Choir of the Year Competition 2014

MAY 2015

By Dr Trish Vella-Burrows and Alistair Bamford

An Evaluation of Wellbeing and Health Effects
Acknowledgements

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Summary

This report presents the findings of an evaluation of the effects of the Choir of the Year (CoY) 2014 competition on participants’ physical, social and mental wellbeing and health. Given the resources available, it is necessarily a preliminary investigation which provides a cross-sectional snapshot of participants’ perceptions and views. A total of 104 participants (singers, choir directors and professional choral practitioners) contributed to the evaluation. Method triangulation comprised a quantitative online survey with additional sections inviting open comments and face-to-face and telephone interviews. Quantitative data was mapped using the Bristol Online Survey analysis system and qualitative data was thematically categorised.

The New Economic Foundation’s ‘five ways to wellbeing’ model was adopted as the theoretical basis for analysing, synthesising and reporting the findings. The model provides five key messages for supporting a flourishing national population: connect, keep active, take notice, keep learning, and give (Aked, et al. 2008, see p. 9, section 1.2).

This report lays out the quantitative findings and attempts to be an objective response to the additional thoughts that have been shared by participants. It also extrapolates subjectively to allow for issues that may have been implied but that are not explicit in the responses received.

The evaluation aims to contribute to the growing body of evidence on singing and wellbeing and health, focusing specifically on the competitive singing experience.

Key Findings

Just over half of the survey respondents agreed or strongly agreed that the competition had a positive effect on their physical wellbeing. Comments often related primarily to the ‘five ways to wellbeing’ message ‘keep active’ and secondly to ‘connect’ and ‘take notice’ but often causal affect was ascribed to group singing more generally, rather than the competition experience specifically. This may also explain the neutral or negative responses as the question wording related specifically to ‘singing in the competition’.

The findings therefore show that singing or singing in the Choir of the Year 2014 competition can:

• Support singers’ overall sense of physical wellbeing
• Support energy relating to the shared momentum of rehearsing and performing
• Support physical stamina (inc. choreographed movements)
• Support an improved sense of lung health
• Support improvements in posture
• Support ill-health rehabilitation (e.g. stroke)

A small minority of reported negative physical effects did relate directly to the competition experience (rather than singing more generally), for example, becoming tired; sore feet!
Social wellbeing

Strongly related to the ‘five ways to wellbeing’ messages connect and give and to a lesser extent, keep active and take notice, singing in the Choir of the Year 2014 competition:

- Engendered an intense sense of group connectedness and camaraderie within choirs
- Provided opportunities for meaningful connections between singers that otherwise might not occur (e.g. across different voice parts)
- Provided opportunities for meaningful connections between choirs that otherwise would not occur
- Engendered benevolence and positive reciprocal social benefits between: choir members; the choir and its musical director; the choir and its audiences; and with other choirs

The small number of negative social effects centred on a sense of over-burden, for example, extended time in large crowds, and performance-anxiety, for example, letting down fellow singers.

Mental wellbeing and health

With a relatively equal weighting to the ‘five ways to wellbeing’ messages keep active, take notice and keep learning, and to a lesser extent, connect and give, singing in the Choir of the Year 2014 competition:

- Drove enthusiasm for attending choir rehearsals
- Stimulated aspirations for meeting exciting goals with fellow singers
- Supported a sense of purpose and productivity
- Supported a sense of ‘feeling special’ (being one of joined voices; part of a prestigious event)
- Encouraged and enabled new learning (from the rehearsal/performance experience and from observing other choirs)
- Contributed to an overall improvement in mood

The few negative effects on mental wellbeing related to a sense of overburden, personal failure and/or disappointment (e.g. too great a challenge; being excluded from their choir for the competition; being knocked out of the competition at an early stage).

Overall quality of life

Over half of the respondents neither agreed nor disagreed that the competition experience had improved their overall quality of life over and above other singing performances. This finding appears tied to: i) a perceived balance of excitement and stress in competitive performances which may neutralise the impact on overall quality of life; ii) the possibility that many participants already perceive a relatively good quality of life, which may support their ability/capacity to take part in the competition, but which would not necessarily be affected by it in the long-term.

Competitive singing compared with non-competitive singing

Relating to the ‘five ways to wellbeing’ messages take notice and keep learning primarily, singing in the Choir of the Year 2014 competition:

- Was endorsed as effective by around half of the respondents compared to other singing performances
- Provided positive mental wellbeing and stimulation
- Provided added motivation and excitement

A preference for non-competitive performances centred on the enjoyment of performing in a less stressful environment and the maintenance of the underpinning philosophy/culture of some choirs, particularly non-auditioning community choirs.

Lifelong learning

Relating specifically to the ‘five ways to wellbeing’ message keep learning, singing in the Choir of the Year 2014 competition:

- Provided an impetus to raise standards both personally and as a choir
- Provided opportunities for cross-choir learning
- Provided choirs with constructive criticism from the adjudication panel and opportunities for reappraisal

A small number of comments highlighted the potential for over-burden largely related to perceptions of too complex a repertoire, the challenge of singing without a musical score, or perceptions of unhelpful adjudication critique.

Diversity and cultural wellbeing

Issues that arose around diversity and cultural wellbeing highlighted:

- The opportunity for competitions to act as both a mirror and a guiding light in terms of best practice relating to the inclusion of diverse groups
- The opportunity for competitions to recognise, encourage and affirm musical and non-musical aims, such as social cohesion and cultural identity, and to formally credit choirs that provide exemplary services to their communities
1. Background to the Evaluation

1.1. Group-singing, wellbeing and health

It is not uncommon to hear anecdotes from individual singers about the personal benefits that they associate with regular group-singing. Indeed, recent mainstream television documentaries have highlighted the extraordinary capacity for communal singing to propel the journeys of individuals and communities towards a better overall sense of wellbeing (e.g. BBC One, 2009; Channel 4, 2012).

In addition to the personal stories, eminent theorists and practitioners have put forward myriad discussions on the therapeutic properties of group singing. For example, Potter and Sorrell (2012) write:

> Group music-making helps to create empathy: if everyone sings the same thing in a way they cease to be individuals, and momentarily losing the sense of self can be deeply therapeutic (p.19)

Running alongside these commentaries, a formal body of research has been steadily gathering momentum. In 2001, Professors Stephen Clift and Grenville Hancox, respectively current and former Directors of the SDH Centre, conducted their first small-scale, qualitative surveys on the perceived benefits of choral singing (Clift and Hancox, 2001). The researchers identified only four previously published studies which provided very limited data on the possible health benefits of group singing. Ten years later, Clift et al. (2010) conducted a systematic and critical review of the research on group singing and health, and 48 studies were identified. The review both reflected and informed the work of the SDH Centre, which has since produced a range of research evidence including: a cross-national survey of choral singers in Australia, England and Germany; a study of group singing for people with enduring mental ill-health (Clift, et al. 2009; Clift and Hancox, 2010); and a formative evaluation and a randomized control trial of older people’s Silver Song Club Projects run by Sing For Your Life Ltd (Bungay, et al., 2010; Clift et al., 2012.). These and other studies and reviews show that singing alone or in groups can support wellbeing and health indicators linked to physical, emotional, spiritual, mental, cognitive and social wellbeing and health (e.g. Beck et al. 2000; Hillman 2002; Bailey and Davidson 2005; Kreutz et al. 2003; Grape et al. 2003; Cohen et al. 2006; Gridley et al. 2010; Clift, 2011; Clift and Morrison, 2011; Dingle, 2012; Clark and Harding, 2012; Livesey et al., 2012; Skingley et al., 2013). Summing up these collective concepts, Welch writes:

> Singing has physical benefits because it is an aerobic activity that increases oxygenation in the blood stream and exercises major muscle groups in the upper body, even when sitting. Singing has psychological benefits because of its normally positive effect in reducing stress levels through the action of the endocrine system which is linked to our sense of emotional well-being. Psychological benefits are also evident when people sing together as well as alone because of the increased sense of community, belonging and shared endeavour (heartresearch.org.uk).

