The Work of the Military Wives Choirs Foundation

AN EVALUATION

Stephen Clift, Sonia Page, Norma Daykin, Emily Peasgood
Acknowledgements

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Cover image: A selection of Military Wives Choirs perform at the 2012 launch of the Stronger Together album at Wellington Barracks. Credit: MWCF

Back cover image: Members of Military Wives Choirs at the 2012 launch of the Stronger Together album at Wellington Barracks. Credit: MWCF

Authors:
Stephen Clift, Director, Sidney De Haan Research Centre for Arts and Health
Sonia Page, Research Fellow, Sidney De Haan Research Centre for Arts and Health, Musical Director, Shorncliffe Military Wives Choir
Norma Daykin, Emeritus Professor Arts in Health, University of the West of England
Emily Peasgood, Research Assistant, Sidney De Haan Research Centre for Arts and Health

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Summary

Background

Group singing has experienced a revival in the UK in recent years, stimulated in part by the BBC television series *The Choir* presented by Gareth Malone. A notable success from this series has been the growth of choirs for ‘military wives’ on military bases in Great Britain and further afield, supported by the Military Wives Choirs Foundation (MWCF).

Alongside a growth in interest in group singing, an increasing body of scientific research has also accumulated since the late 1990s which supports the view that regular singing has positive benefits for wellbeing and health. The Sidney De Haan Research Centre for Arts and Health, Canterbury Christ Church University has played a leading role in a progressive research agenda on singing and health and demonstrated that singing can help improve the mental health of people with severe and enduring mental health challenges, and also improve breathing for people with chronic respiratory illness.

In March 2014, the MWCF approached the Sidney De Haan Research Centre with a request to help them evaluate their work and the extent to which they were fulfilling their objectives as set out in the Articles of Association of the Foundation. A principal objective of MWCF is to bring women in the military community closer together through singing.

A protocol was agreed for a study with the central aim of assessing the extent to which the MWCF is achieving benefits for their choirs, their partners and their families.

Method

On-line questionnaire surveys were conducted with members of Military Wives Choirs, committee members of choirs and musical directors. Interviews were also undertaken with five members of choirs (past and present) and five military personnel and husbands of Military Wives Choirs members.

The questionnaires included questions on what women had gained from choir membership, family/partners reactions, communication with the MWCF and internally within choirs and views on musical direction and performances. They also posed a number of open questions to which respondents could write answers. The most relevant questions in relation to health and wellbeing focused on: skills acquired, wellbeing and health effects and finally the ‘best and worst’ aspects of their experience in the choirs.

Results

Surveys were conducted over the period 16-30 September 2014. A total of 464 choir members (estimated 23.5% response rate), 173 committee members (38.4% response rate) and 22 musical directors (29.3% response rate) across the Military Wives Choirs network, participated in the study. On the basis of estimated numbers of women in the network, the combined numbers represent an estimated response rate of 26%. This is a minimum figure as we have no information to confirm that every member of the network received the email with the invitation to participate as the Foundation does not hold individual choir member details. The response rate is reasonable for a rapid online survey of this kind, and given the observed breakdown of forces affiliation; length of time in the network, and age distribution of participants, the sample appears to be broadly representative of the membership of the network as a whole.

Structured feedback from the survey

The role of the Foundation and communication

Choir members, committee members and musical directors showed a high degree of consensus in their views on the role of the MWCF. High majorities in each group agreed that the work of the Foundation involves: developing a national profile for Military Wives Choirs (90-100%); answering queries from committees (87-95%); providing core songs shared across the network (86-91%); providing advice on running choirs (85-95%); planning multi-choir performances (74-91%) and assisting in dispute resolution (64-82%).

Facebook, Office 365 and email were all widely used for communication between choirs and the Foundation, and Facebook and email within choirs, but in relation to communication within choirs, direct personal communication in choir practice settings was also highly preferred. The large majority of respondents (75% of choir members and 73% of committee members and musical directors) rated their experience of social media as positive, but a small minority of respondents in all three groups (4-5%) did report negative experiences.

Music and performance

Large majorities of choir and committee members (80-97%) agreed that the core repertoire created bonds within choirs and the wider network; that singing in choirs had developed their musical ability; that performances were a positive experience, and they have gained in confidence through performance. However, while a large majority felt that the number of performances they were asked to attend was ‘manageable’, just under half of all respondents felt pressure to attend performances, at least ‘some of the time’.
**Personal benefits from participation**

Large proportions of choir and committee members reported positive benefits from participation in a Military Wives Choir, including:

- Increased numbers of friends (87% choir, 86% committee)
- Positive effects on health (81% choir, 78% committee)
- Increased levels of personal confidence (63% choir, 72% committee)
- A stronger sense of wellbeing (71% choir, 74% committee)
- Development of new skills (53% choir, 48% committee)
- A strengthened sense of personal identity (54% choir, 60% committee)

There was some variability, however, with these items, and disagreement may reflect a sense that confidence, skills and wellbeing, for example, were already high and so had not improved.

