest Voluntary Action Forum (FVAF)

Community Groups – Forest of Dean Community Choir

Participants – members of the Forest of Dean Community choir, Artspace learners, FSS service users

Project Implementation

Planning and Preparation

Project planning evolved from the Digital Inclusion Partnership meetings during 2023, and team recruitment and procurement began in October 2023 after approval of EOI by FVAF and the partnership group.

In preparation for sessions, three main items were purchased – a Meeting Owl 3 (plus expansion mic), a Dell laptop for Zoom sessions, audio recording & editing and a Bose Bluetooth soundbar.

There were two team meetings in November and December to introduce the team, outline the project goals, align the choir leaders' creative approaches and determine evaluation methodology.

Recruitment and Training

The Artspace choir was already established with a choir leader, Lisa Jenkinson, a local singer/songwriter and experienced adult education tutor. We advertised for an additional choir leader through local networks and recruited Jennifer Singleton, a former teacher and music therapist based in South-West Wales to lead the FSS choir.

Both tutors are experienced creative facilitators and are used to working with participants with a range of needs. Jenn did not have experience working with an exclusively visually impaired group but through her own inclusive approach and Artspace's enrolment processes and experience working with FSS we decided that no additional training was required for choir leaders.

All Artspace session leaders have a recent (within 3 years) DBS form and have completed recent (within 2 years) appropriate Safeguarding training children or vulnerable adults as appropriate. All Artspace assistants have a recent (within 3 year) DBS.

Choir Activities

The initial plan for the Choir was for the sessions to happen simultaneously via a live Zoom link. This proved challenging for a number of reasons:

- The choir had an existing time slot on a Thursday morning, but there was already a scheduled class at FSS at this time, and no additional space at FSS for the group.
- When the Owl system is linked to Zoom (and other live meeting platforms, including teams and google meet) the Zoom audio software deliberately attempts to remove additional voices, looking for the one voice to send as audio. This means that although there are setting for live music on Zoom, it cannot currently cope with multiple voices at the same time.
- The different choirs had different interests in terms of which songs they wanted to work on, and the facilitator at FSS needed to prepare based on the needs of the group at FSS.

So the initial plan was adjusted, as the technology enabled us to continue to link the groups but allow them to operate at different times and based on their individual preferences. Recordings could be made of one choir

and these could be taken by the assistant to the other to share what each choir was singing and build and adapt the work of each.

Choir sessions therefore occurred at Artspace on Thursdays, beginning in mid January 2024 and FSS choir sessions began at the start of February on Wednesdays in the FSS building.

Results and Outcomes

Participation

Location	Total enrolled	Total attendances (12 sessions)	Identify as having a disability	Identify as having a MH condition	Identify as ND
Artspace	21	151	3	10	3
Forest Sensory	11	81	9	2	3
Totals	32	232	12	12	6

The project goal was to work with 30 individuals with mental health conditions or identifying as disabled, and whilst we did fall short on the overall target (24 individuals out of 32 participants), if you include participants that identify as neurodivergent (which is also a Barnwood priority) then we had 30 participants across the three criteria.

Learner Progression

The main evaluation measure which could be directly determined from the sessions was if participation in the project had directly benefitted people with disabilities or mental health condition in Gloucestershire. We asked participants to rate their mood on a simple smiley face chart at the beginning and the end of sessions and tracked the change over the course of the project.

We also asked for qualitative comments from participants after each session, partly to monitor the learning and wellbeing benefit for participants, and as a channel for participants to talk about what they had enjoyed or not enjoyed, how we can help them get the most out of the sessions, and what songs or techniques they would like to do in the future – to continue the co-creation process and involve participants in delivery.