1.2. Five ways to wellbeing: a theoretical model

A theoretical model that appears to neatly encompass singing-related indicators of wellbeing and health is the New Economics Foundation’s (NEF) ‘five ways to wellbeing’. ‘Five ways to wellbeing’ is a set of evidence-based public messages aimed at improving the mental wellbeing and health of the whole population. They are:

- Connect – with people around you
- Be active – walk, run, cycle, dance
- Take notice – catch sight of the beautiful, savour the moment
- Keep learning – makes you more confident as well as being fun
- Give – do something nice for a friend or a stranger

(Aked, et al., 2008)

The World Health Organisation European Review on Health Inequalities and the Health Divide (WHO, 2014) recognised that the determinants of wellbeing and the determinants of health overlap but are not identical and this highlights the importance of identifying the contribution of personal and social assets that can support wellbeing and/or health. In this vein, the ‘five ways to wellbeing’ reflect the Department of Health’s identified wellbeing determinants of a positive state of mind and body, feelings of belonging and safety, and a sense of coping (Department of Health [DH], 2010), that in turn can support the maintenance of good health.

The ‘five ways to wellbeing’ model lends itself as a suitable theoretical framework for the analysis and reporting of data in this evaluation. The emphasis is on the specific effect of competitive, as opposed to non-competitive choir singing on wellbeing and, subsequently, on resilience to poor health or to coping strategies when poor health occurs.
1.3. Group singing: a human imperative

The origins of singing, and singing as a shared activity, can be assumed to pre-date recorded history by many millennia, as eloquently discussed in Steven Mithen’s *The Singing Neanderthals* (Mithen, 2007). Mithen and other eminent researchers in the field of music ethnography highlight the omnipresence of group singing across cultures, societies and faiths. The desire to sing together appears connected to affirmation (of e.g. faith; cultural/community/self-identity), rites of passage, celebration, motivation, co-operation and education that importantly connect like-minded people.

Choral singing has roots particularly in the church, as well as in orally transmitted folk traditions. Much nearer the present day in Britain (and elsewhere in Europe), from the sixteenth-century onwards the emergence of music publishing and a literate and secular-minded middle class influenced the practice of choral singing. The possibility of collective music-making that was independent of a wider agenda, such as an expression of faith, meant that people sang together simply because they enjoyed it (Longhurst, 2007).

Among the many other influences on what has come to be considered as choral music, glee singing from the early 1700s onwards brought together groups of men meeting in public places to entertain themselves and each other (Lloyd Winstead, 2013). There are plenty of benchmark dates for the development of large-scale choral performances, often bringing together singers from different places. The Three Choirs Festival was founded around 1715. In Westminster Abbey in 1784, there were reportedly 525 singers and instrumentalists in a performance of Handel’s Messiah. The roots of the modern National Eisteddfod date back to 1789, with choral singing introduced in 1825. Growing out of Welsh Nonconformism towards the end of the eighteenth-century, within a hundred years the male voice choir ranked alongside brass bands and football as mainstays of male leisure activity. As consequences of the social and economic effects of the industrial revolution, statements of shared identity associated with these activities pushed well into the twentieth century.

Linked to the mass migration to industrialised towns and cities in Europe in the late eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, the increased accessibility of concert-going as a social event exposed greater numbers of people across wider social strata to musical experiences that were influenced by a fusion of musical styles (Middleton, 1990). In parallel with this the mass production of musical scores and the accessibility of the piano determined a growing appetite for music-making on a domestic and amateur scale. From Victorian times onwards choral societies regularly allowed both sexes to meet and sing together.

The development of barbershop, which initially emerged about 150 years after the beginnings of glee singing, and the recent reinvention of the glee (for example in the TV series Glee and in the Pitch Perfect films), continue to be defined not only by repertoire, harmony and other broad stylistic traits but by the acute finessing of intonation, timing and vocal colour, qualities that are fundamental to successful competitive choirs today.

Despite the falling-away in church attendance, church and cathedral choirs have a continuing presence in British life – for instance on state occasions, with the Christmas service from King’s College Cambridge echoed throughout the country, and in singing at weddings and funerals. If this tradition, like the choral society, is struggling for relevance or reinvention today, it could be seen as being balanced by the emergence of other music – notably gospel singing – that like European choral music has its roots in the expression of faith but has the capacity to transcend religious boundaries and influence secular as well as sacred music-making.

1.4. The fall and rise of community choirs

It is with the invention and development of recording and amplification in the course of the twentieth century that singing as a necessary human activity has been significantly complicated, if not undermined. The development and application of the technology has been commercially led, and the music industry needs consumers rather than producers – it doesn’t need people to sing, but to listen. Also, the dominant musical forms today emphasize individual creativity over collective expression (i.e. the solo artist), with the boy band being perhaps the nearest approximation to a cool choir. We are arguably now at the ‘long tail’ following these changes, perhaps giving rise to the suggestion that choral singing is at a perilous stage in its history.

A concern for the future of choral singing is negated in part by the unprecedented rise of community choirs seen in the UK since the beginning of the twenty-first century. Some of these choirs are part of the outreach activities of existing musical organisations such as professional orchestras and concert venues, with aims including community involvement, education, audience development, and meeting funding criteria. A few tap into television initiatives, notably through choral animateur Gareth Malone, who facilitated groups of novice singers in their quests to form choirs worthy of public performances in nationally prestigious venues (e.g. www.garethmalone.com). The popular televised competitions, BBC’s Last Choir Standing in 2008 and Channel 5’s Don’t Stop Believing in 2010, which illustrated the broadening styles of competition choirs, are likely to have been an influencing factor in the resurgence of community choirs at this time.

The emerging mantra that ‘everybody can enjoy singing’ ran parallel to the most recent efforts to regenerate singing in schools over the last decade or two. For example, over its 15 years of continued existence, Young Voices has delivered massive-scale singing events, which in one single year involved over 2,500 schools, 90,000 children and 6,000 teachers (www.youngvoices.co.uk). Organisations such as Ex Cathedra have also played a key role in regenerating singing in schools with their national project Singing Playgrounds (www.excathedra.co.uk). In 2007, the then Government invested £50 million into the national Sing Up campaign, which aimed to foster positive singing experiences for every primary-aged child in England (www.singup.org).

It appears likely therefore that the increase in singers is due to concerted efforts to establish community choirs, television exposure to choral singing, and a continued determination that singing should be embedded in schools. These factors, and those relating to the evolution of the choir repertoire, are central to shaping the current-day diversity of the UK’s choral tradition, which probably sees choirs with the widest breadth of individual characteristics and a greater variety of music being sung than ever before.
2. Choir of the Year

Whatever the overall reality of the state of choral singing in the UK today, the Choir of the Year competition represents a pinnacle of aspiration, ability and achievement.