**Benefits for partners and families**

Military wives also reported support from their family/husband/partner, positive effects on their families and disagreed that military rank is important in the choirs. Some women, however, did signal lack of support and over 40% did not agree that choirs had had a positive effect on their families. A small minority of women were also conscious of the role of military rank within their choirs.

**Qualitative feedback from the survey**

Over and above the structured items on the questionnaires, the most valuable and insightful source of information in the surveys came from the open questions.

**Personal skills, health and wellbeing**

Choir and committee members provided many examples of personal skill development, improvements in wellbeing and positive effects on health. The specific themes found in comments about health, included:

- General improvements in wellbeing, confidence and morale
- Stronger sense of personal identity
- Release of tension and stress
- Coping with on-going stresses related to military life
- Social support given at a time of serious physical illness
- Help with serious mental health conditions

**Best and worst experiences**

The richest qualitative material was provided by respondents when asked to identify ‘the best and worst bits of your experience as a member of a Military Wives Choir.’ A great deal of positive feedback came from this question. Over half of the choir members, for example, gave only positive accounts and many explicitly stated that they had nothing negative to say about their experiences. The recurrent negative themes expressed in all three surveys, however, related to ‘internal politics’ and issues related to the central activity of the choirs: singing and performances.

In the survey of choir members, for example, just under half of all participants qualified favourable comments with descriptions of the ‘worst’ challenges:

- Attitudes and behaviours of women within the choir
- Attitudes and behaviours of committee members
- Rank of husband affecting the group dynamic
- Concerns about the approach of the musical director
- Favouritism or disputes in the selection of soloists
- Expectations and pressures related to performances
- Feelings of being under-prepared to perform
- Limited nature of the repertoire

**Interviews**

Interviews were undertaken with five former or current members of Military Wives Choirs, and five currently serving military personnel with experience of the choirs. Comments made generally reinforced the findings from the surveys but also reflected the particular circumstances and experiences of the interviewees.

**Recommendations**

On the basis of this study, a number of recommendations can be made for the MWCF to consider in supporting choirs:

- A number of channels of communication operate within the network of choirs, and the Foundation may wish to review this situation. In particular, there are variations among choir and committee members in their preferences for and use of personal email and Facebook
- Substantial numbers of choir and committee members feel at least some pressure due to the number of performances expected, and the Foundation may wish to reinforce current guidance on appropriate numbers of performances per year
- Both choir and committee members, along with musical directors, expressed an interest in musical training/a musical review. The preference was for this to be carried out at the level of each choir. The Foundation may wish to explore this avenue and assess whether further support is required and how this might be delivered
- Choir and committee members report accessing learning tracks for songs fairly evenly across four different routes (e.g. Choir CD, email from musical director, Office 365 and ‘other’). The Foundation may wish to consider whether a single source of learning tracks should be promoted
• A recurrent negative theme running through the qualitative feedback related to what is often referred to as ‘internal politics’. The Foundation may wish to consider how it could help committee and choir members avoid these issues, and effectively address them when they arise. Specific guidance on what to avoid in the use of Facebook may also be helpful

• While most women do not think that military rank is an issue within choirs, a minority of women do feel this, and the Foundation may wish to consider how this could be positively addressed

Further Research
With respect to research, the current survey is unique in being the first study of Military Wives Choirs and moreover of members of choirs in a UK national network. Information on the benefits of group singing gained from the surveys confirm the general tenor of findings from previous studies, but also highlight issues relating to sources of tensions within groups and challenges associated with repertoire, musical direction and performance, which have not emerged from previous studies.

There is considerable scope for further research, both to help the Foundation with its work, but also to pursue basic scientific questions on how, why, when and for whom, singing is beneficial for wellbeing and health. Further directions might include:

• Surveys of women who have been a member of a choir and then left or of women who are not members of a choir and have no interest in joining, would be of interest

• Longitudinal studies of newly formed choirs playing closer attention to the wellbeing and health of members of choirs and the health benefits of regular singing and effects on the family

• Research and health economics assessment on the extent to which membership of choirs leads to less reliance on military welfare and health services

• Research on the negative dynamics that can arise within choirs and on rare occasions between members and their partners/families

• Research comparing the experiences of military and other choirs associated with services (e.g. police choirs, fire service choirs), organisations and workplaces, and in the community

• Basic science 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 rhythms

A larger scale research project with a focus on health and wellbeing issues would require substantial funding and the Foundation may wish to consider partnerships with a university research centre and other relevant organisations in making an application for funding to major statutory or charitable funding bodies.