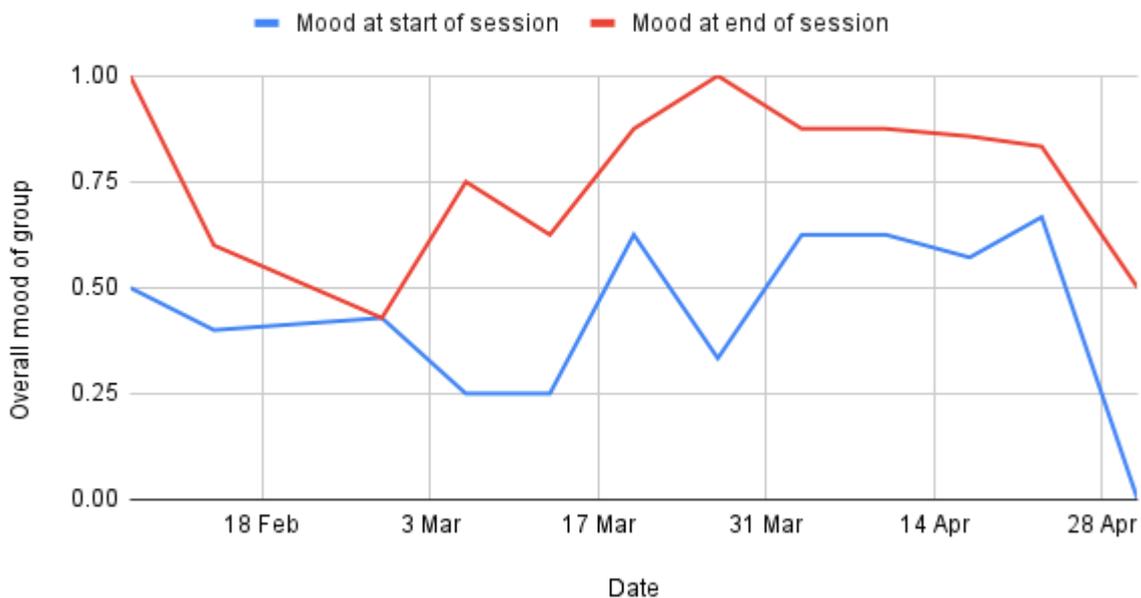
Using the data from the reported mood, we were able to give each participant in each session a positive or negative mood a numerical value where 1 = positive mood and -1 = negative mood. We then averaged the reported mood across all participants at the beginning and the end of each session to give an overall mood for the beginning and end of the sessions across the delivery period. This was then tracked across the sessions to determine patterns in the overall reported mood and give an indication of participants wellbeing which can then be compared with qualitative comments to determine if the sessions are of benefit to participants.

The overall picture of start and end of session mood is demonstrated in the “Mood at start of session compared to end of session” graph on the following page. The following points are noted:

- The overall mood never dipped below 0, which would indicate an overall neutral mood, so the overall mood was always positive or neutral, never negative overall.
- With the exception of one session, the mood at the end of the session was always higher than at the beginning. The session where this was not true the beginning and end mood were the same.

- Mood in the very first session was reported as quite high. This is not unusual when a facilitator asks for feedback from a group who don't know them – participants are usually reluctant to talk candidly about how they are feeling with someone they don't know well.
- The final session had lower reported mood than most – participants were still waiting for the continuation of the sessions to be confirmed at that point so there was concern about the future of the sessions
- Excluding the initial and final session for reasons stated above, there is an upwards trend towards the overall starting mood of the group. This suggests that participants are *coming to the sessions happier* which is a useful indication that their overall mood and wellbeing has been improved over the course of the sessions.

Mood at start of session compared to end of session



Selected qualitative feedback (see appendices for full set)

"I could sing and be me again" – FSS participant

"harmonising - I haven't done that outside of school" – FSS Participant

"Nice to hear ourselves recorded and played back" – FSS Participant

"Fascinated by music, keys, notes - would love to learn more" – FSS Participant

"My mental health and wellbeing has been restored for another week" – FSS Participant

"These sessions are so great for getting me back into music and waking up my skills and confidence" – FSS Participant

"I learned how to work out where my voice is best suited" – FSS Participant

"By the end of the session I feel on top of the world" – Artspace Participant

“Lisa pushes us and I love it” – Artspace Participant

“It is a high impact session which everybody leaves feeling great” – Artspace Participant

“An amazing, uplifting choir that not only builds confidence and singing skills but uplifts the soul, creates friendship and laughter” – Artspace Participant

“It fills me with so much joy and we always have a good giggle” – Artspace Participant

The data gives a very positive picture of the impact from the session. We can show that the sessions improved the mood of those who participated, that the participants fed back that they felt better and had gained skills and confidence thanks to participating in the project. There is strong evidence to suggest that the project was beneficial to the participants.