2.1. The competition

The Choir of the Year competition has been held biennially since 1984. There have been three incarnations: the Sainsbury’s Choir of the Year (1984-2002), BBC Radio 3 Choir of the Year (2004-2008), and Choir of the Year in its present form. The competition was created and developed, and continues to be managed, by the Kallaway arts sponsorship, PR and events group. Kallaway established Choir of the Year Limited as a registered charity in February 2015.

The competition is open to singers of any age, and until the Grand Final, is divided into four categories: Children, Youth (13-18), Adult, and Open. Choirs are invited to apply to sing at live auditions held at venues across the country (8 locations in 2014). At each location ‘Choirs of the Day’ are selected, and recordings of their performances are then assessed by a panel of adjudicators in a ‘National Selection’ round. Four choirs in each category are chosen for the Category Finals, which are held in front of an audience at a major venue. From the Category Finals four category winners plus two ‘Wildcard’ category finalists are chosen for the Grand Final.

2.2. The choirs in 2014

In the Choir of the Year 2014 competition the total number of competing choirs was 149, encompassing 5,737 singers and therefore giving an average of 38 singers in each choir. In the Category Finals there was one choir with 11 singers, two with 18 singers each, and therefore one with 22 singers, and one with 24 singers (these figures are close approximations), while the other choirs were therefore slightly larger than the average. It is hard to know whether there is a pattern to the number of singers in different types of choir (e.g. show choir, younger or older school choir, male voice choir, etc.), and while some choirs are successful by virtue of the individual voices and musicianship involved, others may gain from the effect of massed voices.

2.3. The performances

All choirs at the Category Finals stage performed without musical scores, and there was a mixture of conducted and unconducted choirs, and conductors with or without scores. Some choirs included choreographed movement in their performance, which where present was variably intermittent, understated, witty, constant, energetic and flamboyant. Some choirs were static, while others made significant formational changes throughout. Most of the choirs had performance wear that was individually standardised, for example, identical dress, or thematic dress, such as an array of colourful scarves or waistcoats.

2.4 The competition and adjudication process

Initial regional auditions were held between March and June 2014 at eight venues around the UK (Croydon, Bristol, Leeds, Basingstoke, Warwick, London, Norwich and Glasgow). Alongside two of the choir auditions, Big Big Sing, a project initiated as part of the cultural programme of Glasgow 2014 (Commonwealth Games), offered singing workshops for those not performing with a choir – tickets for these at £5 each included admission to an audition session. The auditions were each adjudicated by a panel of two or three judges plus a presenter from a pool of thirteen practitioners (experienced performers, animateurs and conductors – a further five people, who had not been involved at an earlier stage, took part in the Category Finals or Grand Final as host, presenter or judge). Choirs of the Day were chosen at each venue.
Recordings of the Choirs of the Day were forwarded for assessment at the National Selection stage, and sixteen – four in each of the four categories of Children’s, Youth, Adult and Open - were informed in early July that they had been selected for the live Category Finals, held in London on 19 October. From these choirs four category winners were chosen, together with two ‘Wildcards’, for the December Grand Final in Manchester, at which one overall winner was chosen. The Grand Final was recorded for broadcast on BBC Four and BBC Radio 3.

At the centre of the judging criteria for Choir of the Year are technical ability, musicality, and performance. These are the elements against which choirs are both judged by the external judges and by which they can assess themselves. In brief, the competition encourages the highest standards of music-making in whatever style the individual choir represents. Choir of the Year states:

We encourage choirs to demonstrate their versatility via programmes which demonstrate a variety of styles, changes of mood or pace. If your choir sings a particular style of repertoire then perform a programme that demonstrates the range of music within that. The adjudicators recognise that many choirs sing a particular style of repertoire (www.chairoftheyear.org)

3. The Evaluation

3.1. Methods

3.1.1. Preparation

Following a number of telephone calls, an initial visit was paid by Helen Price of Choir of the Year to Canterbury to meet Dr Trish Vella-Burrows and Matthew Shipton, Business and Partnership Manager for the SDH Centre. The meeting agenda included discussions on the possible aims and objectives of an evaluation, the methods to be explored and the practical processes. A further two meetings took place between Helen Price and Trish Vella-Burrows, and as a result a proposal was submitted and approved and a contract was signed by both parties on 20 June 2014. The following aims and objectives were laid out:

3.1.2. Aims

• To assess for the presence, or otherwise, of wellbeing and health benefits from participating in a competitive choir-singing environment, namely Choir of the Year 2014

3.1.3. Objectives

• To investigate the nature and extent of any wellbeing and health benefits that participants in Choir of the Year may have experienced as a result of their participation
• To compare among participants in Choir of the Year their perceptions of singing in non-competitive versus competitive environments

3.1.4. Data gathering procedures

Figure 1 shows the processes of data gathering, which took place between 16 September 2014 and 20 January 2015.
3.1.5. Data gathering tools

In order to maximise a depth and breadth of data to demonstrate the potential benefits arising from taking part in Choir of the Year 2014, a mixed methods approach was adopted. Quantitative data was gathered via an online survey. Face-to-face, email and telephone interviews provided qualitative data that aimed to give a better understanding of the survey data.

The questionnaire survey

The questionnaire was prepared and delivered using a Bristol Online Survey. This meant that all respondents needed to have access to a computer and to respond online.

The questionnaire had 12 items with questions on:

- **Demographic characteristics**
  1. Age
  2. Sex

- **Choir-singing practice**
  3. Length of membership with competing choir
  4. Number of public performances per year
  5. Number of competitive performances per year

- **Perceptions of wellbeing and health effects**
  6. The effect of the competition experience on the singer’s physical health
  7. The effect of the competition experience on the singer’s social wellbeing
  8. The effect of the competition experience on the singer’s mental wellbeing
  9. The singer’s perception of public performances versus competition performances on their quality of life
  10. The singer’s perception of the differences, if any, between non-competitive (public) and competitive performances

The final two items on the questionnaire were: i) an invitation to give any other comments deemed by the respondent as relevant; and ii) an invitation to give further information via telephone, email or in person.

Questionnaire processes

Representatives for the choirs appearing in the initial auditions were contacted by the researchers via email early in September 2014 to introduce them to the survey and to ask them to forward a link to their singers at a later date.

The questionnaire was emailed to 132 choir representatives, representing a total pool of approximately 4800 singers. It is not known how many representatives followed the request to forward the survey to their singers.

The survey opened online on 25th September 2014 and a reminder was sent out in early October, with a closing date of 17th October just before the Category Finals.

The information/invitation to choir members on the opening page of the survey (Box 1) conformed to ethical procedures set out and approved by Canterbury Christ Church University’s Research Ethics and Governance committee.

**Box 1: Invitation to choir members to take part in the online survey**

> We are delighted to have this opportunity to invite you to participate in a survey of participants in the Choir of the Year (CotY) 2014 competition.

> The survey is open to singers of all ages. Our interest is in the effects of singing, and specifically singing in a competition, on your quality of life - we want to know how your experience has made you feel.

> The results will contribute to a growing body of research from around the world on the experience of singing in choirs. The survey conclusions will also be fed back to CotY, but please note that all information will be anonymous. Please note also that this survey is independent of CotY’s own survey to which you may have been invited to contribute.

> The survey is completed anonymously, can be saved part way through and need take no more than 5 minutes to complete.

A small number of respondents who later expressed a willingness to be contacted again were emailed a more directed list of questions which was emailed to them in early January 2015. This aimed to elicit more personal and anecdotal comments.