1. Introduction
1.1. The Military Wives Choirs

An account of the establishment and development of the Military Wives network is given in Wherever You Are (The Military Wives, 2012, Harper). This book provides a wealth of evidence on the many benefits women have experienced from being part of the Military Wives Choirs supported by the Military Wives Choirs Foundation (MWCF). Two Scots Guards wives at Catterick Garrison had the original idea to establish a choir at the base for wives while their husbands were on deployment in Afghanistan during 2009. Having seen several of Gareth Malone’s series of The Choir, the ladies at Catterick were in touch with Gareth about their idea. He was enthusiastic and a further series of The Choir was developed featuring the founding of choirs at RMB Chivenor and the Royal Citadel Plymouth1. The series culminated in a performance of Wherever You Are at the Royal British Legion’s Festival of Remembrance at the Royal Albert Hall on 12 November 2011 attended by HM The Queen. A single was subsequently released of Wherever You Are, on 19 December 2011 and became the UK Singles Chart Christmas number one, with sales of 556,000 copies in the first week after release.

Further choirs were then established following the television programmes at CTCRM,2 Lympstone and HMNB Portsmouth, and the five choirs of Catterick, Chivenor, Plymouth, Portsmouth and Lympstone came together to contribute to an album In My Dreams. Choirs continued to be established throughout the UK and on overseas bases, and an organisation, The Military Wives Choirs Foundation was established in May 2010 as a registered subsidiary charity of the Soldiers, Sailors Families Association (SSAFA) to support military wives choirs. The Military Wives Choirs network now contains more than 75 choirs in the UK but also in British bases overseas, and the Foundation seeks to support and strengthen the wider Forces family.3 The photograph below shows members of the Military Wives Choir at the Ayios Nikolaos base in Cyprus.

Where a request comes from a base to establish a new choir, The MWCF provides guidance and an information pack for the choir committee. Once established the committee is responsible for recruiting and employing a musical director for the choir, and for the day-to-day running of the choir, with support from MWCF where needed.

1 For further details of Gareth Malone’s work visit: www.garethmalone.com
2 Commando Training Centre Royal Marines
3 Her Majesty’s Naval Base
4 For further details of the Military Wives Choirs Foundation visit: www.militarywiveschoirs.org

The website provides a map of the location of choirs across the UK and internationally.
1.2. The Value of singing for wellbeing and health

Since 2000, there has also been a substantial growth of interest in singing, wellbeing and health. At the time Clift and Hancox (2001) conducted their first small-scale, qualitative surveys on the perceived benefits of choral singing, only four previous relevant studies had been published and these reported 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. At the time of writing a simple Google Scholar search revealed yet more studies published during 2012-2014. The field is thus a growing one, and the increasing body of evidence lends support to the value of group singing for wellbeing and health. Nevertheless, all of the reviews point to the need for further more robust research designs with larger controlled studies conducted over longer time periods using validated measures of wellbeing and health outcomes.

Reference to three recent basic science studies on singing are of interest to give a flavour of current research that has explored the biological dimensions of group singing. Vickhoff et al. (2013) have recently shown that when people sing together in groups their individual heart rhythms become synchronised, especially when the structure of the song leads to a co-ordinated pattern of breathing among the singers. The authors show that the heart rate decelerates during the out-breath and that this is experienced as soothing and may account for the stress-relieving effects that people often report when singing. In a further recent study, Kreutz (2014) reports that group singing leads to a higher level of the hormone oxytocin, often called the ‘bonding hormone’ as it is released in women during labour, childbirth and breast feeding, and is associated with feelings of emotional closeness and love. The suggestion is that this hormone may play a part in the positive feelings of belonging which people can report when they sing together in a group. Finally Dunbar et al. (2012) have recently demonstrated that group singing, and other forms of collective music making, leads to increased tolerance of pain (raised pain thresholds), which they attribute to a central nervous system release of endorphins - natural opiates - which help to reduce experiences of pain.

These studies undoubtedly have relevance to the notion that group singing can have health and wellbeing benefits, as they identify some of the physiological mechanisms brought into play when people sing and make music together. However, these studies involved only small groups of healthy participants singing for short periods of time; none provides direct evidence that singing can have sufficient measurable benefits for people experiencing challenges to their mental or physical health to be of interest to health and social care services.

To address the more practical health and social care issues, an increasing body of research internationally has also looked at the value of singing for people with serious challenges to their health and wellbeing. This is an area to which the Sidney De Haan Research has particularly contributed, as outlined in the next section, but a number of other examples are of interest. One practical and research initiative of particular relevance in the context of the current study is the development and evaluation of a national network of choirs for people affected by cancer in Wales, supported by the charity Tenovus (Gale et al., 2012; Reagon, 2014). Reagon reports on a large survey of just under 900 members of fifteen choirs in the Tenovus network, including people affected by cancer, survivors of cancer and relatives and friends, using a standardised measure of health and wellbeing on three occasions over six months. The results show clear and statistically significant improvements in mental wellbeing over the course of the study.