Another project goal was for people with disabilities and mental health conditions to be involved in the planning, delivery and/or evaluation of the project. As only one person was brought in to the team in the planning phase, it was not possible to have our target of 4 individuals involved in the entirety of the project in terms of planning, delivery and evaluation.

However, the nature of participatory arts and the ethos of Artspace means that our learners have been encouraged to play an active role in decisions about the songs that we are singing, to bring songs to the group that they want to sing and to collaboratively work on the parts that they are passionate about. For example, whilst the FSS group choir leader Jenn is mainly an acapella practitioner, the group expressed an interest in having musical accompaniment, so one of the group regularly brings their guitar, and we use percussion and a ukulele to support the songs we have been singing.

Five of the forest sensory participants have brought work into the group to share, including additional lyrics for songs we have been singing, two brought songs that they want to perform as a group, one had a song they wished to perform as a solo, and one poetry that they wanted to share based on the work we have been doing.

Whilst the evaluation methods we have been using have been delivered by the facilitators of the sessions, who do not all identify as having a disability or a mental health condition, they have been involved with the planning and delivery, which is at least a partial success for the target

Community Engagement

As a result of participation in the project, there have been several developments that would not have happened without our sessions, these include:

- Invitation for the FSS choir to participate with the Artspace Choir at the Artspace Annual Showcase in July 2024.
- Continuation of the Artspace choir as part of the Adult Education programme ‘Local Flex’ programme to benefit wellbeing and confidence.
- FSS choir sessions to continue, firstly as part of a legacy pot from the Digital Inclusion project (May-July 2024) and then as self-funded sessions. Without the impetus from these initial sessions this would not have been possible.
- Two of the regular FSS participants deciding to work on music together and performing at local open mic nights.
- Use of the hybrid digital technology for increased digital inclusion as part of the Artspace programme.
- One of the FSS participants began to bring poetry to read out at the session that they had not felt able to share before.
- One of the FSS participants began to write additional lyrics for some of the songs in our sessions

- Lisa, the Artspace choir leader was inspired to write a song for both choirs
- One of the Artspace choir participants becoming a volunteer at Artspace with a view to begin paid work once trained.
- Setting up of a paid-for evening community choir at Artspace to run alongside the free to access daytime sessions.



Case Study

Throughout the course of the sessions, CA has been careful to report their mood as neutral, both before and after sessions. Sometimes they will indicate that their mood is *“a little towards positive”* or *“a little towards negative”*, but they are careful not to give too much away.

For the first few sessions CA is finding their feet. They have feedback for us about the session, parts that they enjoyed and parts that they didn't and they are becoming more confident in communicating these with us. At the end of the third session, their overall comment is that they are *“Happier than when I came in”* – they do not elaborate why they were unhappier earlier.

By the 5th session, their feedback is more revealing, they record that they are *“Feeling calmer and more relaxed (and a little less sad)”*. Despite some of the choices of songs that the group have made, such as choosing the Simon & Garfunkel song *Sound of Silence* over *Bridge Over Troubled Water* they are generally feeling more positive. By the 10th session they list the song they were worried about, *Sound of Silence*, as one of the highlights of the session: it *“is coming together and... [I'm] enjoying the part I'm singing”*.

In session 11 CA brought with them to the session lyrics that they had written for a song that we had begun to practise, which they shared with the group and we happily adopted them as the words to the final verse. In session 12, CA again brought in lyrics that they had written, this time an additional verse to the song that Lisa had written inspired by the project: *“Lovely glade, leafy trees, humbugs [baby boar] running, 'round my knees. Let's go walking... Anywhere.”* We are hoping to incorporate these words into the song as part of the Showcase performance in July.