Observations and conversations at the category finals

The Category Finals provided an opportunity for the researchers to observe the general demeanour of competing individuals and for conversations to take place with people who had both a direct and an indirect involvement with the choirs remaining in the competition at this stage. This was the principle opportunity for face-to-face contact with the singers. The Grand Final was not observed live.

Interviews and focus group discussions

Interviews were conducted face-to-face or by telephone or email with seven individuals – five singers and two choir directors. In addition a number of conversations and email exchanges were conducted with high-level professional choral practitioners with experience of preparing, conducting and adjudicating competitions.
The interviews and focus group discussions with the singers were conducted following a broad question-schedule which had room for expansion. In both cases, the following views and opinions were sought:

- Role and association with Choir of the Year
- Positive aspects of involvement with Choir of the Year/relevant competitive environments relating to wellbeing and health
- Negative aspects of involvement with Choir of the Year/relevant competitive environments relating to wellbeing and health

The interviews with the professional choral practitioners focused on the same topics, but they were additionally asked to identify issues they have come across, or about which they have particularly strong feelings.

3.2 Analysis of data

Responses to the structured items in the survey were given as frequency distributions in graph format. Written comments given in response to open questions were subjected to a preliminary thematic analysis by both researchers independently and an additional research assistant. By consensus, a template analysis was used to organise this data (Waring and Wainright, 2008). The map showed immediately obvious themes that arose commonly and less common themes and subthemes. A similar process was undertaken for the interviews, whereby word-processed transcriptions of the conversations in their entirety were thematically analysed using the Braun and Clarke (2006) model. A précis of the main emerging themes in each of these data sets have been outlined for this report.

It is important to notice that further systematic analysis is needed to do full justice to data gathered at a qualitative level. It is recommended that this should be included in any future phase of evaluation.

4. Results

4.1 Participants

In total 104 people took part in this evaluation. This comprised 97 choir members (92 survey respondents and five interviewees), two choir directors and five professional choral practitioners.

4.1.1. Choir members’ characteristics

Ninety-two completed surveys were returned with over three-quarters (77.2%) from women.

Table 1. Age Ranges of Respondents (n=92)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Age Range</th>
<th>Number of Respondents</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Under 13</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>13-15</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>16-18</td>
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<td>19-25</td>
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<td>50-64</td>
<td>70</td>
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<tr>
<td>65-74</td>
<td>70</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>75+</td>
<td>80</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 1 shows that over half (52.2%) of the 92 respondents were aged between 50 and 64 and just under two fifths were aged either 36-49 or 65-74. Fewer than 5% were aged 26-49 Three were aged 75+, two were aged 16-18, and one each aged 19-25; 13-15 and under 13.

It is important to note that whilst the sex distribution reflects evidence of a predominance of women singing in choirs in the UK, neither this figure nor the age distribution of survey respondents accurately reflected Choir of the Year competitors as a whole in 2014. Therefore the findings can give only a snapshot of views which cannot be a generalized without further research.
4.1.2. Length of membership and nature of choir participation

Table 2 shows the length of time that respondents had sung with their competition choirs. The range was between 6 months and 21 years, with a mean across the group of 5.27 years. Around half had been members for between 3-7 years, just over one-fifth for 1-2 years and around one-tenth for 8-10 yrs. Seven respondents had been members for over 11 years and two for between 6-11 months.

This indicates that in general well established choir members were amongst those completing the survey. However, also to be born in mind is the expected churn at primary, secondary and tertiary education levels, in which more singers are likely to have been with their choirs for fewer than five years.

Table 3 shows that over half (53%) of respondents’ choirs gave 4-6 public performances per year, one-fifth (20.6%) 7-10 times, and just under one-fifth (15%) one to three times a year. Seven choirs gave public performances up to 11 times a year and two, more than 11. Three choirs gave various levels year-on-year.

In terms of competition performances, the majority of respondents (58%) reported taking part in one or two overall. Around 16% had competed three or four times, just under 10% had competed five or six times and around 6% more than seven times. Around 3% had competed more than 11 times, with one choir competing 24 times and another over 30 (Table 4).
4.2. Physical Wellbeing

In terms of competition performances, the majority of respondents (58%) reported taking part in one or two overall. Around 16% had competed three or four times, just under 10% had competed five or six times and around 6% more than seven times. Around 3% had competed more than 11 times, with one choir competing 24 times and another over 30 (Table 4).

Table 5 shows that just over half (56.5%) of respondents agreed or strongly agreed that participation in the competition ‘has had a positive effect on my physical wellbeing’. Just over one-third (38%) neither agreed nor disagreed and a small minority either disagreed (4.3%) or strongly disagreed (3.3%).

Two or three comments about physical wellbeing could be analysed on the basis of the ‘five ways to wellbeing’ message connect, for example, ‘I enjoy the exercise and the energy of singing with others’. However, perhaps understandably, most comments related to be active.

4.2.1. Positive responses

Around a fifth of the positive comments related to the perceived benefit of singing to improve specific health conditions, for example, ‘it keeps my sinuses open’, and ‘It’s good for your cognitive breathing, stamina, memory, concentration’. Two people commented directly about the benefits in relation to recovery from illness:

‘Having had a stroke some 6 years ago, I’ve found singing with our choir most beneficial in terms of both physical and emotional health.’

‘I have had lung surgery and singing helps my breathing patterns.’

An association with singing and lung health and improved posture was common, for example:

‘Singing helps to improve lungs, abdomen ….’
‘Breathing exercise greatly improved my asthma.’
‘Practicing and rehearsing have improved my breathing.’
‘I think it has helped my posture and breath control a bit.’
‘We dance about and increase our lung capacity.’
‘I found myself correcting my posture.’

4.2.2. Neutral responses

Neutral responses may have arisen because participants ascribed the physical benefit to singing per se rather than directly to the competition, for example:

‘Singing is perfect exercise for both mind and body.’
‘Singing makes me feel good physically.’
‘Singing in the choir in general improves my physical well-being not just competition.’
‘It is singing and performing, not competing that has improved my life.’
4.2.2. Negative responses

A few respondents expressed negative effects on physical wellbeing relating to competition singing, for example, ‘Physically exhausting!’ and ‘Sore on my feet’. One respondent referred to a level of physical fitness needed to prepare for the competition, stating, ‘…You had to be fit!’ One respondent commented on the issue of physical safety during competition events. It was not possible to trace the roots of this comment.

4.3. Social Wellbeing

Table 6 shows that no respondent ‘strongly disagreed’ with the statement ‘Singing in this competition has had a positive effect on my social wellbeing’, and only 2.2% of respondents ‘disagreed’. Over one-fifth (21.7%) ‘strongly agreed’, and over half (55.4%) ‘agreed’.

Comments that supported these findings could be clearly categorised into the ‘five ways to wellbeing’ messages, with more than three-quarters to the connect message.

4.3.1 Social connectedness within choirs

A strong sense of interconnectedness between choir members was evident and enabled through:

Shared preparation time (over and above non-competition rehearsals)

- ‘I got to rehearse more with friends and felt very sociable and connected as a result.’
- ‘I have made new friends within the choir as we had to have many more rehearsals so I got to know folks better.’

A heightened sense of camaraderie, often with diverse group of people

- ‘Being part of a choir like this is being part of a team and working together is a good feeling.’
- ‘I made social connections through singing that I never would have otherwise made. I believe this is because singing is an activity that anyone can do regardless of age, gender, or financial circumstances.’