A further programme of research on the value of singing for people affected by serious health conditions is also ongoing in Australia under the direction of Felicity Baker. This work comes out of a tradition of music therapy which generally works one-to-one with patients, but Baker’s team has also considered the value of group singing for people affected by stroke (Tamplin et al., 2013), spinal cord injury (Tamplin et al., 2013), Parkinson’s (Elfant, et al., 2012) and enduring mental health issues (Dingle, et al., 2013). All of these studies provide encouraging evidence of the value of group singing not only for personal and social wellbeing but also for supporting rehabilitation and maintenance of functional capacity in the face of disabling conditions.
1.3. The work of the De Haan Centre on singing, wellbeing and health

The De Haan Centre’s research mission is to build a robust body of evidence on the ways in which, and the extent to which, regular engagement in group singing can be beneficial for wellbeing and health. Several substantial empirical projects have been undertaken to date to explore the wellbeing and health benefits of group singing with a variety of participant groups.

A cross-national survey of choral societies and choirs in Australia, England and Germany

This study of over a thousand singers revealed high levels of agreement that singing has positive impacts on personal and social wellbeing and physical health. The average age of participants in the survey was in the late fifties, and approximately half reported experience of challenges to their mental and physical health, and these people in particular gave fuller accounts of the support for their wellbeing which came from being a member of a choir and from the activity of singing (Clift et al., 2009; Clift and Hancox, 2010; Livesey et al. 2012).

An evaluation of a network of singing groups for older people (Silver Song Clubs)

The De Haan Centre has evaluated the work of the charity Sing for Your Life, which provides singing opportunities for older people in the community under the title of Silver Song Clubs. These song clubs meet monthly and involve older people, generally aged 70+ who are affected by age-related health problems, and particularly dementia. Evaluation revealed significant perceived benefits in supporting positive mood and addressing social isolation and also in supporting the partners and relatives providing informal care for older people (Bungay, Clift and Skingley, 2010).

A randomised controlled trial of the value of weekly group singing for people aged 60+

The Centre has undertaken the first fully randomised controlled trial on the impact of weekly singing for older people living independently. Singing groups were specifically established to run over three months and volunteers in the trial were allocated at random to either participation in singing or a non-intervention control group in which individuals continued with their usual daily activities. Assessments of physical and mental wellbeing were made before and after the singing intervention for both groups and then six months later. The results showed clearly that regular singing improved mental wellbeing and reduced both anxiety and depression, with differences between the singing and control group still apparent after six months (Skingley et al., 2011, 2013).

Evaluation of the feasibility of networks of singing groups for people with enduring health problems.

Two feasibility studies have been conducted by the Centre which involved people affected by severe mental health issues, and with chronic obstructive pulmonary disease (COPD). Both of these studies provided opportunities for people to sing in one of a number of community singing groups meeting weekly. Groups were part of a network and at intervals groups could come together for larger events including public performances. Evaluation of these projects ran over a period of eight and ten months respectively with measures of wellbeing and health taken at the start of the project, halfway through and at the end. For both studies, significant, clinically important health improvements were found. For people with mental health challenges, mental distress was substantially reduced for many participants, and for people with respiratory illness, their management of their breathing problems was improved. In both studies, participants also valued the opportunity to socialise, make new friends and benefit from social support (Clift and Morrison, 2011; Morrison et al., 2013; Skingley et al., 2014).
1.4. The work of the Military Wives Choirs Foundation: an evaluation

This report presents the findings from surveys of members of the MWCF network of choirs, together with a small number of interviews. Given the time-frame for the study and the resources available, it is necessarily a preliminary investigation which provides a cross-sectional snapshot of the views and experiences of participants in the network, and of some people in the wider forces organisations who are aware of the work of the Foundation or touched by it personally or professionally.

Development of Military Wives Choirs received a tremendous boost from the Gareth Malone series The Choir – Military Wives, and from a series of high profile events, successes with the release of singles and albums, publications and extensive media coverage. Through all of these sources, the considerable benefits for women of participating in choirs are immediately apparent and the principal themes are documented and validated through repeated personal narratives.

Accounts from members of Military Wives choirs included within the book Wherever You Are (The Military Wives, 2012), are particularly powerful in highlighting what group singing means to them. The Choir – Military Wives, and from a series of high profile events, successes with the release of singles and albums, publications and extensive media coverage. Through all of these sources, the considerable benefits for women of participating in choirs are immediately apparent and the principal themes are documented and validated through repeated personal narratives.