Whilst AC still prefers to complete feedback forms with their mood as neutral, they have certainly opened up over the course of the sessions and has grown in confidence and seems happier in themselves and able to share more of themselves in the sessions and with us as facilitators. As they said during a session near the end of the project – *“when you two [Jenn and I] first started, you didn't think blind. But the more that we've got to know you the more that you can tell that you get it, no offence, if you know what I mean. It feels like now that you think like one of us and it really helps, you know.”*

Challenges and Lessons Learned

Challenges

The project has changed substantially from its first inception to the version in which it finally happened, primarily down to the logistical arrangements between lining up schedules (to allow sessions to happen simultaneously) and the restrictions of the technology available to us – particularly difficult, it appears, in the context of group singing over Zoom.

It is also difficult to ensure the involvement of participants, in this case adults with disabilities or mental health conditions, in the whole extent of a project when working in the context of organisations that are set up to support individuals with conditions that staff do not necessarily have lived experience of.

Solutions

In order to overcome the issue of group singing over Zoom we were able to use aspects of the digital technology we had – using the Meeting Owl 3 as a microphone to record directly into a laptop rather than using it as a camera/microphone for Zoom and using the project assistant to go between Artspace and FSS sessions to pass recordings and feedback from one another rather than having a direct live link.

This meant that we did miss out on aspects of the live connection between the groups, but it also allowed the groups to influence one another whilst remaining independent and able to develop their own styles and songs that they wanted to work on.

The issue of lived experience on the project team is one not easily solved in the amount of time available to us here. Artspace are committed to increasing diversity in our workforce, as we believe that it strengthens our organisation to have as diverse a range of creative experiences as possible. However, we also want to nurture the creative talent that our organisation already contains, offering progression routes for our volunteers and assistants to facilitate sessions and manage projects, so this is a journey that will take us many years to progress.

Whilst involving participants in planning and delivery to the extent that we were able to is an important step, the option to have steering groups and external input from those with lived experience is probably the best solution to a lack of diversity on a project team. Whilst this project was small in terms of budget and time scale, it may have benefitted the project to bring in an external evaluator with lived experience of mental health conditions and/or identifying as disabled.

Future Directions

Sustainability & Expansion

Based on the success of the project, the Artspace choir has already been continuing as a free to access activity as part of the Artspace Adult Education programme, and a paid for evening class has also begun and is on the way to self-sustainability. It is hoped that both choirs will continue into next year, but Artspace are confident that the paid-for choir will become permanent even if future funding for the free to access choir is dependent on future funding bids.

Since the beginning of this project, nearly twice as many people are singing at Artspace, and it is hoped that this number will continue to grow.

The FSS choir was extended as part of the Digital Inclusion legacy pot (10 additional sessions) and FSS are now in talks with Jenn to be able to provide ongoing choir sessions in September 24. These sessions may also be able to continue as a linked project with Artspace if current funding bids are successful.

Conclusion

Summary

Whilst it was different to the way that it was initially imagined, it is clear that for the participants in this project, it has had a clear benefit in terms of wellbeing, confidence and performance skills for those involved. The project has also created a host of positive unexpected community engagement outcomes, from a new musical duo forming to a new volunteer working with Artspace - each of these would not have happened if it were not for this funding.

The project reached a diverse group of participants, including 24 people with either a disability or a mental health condition, and enabled them to participate in and influence the direction of a project that has been important to those involved in it, and continues even though the initial funding period has finished.

This project highlights that whilst digital tools can be helpful to cross divides, it is by empowering and enabling people to use these tools that we can make connections in our communities, and these connections between people are the key element that bring communities together.

Acknowledgements

Thank you to Barnwood Trust for taking a risk to fund projects where the learning is just as important as the number of people that you are working with.