- ‘Enjoying the company of own choir members, especially those in other sections that you do not always have time to chat to on rehearsal evenings.’
- ‘I bonded with my choir members while spending the whole day traveling and waiting to perform.’

- ‘I like the day-trip element of the competition because we all get on very well together.’

Shared challenges/goals

- ‘The social aspect of performing and the reliance on and the trust and support of other members is invaluable.’
- ‘Working as a team for a competition develops stronger bonds and other choir members.’
- ‘It’s good to share the excitement and determination with choir members.’
4.3.2. Social connectedness across choirs

Other comments related to wider connections made outside of the respondents’ immediate choir group:

- "Meeting so many fellow choristers has proved to be most beneficial in terms of my social well-being."
- "I met many people from a wide age range who I would not have otherwise met."
- "Singing with a great group of people from all walks of life; young and old, all coming together to sing for fun, for the pleasure of many.”

These collective aspects of social wellbeing were highlighted in an interview with a CotY competitor as shown in Box2.

**Box 2. Choir of the Year competitor talks about social connections**

**Interviewer:** You mentioned that taking part in the competition [CotY 2014] had an impact on your social wellbeing. Can you talk a bit more about that?

**Choir member:** Well yes. It’s because it does all the things we know are good for us socially, and intellectually, actually. You need to really get on … and I think there’s something special about getting it right as a group actually. You’re meeting your choir more often and you work for something for yourself but you can’t do this on your own. You sort of become like ‘one’; like a family where everyone knows what the others are doing. And because we’re together more than we would be we really get to know each other. That’s important for the competition and it’s important for us as human beings. We feel much more connected. And you see that in the other choirs too. And because of that we feel more connected to them too. It’s like – this is a common goal and we’re knitted together because of it.”

4.3.3. Negative social impact

Comments that highlighted the negative effect of social connectivity were few but they nevertheless highlighted this potential. One respondent wrote, ‘I found it a bit overwhelming being with so many people for so long’. Another felt under pressure to perform well for the sake of fellow singers, writing, ‘I dislike team competitions generally as it is stressful worrying about letting down your friends’.

4.3.4. Being active and taking notice as a group

Issues relating to social wellbeing and the ‘five ways to wellbeing’ messages, be active and take notice tended to interweave.

In addition to actively travelling to the competition venues, which sometimes required long-distant journeys, activities related to the ongoing nature of the competition preparation and processes were highlighted. Some respondents used sports references/language to illustrate their point, for example:

- ‘It helped to focus my mind and I also enjoy the buzz of the competition. I am a sporty person so I am used to this.’
- ‘It would be the same practicing for a relay race. You need to be at the top of your game for your team. Fit and focussed,’
- ‘It makes the choir up its game to perform to its potential. You need to really listen and follow the conductor because you’re working as a team.’

4.3.4. Reciprocity

A sense of reciprocal benefit, which may be associated with the ‘five ways to wellbeing’ message, give, was evident between choir members, between the choir and the musical director, and between the choir and their audiences. Issues of reciprocity were expressed well by an interviewee as shown in Box 3.

**Box 3. Choir of the Year competitor talks about reciprocal benefits**

Well, of course you do do it for yourself; it wouldn’t work if you didn’t want to do it. But you have all these things going on at the same time. You’ve got the buzz between the members, which is really to do with wanting to do it right together. Then you’ve got this two-way thing going on with your conductor. He wants you to feel you’re doing OK because then you sing better - for him. And when you sing well, he feels he’s doing a good job. And that, all those things mean the audience enjoy it more. And when you see them smiling and really clapping you feel good. To be honest I don’t know where it starts really, It’s like a circle, an unbroken circle.

The fact that the audience consisted predominantly of other competitors was remarked on. Many comments showed both generosity and humility towards fellow competitors and their abilities.
4.3.5. Diversity

One interviewee CotY singer offered her perceptions on diversity and what might underpin current limitations:

‘Choirs that reflect true diversity, with members from different social backgrounds, ethnicity, sexual orientation, and singing experiences – I don’t think that happens much within choirs in the competition’.

‘I think it’s got a lot to do with the audition process. Where the auditions are held, for example, opera houses, and in areas where you don’t see that level of diversity. It just doesn’t attract that level of diversity’.

The singer felt that diversity needs to be constantly encouraged by CotY to continue to broaden the competition’s social portfolio and to endorse the premise that choirs support cohesive communities. She also suggested ways in which this might occur:

‘There seems to be a bit of a clash between the message for choirs to create cohesive communities and the audition processes of the competition. There is something about the give and take nature of the competition that seems a little unbalanced. They say where the auditions are being held and then choirs apply – or not. I’m not saying that CotY should visit choirs, but they might consider exploring the flavour of choirs in different geographical areas of the UK. They’re all very different and the competition would benefit from knowing more about them’.

4.4. Mental Wellbeing

Themes that arose around the survey question on competitive singing and mental wellbeing interwove with those arising from the next two items, ‘Singing in competitions has a more positive effect on my general quality of life than singing in other public performances’ and ‘How is singing competitively different to other public performance activities with your choir’

4.4.1. Positive effects on mental wellbeing

Table 7 shows that around three-quarters of respondents agreed (44.6%) or strongly agreed (27.2%) that taking part in the competition had a positive effect on their mental wellbeing. Around one-fifth (22.8%) were neutral and five people in total (5.5%) disagreed or strongly disagreed.

Table 7. Effect of the competition experience on mental wellbeing (n=92)

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Many respondents commented directly on mental wellbeing, using positive terms such as ‘uplift’, ‘belonging’, ‘smiling’, ‘enjoyable’, ‘fun’, ‘confidence’. Others expressed an overall sense of good, for example:

‘I always feel much better after a good sing with my choir!’

‘It has improved my confidence a lot. Singing in a large choir also gives you a very uplifting feeling’.

‘The feeling of achievement afterwards was a fantastic confidence booster’.
Improvements in mood were associated with a positive focus, ‘having me time’, a sense of camaraderie/belonging/being connected and sharing and achieving goals:

- ‘Helps lift your mood and gives you something positive to think about’.
- ‘I love singing at any time but doing a competition makes me excited and therefore keeps me smiling for longer’.
- ‘I always get a happiness fun buzz when singing with my Gospel choir’.
- ‘It improved my self-confidence and it’s great to feel a sense of belonging’.

4.4.2. Negative and mixed effects on mental wellbeing

Positive comments on singing in the competition and mental wellbeing far outweighed negative comments. Those that were unequivocally negative related predominantly to a sense of overburden, personal failure and/or a sense of disappointment, for example:

- ‘I am not comfortable with competition of any description. Too much pressure’.
- ‘I was nervous and aware the spotlight was on us. Felt my singing was affected as a result’.
- ‘...deflating if you don’t get placed’.

Negative feelings also centred on fear of letting down friends/fellow singers and a sense of exclusion. Three people said they had been asked by the conductor to sit out of the competition, which was a significant blow to their confidence and sense of self; ‘I felt left out having been asked not to take part and considered whether to carry on with the choir’.

A few negative comments derived from the experience of not proceeding further in the competition or from what singers felt to be unduly negative comments from the judges. Several other respondents echoed a feeling of competition-related challenge for large, non-auditioned community choirs, one making a distinction between ‘choir’ and ‘choral group’, and another contrasting ‘our enormous choir’ with ‘small choirs with young voices’.