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By the time Calum was born in May 2010 Dave was gearing up for another tour in Afghan. He was sent away on a course when Calum was five weeks old, and I had nine solid hours daily of Calum screaming with colic, which was hellish. Calum was eight months when Dave – who is now a petty office medical assistant – went, but I wasn’t as lonely when he was away, because this time we had the choir (Clare Balneaves, p.61)

I was new to the camp at the time and we’d moved to the patch during the winter, when you see no one in the street and because I worked I didn’t go to the coffee shop, so I didn’t know the wives in the other forces. Until the choir. (Kelly Leonard, p.68)

Because he deployed at a different time from most of the men on this patch, I didn’t have the normal support of being in the same boat as everyone else. But by the time he went, we had the choir. That’s been my saviour. (Rachel Woosey, p.72)

I refuse to ever tell anyone my husband’s rank. I’m Carol, I’m a person; I’m not the wife of a rank. Even my daughters don’t know Richard’s rank because it shouldn’t ever count in how they are judged. Most military wives feel exactly the same as me, and that’s one of the great strengths of the choir. (Carol Musgrove, p.83)

The truly great thing about a choir is that for the time you are there you are so busy concentrating on the next note that you don’t have time to think about anything else. You really do leave your worries at the door. (Nicky Clarke, p.151)

In addition, the staff of the Foundation, through their day-to-day communications with committee members of choirs, their musical directors, and with individual choir members, are very aware of the challenges and stresses which routinely face Military Wives Choirs (as with any community choir) over issues such as: recruitment, finances, facilities, musical direction, repertoire and performances, and also in helping to deal with the interpersonal disagreements and conflicts which may arise from time to time in any group.

It is appropriate, therefore, to consider what a rapid survey of the kind reported here can possibly add to what the staff and the Board of the Foundation already know from direct personal experience, observation and reflection on daily feedback from the choirs. Several points can be made by way of justifying the current evaluation (and expenditure involved):

- Firstly, as the evaluation is undertaken by a research centre with a substantial track record of research on the benefits of group singing for wellbeing and health, this study allows the experience of the Military Wives Choirs Foundation and its member choirs to be located in a growing body of theory and research on the value of singing

- Secondly, a study of the Military Wives Choirs substantially adds to this growing body of scientific literature, as to date no research has focused on a large national/ international network of the kind established and supported by the Foundation

- Thirdly, an outside evaluator can provide a more detached view of the organisation and what it is achieving. It would be a surprising if conclusions drawn were at odds with what people involved in Military Wives Choirs know, but whatever the results are, they are coming from an independently conducted evaluation

- Fourthly, from the perspective of the Foundation Board and staff, there may be a tendency to focus on both the successes of the choirs and the organisation, and conversely on the most pressing challenges coming from participating choirs – and so the view of what is generally happening across choirs in the network may be disguised by this polarisation of feedback. A general survey serves to quantify the levels of satisfaction-dissatisfaction and more systematically identify the most prominent issues exercising members of the Military Wives Choirs

- Finally, a first survey of this kind can provide a basis for considering whether further research may be of value and what directions that might take. This is an issue that will be taken up in the final section of this report, but even in the planning of the current evaluation, its limitations were apparent, and further possible directions for research were clear. For example, it would be of value to follow a number of newly formed choirs, with appropriate assessments over time, much as the De Haan Centre has done in its feasibility studies with people affected by enduring health challenges. More sophisticated monitoring studies would also be possible, particularly employing key bio-markers of stress, relaxation, wellbeing and social bonding, which are increasingly easy to collect in a non-invasive way through saliva samples, or lightweight digital devices
2. Method

An initial visit was paid by Professor Stephen Clift and Sonia Page to the offices of the Foundation on 2 April 2014 to meet three members of the Board of Trustees and the Director of Operations. Possible aims and objectives of an evaluation and the methods to be used were discussed and notes were made from this discussion and fed back to the Board members. Sonia Page attended the MWCF Annual Meeting on Monday 12 May 2014 and was able to speak with members of choirs in the network about a proposed evaluation. This exercise was very encouraging and provided further guidance for formulating aims and objectives for this study and in agreeing the methods to be employed. Following this, a proposal was submitted to the MWCF on 16 May 2014 and this was approved as the basis of the study reported here.