Thanks to Alex Digby, the FVAF team and the other Digital Inclusion partners for their input, support and enthusiasm

Thanks for Forest Sensory Services for hosting our choir and always being kind about our singing

Thanks to the project team, Lisa & Jenn for all of their hard work and patience

And, most importantly, thank you to all of the participants for lending this project your wonderful voices

Appendices

Additional Materials

Digital Divides (2022) Working towards Digital Equity in Gloucestershire (Digital Divides): (available from <https://static1.squarespace.com/static/617abf9b742ed51f29193232/t/62443af43d9fc81d2d9a14e4/1648638711164/Digital+Divides+Report.pdf>)

RNIB (2021) APDF Sight Loss and Technology Briefing: <https://www.tavip.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2022/01/APDF-Sight-Loss-and-Technology-Briefing.pdf>

Culture, Health and wellbeing Alliance (2017) Creative Health Inquiry Report: https://www.culturehealthandwellbeing.org.uk/appg-inquiry/Publications/Creative_Health_Inquiry_Report_2017_-_Second_Edition.pdf

Complete set of qualitative comments (FSS and Artspace choirs)

like	dislike	comments
Singing prep exercises Learning new songs First Song - Great Day new & different		Great Start Fitted the bill, suitable & accessible
All of it Rhythmn parts Harmonies	Rhythmn for second song	Felt unsure at first, but now know what to expect
Really enjoyed it! Liked all the songs	too modern for me	Happier than when I came in Make it longer!
Enjoyed all the songs and joining in Love reggae music "I could sing and be me again!" Lots better this week	Wanted a longer warm up	Enjoy learning by ear
New songs Jenn is converting me to like Lay My Birden Down 3 little birds harmonising - I haven't done that outside of school	New song - bubbel-le- la, but drawn into it at the end	Can't hear well - must sit near Jenn I've enjoyed it today Nice to hear ourselves recorded and played back Felling calmer and more relaxed
Rounds - brain workout Loved it Bamblela and all of it! It was fun!	Perturbed about the sound of silence	I love singing it makes me feel really happy I feel calmer and more relaxed "loving the power of love!" Enjoying the harmonies I love singing sea shanties
Particularly liked Sound of Silence Harmonies and guitar Everything was absolutely brilliant	My voice is tired from yesterday Didn't have time for tea	Fascinated by music, keys, notes - would love to learn more "My mental health and wellbeing has been restored for another week"

All of it Brought back memories		
Loved all the songs All All Chocolate!		I've been suffering with indigestion - need to get some tablets! Singing really lifts your spirits, it really helps "My mental health and wellbeing have been restored yet again thanks to the enthusiasm of the group" Loved it all
Loved all the songs I Am My Mother's Daughter		I just love singing Enjoyed
Sound of silence is coming together and I'm enjoying the part I'm singing	Unsettling having someone new (assisting)	Enjoy singing the harmonies It was really special today, everyone was jolly The delivery, content and enthusiasm today has restored me for another week. Cannot wait for next week's session Love singing and working on the harmonies These sessions are so great for getting me back into music and waking up my skills and confidence
Singing Rounds Everything Really The sea shanty!	Bass Line 3 little birds	Had a really good laugh. Enjoy it more now than at the start Learned how to work out where my voice is best suited Different to anything else and I like it This makes you feel good It doesn't matter if you get the words wrong, it's for enjoyment
The sound of silence, everything really	Not much!	99% of today was great. Canoe song not so much Good to come Enjoyed it In a funny mood today. I couldn't get into this so much Feeling a bit isolated
We love Lisa's energy and vibe Love that Lisa pushes us The group singing as one Seeing everyone Singing with friends By the end of the session I feel on top of the world	Not long enough Having to leave early	I was happy happy happy, thank you Something for everyone I always leave feeling uplifted Really enjoy coming feel so much better afterwards Lisa's teaching is exceptional and fun An amazing, uplifting choir that not only builds confidence and singing skills but uplifts the soul, creates friendship and laughter Great for mental health
Singing with friends When we nailed the harmonies Lisa pushes us and I love it	My diaphragm!	Thank you for being here I absolutely love this class, Lisa is so welcoming and supportive I'm buzzing after every class Thanks for having the choir it is great to come along It fills me with so much joy and we always have a good giggle Maybe we could do some slightly more up-beat tunes?
Joining in with everyone Lots of laughter	It had to end	Lovely relaxed atmosphere You are therapy

<p>Warm up really helps Friendship - the wonderful buzz of singing together Full of fun and energy</p>		<p>It just makes you feel really good and happy Really enjoy coming I always leave with a smile It is a high impact session which everybody leaves feeling great Fun and companionship - earning to breathe properly</p>
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