This comment was illustrative of many highlighting the potential for a mixed range of emotions:

- ‘Competitions seem more intense and can sometimes make you feel a little bit stressed, but the effort to get it absolutely right is perhaps greater. If you win it’s euphoric but if you don’t, you feel deflated’.

4.5. Effects of competitive singing on quality of life

Table 8 shows that nearly half of respondents (46.7%) neither agreed nor disagreed with the statement ‘Singing in competitions has a more positive effect on my general quality of life (QOL) than singing in other public performances’. Equal numbers (22.8% in each case) agreed and disagreed. Six strongly agreed and one strongly disagreed.

The six individuals who strongly agreed mentioned the ‘buzz’, the feeling of achievement afterwards, and other distinctive aspects of competing, for example:

- ‘Competitions provide a goal to achieve more and improve performance, whereas when a choir performs in public the primary aim is to entertain the audience and enjoy the experience’.
- ‘There’s a definite adrenaline rush: more so than going on stage to perform to a small audience’.

The quantitative findings indicated indifference among the majority of respondents towards the effect of the competition compared with non-competitive performance on overall QOL. The qualifying comments suggest that this is tied variably to: i) a balance of perceived benefits in both situations, for example, ‘I enjoy the competitions but not any more than our public shows’; ii) a resilience towards associated stressors which might otherwise jeopardise QOL, for example:
’I think it puts one under a lot of pressure but not unenjoyable’.

’I was feeling really nervous about the competition but, as with any performance, the feeling of achievement afterwards was a fantastic confidence booster’.

Another comment, ‘There was pride in having taking part although no lasting impact beyond that’, pointed to a temporary effect that had no long-term influence on QOL.

4.6. Comparing competitive to non-competitive performances

The open responses relating to singing in the competition and quality of life were similar to those for the question, ‘How is singing competitively different to other public performance activities with your choir’, in that positive and negative comments were fairly equally weighted. Six respondents suggested that both competition and other performance situations were similar whereas 70 used the word ‘more’ or near-equivalents (e.g. ‘greater’, ‘higher’, ‘increased’) in relation to one or the other. This indicated that feelings were more intense one way or the other. Comments weighted positively towards competitive performances included:

’I am a competitive person so it adds a bit of excitement to the occasion. I like to be part of a team which does well’.

’It makes you feel important in some way.’

’It gives one a sharper edge and feeling of excitement.’

Around half also referred to heightened anxiety in competition, for example, ‘More nerve-racking’, ‘…scary because you have the judges in front of you so it’s a bit more tense’. However, many of these comments rationalised raised stress as positive in terms of goals aspired to, or met, for example:

’You feel more nervous but also more satisfaction as you feel you have achieved more by taking part in it. It helps build team bonding more because we are going through this ordeal (but not negative type of ordeal) together and united.’

’It’s more nerve-wracking but better for technical precision.’

’I prefer the feel-good factor of singing at fundraising/community events, although the prep for competitions keeps us on our toes.’

Anxiety also related to being critically judged by expert adjudicators, but those who commented tended to appreciate high-level feedback, for example:

’It’s a great fillip for knowing you’re getting it right’

’You get detailed feedback on your performance, which is great.’

’It’s lovely to get feedback from friends and family but it is fantastic when the feedback comes from other choirs or the judges’.

One respondent wrote: ‘I have had positive and negative experiences of competitive singing and that is usually judged by if we win or not! While there may have been an element of tongue-in-cheek in saying this, one commentator showed perceived subjectivity in the judging, writing, ‘It would have been nice if just one of the judges had acknowledged the difficulty of the songs we sung. Other choirs sang much easier pieces’.

One singer highlighted a potential preference for performances where costs are not incurred. This was raised in relation to community choirs where income is an issue for the individual singers:

’There is [monetary] cost involved. Choir of the Year contribute but there is a cost, which really can be a factor for less affluent choirs’.

4.7. Lifelong learning

Learning opportunities and goals, which relate directly to the ‘five ways to wellbeing’ message keep learning, were expressed as an important aspect of the competition experience by around two-fifths of respondents. Many comments referred to the learning trajectory as necessary for accessing and finessing material for performance. It was felt that the competition environment provided an impetus to raise the standards of their own choirs, for example, ‘It is exciting and gives us something to work at’; and, ‘…highlights areas where we could make improvements and inspires us to greater things’.

Other comments referred to learning from other choirs, for example, ‘We learn a lot watching other choirs perform’. One singer highlighted the potential learning aspects from other individuals and choirs beyond the musical elements, saying:

’We definitely took away a lot form it from watching other choirs. It was great to step back and watch the management of the processes from individuals and collectively, managing the stress in different way’.
Some comments centred on personal benefits of learning experiences, for example:

- A greater knowledge of musicianship has increased my confidence
- I feel the competition experience is a good idea to develop my skills
- It was nice to push myself to the limit

A sense of collective achievement related to learning was also highlighted, for example,

- It pushes the choir beyond expectations; a sense of achievement.

4.8. The views of professional choral practitioners

Many of the comments given by survey respondents were elucidated upon during interviews with two choir directors whose choirs took part in CotY 2014, and five professional choral practitioners who have a wide range of experience in training/preparing choirs for competitions and adjudicating.

Repertoire

One issue that arose very little among survey respondents was the choice of repertoire, but distinctions can be made between pieces chosen to expand the choir’s usual repertoire, and pieces chosen specifically to demonstrate particular qualities in a competition context. The overlap between the two, and ‘researching appropriate repertoire (something that’s going to show a choir off to its best advantage)’ was highlighted by one choral practitioner as a positive challenge and opportunity thrown up by entering a competition. The practitioner went on to observe the potential risk that participation could unduly affect repertoire choice, for example choosing a contemporary piece that might be seen as significantly at odds with the rest of the repertoire offered, or the general ethos of the choir. Also raised were the issues of repertoire and style of delivery and cultural identity, which are linked to cultural wellbeing. This was thought to be potentially more complicated in choirs that have greater diversity than in mono-cultural choirs.

Managing stress and disappointment

The main thrust of comments related to managing stress and disappointment centred on the conductors’ ability to balance competitiveness and nurturing.

- It is imperative that the conductor remains positive throughout the process, and doesn’t get wound up in the inevitable frenzy and possible disappointment of not winning.

Another practitioner commenting from personal experience observed that over-competitive choir directors can rather lose a sense of perspective on their own and others’ performances:

- Whilst I would take the view that it is about taking part, certainly my director…was all about winning and was really rather rude about the adjudication!

The approach of choir directors

Commentary from the choir directors and choral practitioners highlighted the central importance of the conductor in competition processes, which they observe cannot be overstated. This applies not only to the musical preparation but also to the singers’ wider experience of the competition.

One practitioner observed that the conductor is likely to be an incredibly positive and inspiring presence, but there are examples throughout the choral world of conductors who may be serving their own needs at the expense of their singers:

- I rail against choral conductors who bully to get the results they want – simply not necessary.

This issue of who is ‘in charge’ was discussed by another practitioner who observed that some of the most revered conductors have the capacity to empower their performers by handing over to them a sense of responsibility for making the music work. The practitioner also refuted the need for bullying by conductors suggesting that the experience can be compounded by a reciprocal dependency developing between singer and conductor, whereby the singer’s sense of self-worth is eaten away at by the
conductor and his or her own sense of inadequacy. The practitioner observed that this is not necessarily a gender-specific issue, although anecdotally this symbiotic relationship tends to occur between male conductors and female singers. However, this too may be a reflection of the historical tendency for a predominance of male conductors. The practitioner highlighted that the overall balance of conductors was fairly evenly split between male and female in CotY 2014, although in the Adult category finals all the conductors were male.