2.1. Aims and objectives

Aims

• To assess the extent to which MWCF is achieving benefits for their members as specified in the MWCF Articles of Association
• To assist MWCF in the setting of future goals and fund-raising work

Objectives

• To investigate the nature and extent of any benefits which members of MWCF choirs have experienced as a result of their participation
• To assess the added value for individual choirs and their members from being part of a wider network
• To assess the wider impacts of MWCF within the military community and beyond as perceived by key individuals and stakeholder groups

2.2. Methods

• Online surveys, with tailored questionnaires for the following categories of people in the MWCF network: choir members, members of choir committees and choir musical directors
• Face-to-face or telephone interviews with a small number of women with previous and current experience of singing in choirs and military personnel in various roles with personal experience ofMilitary Wives Choirs

Surveys were administered online through the Bristol Online Survey facility. Potential participants were contacted by the MWCF with an invitation to complete the relevant survey. The text of the email to Military Wives committee members is given in Box 1 as an example. The survey was advertised on Facebook sites covering choir members, committee members and musical directors. Respondents for interview were nominated by staff of the Foundation, and interviews were conducted by telephone over the period of the study.
Dear Committee Members,

17 September 2014

As you will be aware, we have been working in partnership with Canterbury Christ Church University to develop a questionnaire that will enable us, as an organisation, to determine how well we are achieving the aims we set out – that is, our charitable aims, and the support we provide to the choirs within the organisation.

I am pleased to attach a link to the questionnaire that has been specifically designed for those who currently fulfil a choir committee role. A further email including a link to a questionnaire for members of your choirs will follow. I kindly request that you forward it on to all members of your choirs. The questionnaire designed for Musical Directors will be sent directly to them.

https://survey.canterbury.ac.uk/mwc-committeememberssurvey

The survey is entirely anonymous and will be collated by Canterbury Christ Church University. Please take time to fill in the questionnaire (it should take no more that 10 minutes), and encourage members of your choirs to do the same.

Your input is important, and the information collected from these questionnaires will be used to shape how the organisation develops in the future. The survey will remain available until 30th September 2014.

** Technical point - please note that once you have completed/clicked ‘Continue’ you cannot go back to change your answers. **

Thank you for taking part in this project.

Sara Smalley
MWCF Trustee

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2.3. Ethical approval

Ethical approval for this study was provided by Canterbury Christ Church University and confirmed on 16 June 2014. The key ethical principles for relevance to the study were a commitment to anonymity in quoting any views expressed on the questionnaires or through interviews. Where a comment is included in this report which contained details which could identify the respondent, suitable modifications are made to remove or disguise identifying features. This will be indicated by an asterisk (*) where appropriate.

2.4. Questionnaires

Three questionnaires were constructed for members of Military Wives Choirs in the Foundation network, choir committee members and the musical directors of choirs.

Choir members

The choir members’ questionnaire had five sections:

- Introductory questions - asking about choir membership, age and military connection
- Personal and social development, health and wellbeing – asking about friendship, confidence, personal skills, identity, view of military rank, affects on family, attitude of partner, family enjoyment, and effects on health and wellbeing
- Obtaining information and receiving communication – asking about the role of the MWCF, forms of communication with MWCF and within their choir, use of IT, attitudes to social media
- Music and performance – asking about musical skills, training provision, core repertoire, learning of material, enjoyment and confidence, feelings about performances
- A final section which requested feedback on the ‘best and worst bits of your experience’ and any additional feedback

Committee members

The questionnaire for the committee members had six sections:

- Sections 1 and 2 correspond to those in the choir members’ survey
- Your committee role and responsibilities – asks about role on committee and what that involves, whether members has prior experience, what is enjoyable and challenging, what skills have been acquired through the role and whether training from the Foundation would be helpful
- The Military Wives Choirs Foundation team: information and communication – broadly similar to the third section of the choir members questionnaire, but with some questions specifically worded for committee members
- Music and performance – corresponds to the choir members’ survey
- A final section asking again about ‘best and worst bits’ and for further comments

Musical directors

The questionnaire for musical directors has four sections:

- Introductory questions – asking about number of choirs directed, whether also a Military Wives Choirs member, previous experience of leading choirs and musical ensembles, and musical qualifications
- Roles, repertoire and performance – asking about remuneration, decisions on repertoire, the appropriateness of the standard of core repertoire, use of IT, views of choir participants, demand of performances, use of auditioning and view on an annual musical review
- The Military Wives Choirs Foundation team: information and communication – broadly similar to the third section of the choir members questionnaire, but with some questions specifically worded for musical directors
- A final section identical to the choir members and committee members questionnaires
2.5. Interviews

Interviews were conducted face-to-face and by telephone with ten individuals: five women who had been or are currently members of Military Wives Choirs, and five men in a variety of military positions, with personal experience of Military Wives Choirs. Interviews were conducted following an interview schedule but with some flexibility. The following information and opinions were requested during the interview: Military role and association with Military Wives Choirs; negative aspects of involvement with Military Wives; impact of choir membership on wives’ ability to cope with partner absence when they are deployed or away training for prolonged periods of time; effects of choir on life on military bases; the interviewees role in supporting Military Wives choirs; views on the role of the MWCF; views on the future directions of the Foundation; possible support from the Foundation to military personnel; interaction between Military Wives choirs and welfare services; effects of a choir on the extent to which women access welfare services, and views on closer links between choirs and services.