The influence of the choir director was also observed to relate to managing singing technique, poor management of which might jeopardise vocal health, and to establishing and maintaining the culture of the choir. One choir director reported a sense of misguided judgement on her part when she entered a young people’s community choir without giving enough thought to their lack of experience with large arts venues or with competition etiquette:

“They were not used to the codes of conduct – behaviour in arts venues. It’s not what they’re used to. They come from a very different background. In rehearsals they were excited, noisy and cheeky but the sense of protocol was unfamiliar and it was a surprise to them and they didn’t do well”.

The choir director proposed to maximise singers’ psychological wellbeing in the future by anticipating this potential challenge and by attempting to put into place strategies to overcome these concerns.

Judges and adjudication processes

Three of the contributing choral practitioners identified the judges and the adjudication process as critical in relation to wellbeing and one believed that these elements can become an ‘elephant in the room’:

“I would say that the crucial elements for a successful choral competition lie in the skills of the conductors and, most importantly, the adjudicators…those who are ‘in charge’ of the competitor/performers”.

“Adjudicators must be very aware of their comments, and how they might be interpreted by the competitors. Failure is, in these PC days, a dirty word, but is an inevitable consequence of competition. It’s so important that the adjudicators accentuate the positive, and provide constructive criticism where needed”.

Overall, there were understandable reservations about aspects of taking part in competitions in general, but unequivocal support from the practitioners for the actual experience: ‘I have never known anyone not enjoy it.’ Putting things in a slightly more measured way, another practitioner confirmed: ‘My knowledge of Choir of the Year is that it is a positive experience for the choirs who take part.’

5. Discussion

This report has presented evidence on physical, social and mental wellbeing related to singing in the Choir of the Year competition 2014 from the perspective of a sample of singers, choir directors and other professional choral practitioners. It is based on the mapping of 92 quantitative survey questionnaire responses and the thematic analysis of accompanying written comments, and transcriptions of interviews from a further 12 participants. All questions were carefully worded to be as open as possible, to allow respondents to deny that participation in the competition had any effects, or to identify both positive and negative effects on wellbeing and health.

The findings concur with previous studies on singing and physical wellbeing and health (e.g. Clift et al., 2009; Skingley et al., 2013), and on singing and psychosocial wellbeing and mental health (e.g. Bungay et al., 2010; Clift et al., 2011; Clark and Harding, 2012; Livesey et al., 2012).

The results confirm that a large majority of singers perceive singing to be positive and beneficial. As the singers in this evaluation were all assumed to be voluntary CotY competitors, this finding is not surprising. However, variations in the extent to which singers endorse the idea that singing benefits their wellbeing and health in relation to the competition were apparent.

New Economic Foundation’s ‘five ways to wellbeing’ was used as the theoretical model on which analysis and reporting of this data was grounded. The findings illustrated the potential benefits of taking part in the competition in relation to the model in the following ways:

**Keep active**
Identified benefits of the competition on physical wellbeing related, perhaps understandably, predominantly to the ‘five ways to wellbeing’ message keep active and they reflected those in previous studies on group singing more generally (e.g. Clift et al., 2009; Skingley et al. 2013). An increase in energy and stamina, improved breath control/lung health, improved posture, and health rehabilitation were commonly cited as benefits. However, the number of survey respondents (56.5%) who agreed that singing in the competition had a positive effect on their physical health was not markedly different from the neutral or negative responses, (43.5%). The indication that positive effects were ascribed to singing per se, rather than only the competition experience, may provide one explanation.

Comments that related to negative physical effects were in the minority by far and appeared to have less lasting significance but they did relate directly to the competition, for example ‘tiredness’ and ‘sore feet’. It may be significant to note that the age-range of survey respondents was higher than the average age of participants in the competition, which may have influenced their perception or awareness of such benefits.

These findings indicate that benefits to physical wellbeing were acknowledged when participants were specifically asked, but they were likely not to have been a major reason for taking part in the competition when compared to singing in other performances.

Connect

Findings on the ‘five ways to wellbeing’ message connect were clear-cut in relation to the competition experience and social wellbeing. This related most strongly to a deeper and wider breadth of connectedness within and across choirs, leading to apparently heightened benevolence and empathy between singers and between choirs. Whilst this confirmed findings in previous studies on group-singing (e.g. Bungay et al., 2009; Clift and Hancox, 2010; Livesey et al., 2012) it was possible that the competition experience amplified these feelings for around three-quarters of survey respondents. An intense sense of group connectedness, belonging, shared purpose/goals, heightened camaraderie and opportunities for meaningful connections with singers from diverse backgrounds appeared to engender benevolence and positive reciprocal social benefits.

Diversity and cultural wellbeing

Important issues arose around the potential role of competition organisers to encourage diversity and thus to support a breadth of cultural identity and wellbeing. Choirs that were inherently diverse, for example, a mix of social backgrounds, (dis)abilities, ages, sexual orientation, singing backgrounds/experiences, were thought to be few in CotY 2014. This is particularly significant in the context of the rapid growth of community choirs in recent years in cosmopolitan urban localities. CotY has the opportunity to act as both a mirror and a guiding light in terms of best practice relating to the inclusion of diverse groups. In the same vein, cultural wellbeing may be supported by CotY’s recognition, encouragement, and affirmation of the widest range of choral activities. This applies not only to choice of repertoire and presentation but also to non-musical aims, such as social cohesion. In turn, these qualities might reflect back and inform the formation and practice of choirs around the country.

There was a suggestion that, whilst the competition offers a great deal for individual competitors and choirs, the current audition processes, for example the nature of buildings in which auditions are held, may be at odds with the message that choirs create cultural wellbeing and cohesive communities in a vast range of community settings.

These findings indicate that benefit to social wellbeing relating to the competition environment aligns to the evidence on group singing more generally. However, there may be a unique quality to the competition environment compared to non-competition environments, which is underpinned ultimately by high levels of flourishing empathy.

To encourage choirs to take part in competitions for the broadest of benefits and to help to address issues of inclusion, the competition organisers may wish to produce specific information/guidance documents for choir directors and to monitor barriers to inclusion.
The relationship between the competition experience and the ‘five ways to wellbeing’ messages take notice and keep learning were closely linked. To some extent, both related to the social element in terms of heightened connectedness with fellow choir members, which was likely to have supported greater awareness between singers. This may also have extended to more intense relationships between singers and their conductor. Comments from the professional choral practitioners highlighted the potential for this intensity to be positive, for example, inspirational and supportive, or negative, for example, bullying. Whilst the latter is never desirable and likely to elicit psychological dis-ease, either approach could, arguably, serve to increase the will among singers to maximise group potential.

The reported sense of belonging and connectedness, feeling happy and purposeful and being meaningfully productive are all factors that are known to support learning (Tickell, 2011). Learning platforms were observed at individual, inter-choir and cross-choir levels. A marked number of comments highlighted the additional learning input required of singers in competition compared with non-competitive singing. Most survey respondents were considerably buoyed by aspirations to raise personal and choir standards to competition-entry level. Exposure to new musical material, observing other choirs in performance, constructive criticism from the adjudicators (which was generally regarded as a positive process), and internal reappraisal were largely considered positive learning experiences. However, a few respondents reported a sense of over-burden, for example, too complex a repertoire; difficulty singing without a musical score.

These findings indicate that, for singers who elect to participate, competitive singing is likely to provide an affective platform for lifelong learning. The primary caveat, however, centres on a balance between challenge and nurture, and this centralises the choir director as the gate-keeper of wellbeing in this context.

A sense of reciprocity associated with group singing has been highlighted in previous studies (e.g. Clift and Morrison, 2011; Dingle, 2012) but the level indicated by participants in this evaluation arguably showed more intense reciprocal feelings engendered by the competition environment. This was highlighted through multi-way relationships between choir members, the choir and its musical director, and, importantly, other choirs in the competition. It may be argued that the shared sense of heightened drama and excitement associated with the competition engendered
greater empathetic feelings, which in turn could underpin the capacity for insightful and productive relationships with a wider group of people who are involved. It was indicated that this extended equally to the relationship that singers had with the CotY audiences, a large proportion of which were apparently either friends or family members of the performers, or fellow competitors, some from the same schools or musical establishments. The apparent high level of mutual goodwill wishes flowing between singers and allied choirs and friends and families in the audience, as manifest by some highly enthusiastic audience responses, and the mutual benevolence between singers and choirs, as illustrated by participants in this evaluation, may indicate that the competition is a unique platform for engendering a sense of reciprocal wellbeing. These findings show the potential for the competition environment to support individual and community wellbeing.

The NEF five ways to wellbeing and mental wellbeing

The findings on the effects of the competition on mental wellbeing were closely allied to each of the ‘five ways to wellbeing’ messages above. Previous evidence showed that the psychosocial effects of group singing were linked to mental wellbeing, most commonly relaxation, reduced tension and stress relief (e.g. Clift et al., 2009; Dingle, 2012; Skingley et al., 2013). In the current evaluation around three-quarters of respondents agreed or strongly agreed that taking part in the competition had a positive effect on their mental wellbeing but this tended to be associated more with motivation, goal-aspirations and challenges met, rather than relaxation and stress relief. For example, meeting fellow singers more regularly, being productive, aspiring to/meeting goals together, learning, being part of a prestigious event, ‘feeling special’, meeting/learning from other choirs and acting on critical reviews were all thought to contribute to improvements in mood and a sense of mental wellbeing.

The potential for negative effect on mental/psychological wellbeing was highlighted by a few respondents and this related to a sense of overburden/personal failure and/or a sense of disappointment. This emphasises the need for putting into place supportive guidance for singers and choirs as a matter of course from the outset of preparation for a competition, particularly for those who may be unaccustomed to working within the competition environment.

Overall quality of life

It was interesting to note that the perceived effect of competitive versus non-competitive singing on overall quality of life was not clearly defined, with over half of survey respondents neither agreeing nor disagreeing to the former being more effective. This tendency appeared tied variably to few perceived benefits of competitive performances over and above non-competitive performances, or a balanced level of excitement and stress in competitive performances which neutralises the impact on quality of life one way or another. A previous study on the effect of choral singing on wellbeing and health showed that most of the 1124-strong sample in the study rated their quality of life and their health as good (Clift and Hancox, 2010). In line with this study, it may be reflected that our findings partly point to the health-promoting benefits of choral singing but it could equally be explained by competitive singers representing more active and healthy members of their communities.

6. Limitations

Identified limitations to this pilot evaluation centred largely on the poor survey response rate and subsequent low uptake of follow-on interviews with singers. The low number may have been due to singers not receiving the survey link from their choir representative, lack of time to complete the survey, low dis-interest in the subject matter, a sense of having moved on since taking part in the competition, or a sense of saturation relating to online survey requests in general (e.g. corporate/national surveys). The online nature of the survey may also have prohibited some singers from accessing it, and accessing singers through a gate-keeper (the choir representatives) limited the researchers’ control on who received the survey link and when.

Whilst the data did yield a useful base of information, a larger sample with a wider breadth of age-ranges and heterogeneous profiles (e.g. CotY managers, judges, audiences) would provide a more generalisable picture.

The method triangulation and mix of quantitative and qualitative methods provided a level of rigour but more in-depth data on, for example, singers’ existing health and social status would have enabled a better synthesis with the evidence on singing and wellbeing. This in turn would enable further comparisons between studies of competitive and non-competitive group singing.

7. Conclusion

The findings of this pilot evaluation indicate that taking part as a singer in the Choir of the Year competition has the potential to support physical, social and mental wellbeing, and this potential may lead to resilience towards ill-health stressors (e.g. Cohen, 2010), and/or coping strategies when ill-health occurs. Whilst these effects have been previously identified in studies on singing and wellbeing, some might be amplified in the competition environment for the people electing to so engage. This is because of a heightened sense of purpose, connection, the drive to meet a common goal and reciprocal empathy and understanding. However, it appears likely that levels of existing confidence among competition singers and/or confidence gained through appropriate support and guidance from the professionals preparing a choir for the competition are key factors to participants’ enjoyment of the whole process. This highlights issues of exclusivity, wherein some singers/choirs may be discouraged from taking part because of perceived personal, cultural and/or musical barriers. The recommendations below suggest ways in which these issues might be further explored and/or addressed.

The New Economic Foundation’s ‘five ways to wellbeing’ model has provided a suitable theoretical basis on which to analyse and report the findings.
8. Recommendations

On the basis of this evaluation, a small number of recommendations can be made for the Choir of the Year organisers to consider in supporting choir singers and directors:

- Guidance for choir directors about setting out aims and expectations for their individual singers for taking part in the competition, which would relate to musical and/or non-musical benefits as set out in this report.

- Guidance for choir directors on the potential negative effects of the competition on singers and guidance on management strategies.

- The nomination of Vanguard Choirs that have provided an exemplary service to their communities but that may not be traditionally competition entrees (self-nominated, or identified through a limited scheme of visits, interviews or surveys).

- Provide a platform for the work of Vanguard Choirs to be showcased (e.g. announced/appearance at The Finals; showing of filmed footage of their work).

- An audit of choir-types according to geographical locations in order to produce the most appropriate location-specific audition processes to encourage inclusion from a broader range of choirs (including from aspiring Vanguard Choirs).

- Further research to explore the wellbeing and health effects with a larger sample with broader demographic and heterogeneous profiles over a longer period of time using the ‘five ways to wellbeing’ as a theoretical model, and to consider other measures such as quality adjusted life years for older singers.

- Surveys for singers on their life-styles to assess their perceptions of quality of life outside of the competition.

- Surveys for singers/choirs who elected not to take part in the competition, to identify the barriers to their taking part.

- Research comparing the experiences of CotY competitors with other choral competition competitors.

- Surveys for choir directors to explore perceived challenges of entering their choirs in the competition compared with other competitive environments (e.g. brass bands).

- Science-based research drawing on recent developments in the psycho-neuro-immunology of singing and the direct physical effects of regular singing on breathing patterns and cardiac rhythm.

9. References


Livesey, L., Morrison, I., Cliff, S. and Camic, P. (2012) Benefits of choral singing for social and mental...
wellbeing: Qualitative findings from a cross-national survey of choir members. Journal of Public Mental Health, 11, 1, 10-27


'It is a competition where everyone can take something positive away. They can benefit from the processes, learning and broadening networks.'

Choir director

‘Meeting so many fellow choristers has proved to be most beneficial in terms of my social well-being.’

Choir member

‘I loved the discipline of the creative process and being as good as you could be in a short amount of time.’

Choir member