2.6. Analysis

Responses to the structured items in the surveys are given as frequency distributions in a tabulated format. Where the same items were presented in two or three surveys, the data are given for the sample groups involved for ease of comparison. Written comments given in response to open questions were subject to a preliminary analysis by the first author in which the most immediately apparent themes were identified and illustrative comments extracted for the report. Given the richness and extent of the qualitative material gathered, further systematic analysis supported by suitable software is needed, and will be the focus of further publications. For the interview data, a precis of the main themes was produced for this report. As with the qualitative data from the survey, further detailed analysis is required.

3. Results: Surveys

3.1. Characteristics of the samples

Surveys were conducted over the period 16-30 September 2014. A total of 464 choir members (estimated 23.5% response rate), 173 committee members (38.4% response rate) and 22 musical directors (29.3% response rate) across the Military Wives network, participated in the study. On the basis of estimated numbers of women in the Military Wives network, the combined numbers represent a minimum estimated response rate of 26%. This is a minimum figure as we have no information to confirm that every member of the network received the email with the invitation to participate. The response rate is reasonable for a rapid online survey of this kind, and judged by the breakdown of forces affiliation; length of time in the network, and age distribution of participants (see below), the sample appears to be broadly representative of the membership of the network as a whole.

Choir members

Time of membership in the participants’ current choir was fairly evenly distributed from 1-6 months through to over two years. 44.2% had been members for up to one year, and 55.9% for over a year. 82 participants had been a member of one choir previously (17.7%) and 14 had been a member of a second choir (3.0%).

The women’s ages revealed a fairly normal distribution, with just under a third (32.1%) in the modal category of 40-49 years, and 17.5% aged 50 and above, and just over half (50.5%) aged below 40.

Each of the armed services were well represented in the sample: RAF, 21.8%; Army 50.0% and Navy 28.2%. This distribution reflects the relative size of the three forces.

In terms of previous experience of music and singing, 392 participants gave information on singing before getting involved in the Military Wives Choirs and 57.9% reported prior experience. 32 participants reported training to sing (6.9% of the total sample).

173 reported ability to play an instrument (37.3% of the total sample). A total of 363 participants gave information of their ability to read music and 47.1% reported they could.

Committee members

Time of membership showed a different distribution for committee members, with 30.8% being members for up to a year, and well over half being members for a year or more (69.2%). Thirty seven had been a member of a previous choir (21.4%); with 4 a member of a second previous choir, 2 of a third and 1 of a fourth.

The age distribution of committee members mirrors that of the choir members fairly closely, with just over a third in the modal category of 40-49 years. Fewer women were aged 50 and above (8.7%) and 54.9% aged below 40.

The distribution of armed forces representation was also comparable to the choirs as a whole: 28.9% RAF; 48.6% Army, and 22.5% Navy.

In terms of previous experience of music and singing, 148 participants gave information on singing before getting involved in the Military Wives Choirs (48.6% reported prior experience). Thirteen committee members reported training to sing (7.5% of the total sample). 66 also reported an ability to play an instrument (38.2% of the total sample).

A total of 143 committee members also gave information of their ability to read music and 53.8% reported that they could.

Musical directors

Among the 22 musical directors leading choirs, 59.1% had been in that position for up to a year, and 40.9% had directed their current choir for more than a year. Six respondents had led a previous Military Wives Choir and two respondents had led a second previous choir.
A large majority of musical directors also describe themselves as a member of a Military Wives Choir (86.4%).

Sixteen directors participating in the survey had previous experience of leading a non-military choir; two leading a military band and six leading an orchestra. As a group the musical directors had a range of different levels of musical qualification (e.g. three a Certificate of Higher education five a BMus degree, one a Masters degree in music).

3.2. The roles of committee members and musical directors

Committee members

A number of questions specific to committee members were also included to gather information on their perception and conduct of their role.

Under half of committee members had prior experience which they felt helped them in their role (42.7%); 48.0% felt they had gained new skills becoming a committee member, but a large majority also felt that training should be provided by the Military Wives Foundation to support committee roles.

Three open questions allowed committee members to give more information about their responsibilities, the skills they have gained and what they would like the Foundation to provide.

In terms of roles, the usual positions one would expect in any organisational committee were well represented among the respondents including: Chair, Choir lead, Events manager, Fundraiser, Music Librarian, Publicity, Secretary, Social Secretary and Treasurer.

The main themes with respect to skills in committee work were:

- Managing IT
- Organisation skills
- Communication
- Managing people
- Diplomacy and tact
- Confidence in public speaking

More interesting are the suggestions made for additional training. Common themes here are:

- Effective running of meetings
- Dealing with difficult situations and resolving conflicts
- Financial management
- Use of IT, especially Office 365
- Legal issues

Some respondents asked for a general guide to all of the roles which make up a committee and efficient ways of working together, to ensure clarity and agreement on what is expected:

An overview of what’s expected maybe in the form of a workshop. A better way to share best practice so that not everyone’s is recreating the wheel. An idiot’s guide to the technology

Basic “how to” guides for each role

Basic brief training package on role so that there is consistency across MWCF

Basic training on how to run the committee and guidance in connection with the responsibilities of the roles within the committee?

I think all committee roles should have firm guidelines and training so everyone knows who is responsible for what

Particularly for the Chair & Treasurer. Almost need ‘a dummies guide’ to each of the committee roles, something that can be referred back to after a training session

Training for all roles would be beneficial, including how the charity works.

Treasurer, fundraising, events, PR and music (including copyright laws) would benefit from some kind of training

Office 365 is a Microsoft system which allows for online sharing of documents, presentations, spreadsheets etc. The system is used centrally by the Military Wives Choirs Foundation as a means of communication with choirs in the network.
Musical directors

A number of questions were specific to the Musical Directors. Over half of the respondents said they were paid for their contributions (54.5%). Of the 12 respondents receiving payment, nine specified their fees which ranged from £25-80 per week. Two directors reported being paid for performance events (one £40-50, the second £100-150).

Generally songs sung within choirs were decided either by the Musical Director or jointly between the Musical Director and committee. Just under a third of directors reported that their choir could also vote on songs.

Half of Musical Directors felt that the core repertoire was of an appropriate standard for their choir (50%) and half did not choose to endorse its appropriateness. All directors reported that their choir was happy to learn songs outside the core repertoire which all choirs sang in common, and all indicated that choir members themselves suggested such material to sing.

Office 365 was widely used by the Musical Directors to: access scores (90.9%); access backing tracks (72.7%) and accessing learning tracks (68.2%). Only 2 out of 22 respondents reported not using Office 365.

The large majority of directors found performing with their choir rewarding (90.9%) and also found the number of performances they are asked to attend manageable (90.9%). A large majority of directors were also prepared to audition choir members for solo performances (86.4%).

A large majority of choir leaders also agreed with the idea of an annual musical review of their choir by the Foundation team (81.8%).

3.3. Obtaining information and receiving communications

The surveys investigated the ways in which choir members, committee members and musical directors perceived the role of the Foundation; obtain information and receive communications about the work of the Foundation and also the day-to-day running of their own choir. The results in Table 1 relate to the Foundation and in Table 2 to the participant’s own choir. In these and all further tables, the figures reported are percentages of the samples giving specified answers (choir members n=464, committee members n=173 and musical directors n=22).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>I believe the role of the Military Wives Choirs Foundation includes:</th>
<th>Choir members (464)</th>
<th>Committee members (173)</th>
<th>Musical directors (22)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Developing a national profile for the Military Wives Choirs</td>
<td>89.9</td>
<td>91.9</td>
<td>100.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Answering queries from the committee</td>
<td>87.1</td>
<td>95.4</td>
<td>90.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Providing core songs (songs shared across the network)</td>
<td>86.0</td>
<td>90.8</td>
<td>n/a</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Giving advice on how to run the choir</td>
<td>85.1</td>
<td>89.0</td>
<td>95.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Planning multi-choir performances</td>
<td>74.1</td>
<td>74.6</td>
<td>90.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Assisting in dispute resolution</td>
<td>63.8</td>
<td>78.0</td>
<td>81.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Answering queries from members</td>
<td>52.4</td>
<td>53.8</td>
<td>68.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>How do you communicate with and receive information from the Foundation?</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Email forwarded by choir committee</td>
<td>86.0</td>
<td>n/a</td>
<td>68.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Office 365</td>
<td>14.2</td>
<td>73.4</td>
<td>54.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>MWC Discussion Page (A Facebook page, and for MDs their own Facebook)</td>
<td>28.9</td>
<td>53.8</td>
<td>40.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Direct (personal) email</td>
<td>n/a</td>
<td>22.5</td>
<td>40.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Foundation website</td>
<td>6.7</td>
<td>15.0</td>
<td>4.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>What is your preferred method of communication with the Foundation?</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Email from the Foundation to the choir committee then to you</td>
<td>53.2</td>
<td>n/a</td>
<td>13.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Email directly to you from the Foundation team</td>
<td>51.3</td>
<td>41.6</td>
<td>95.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Foundation Facebook (for MDs their own Facebook)</td>
<td>26.5</td>
<td>37.6</td>
<td>40.9</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

A series of statements were presented about the work of the Foundation team and participants endorsed all those they believed to be true. The first section in Table 1 reports percentage levels of agreement. Participants were also asked about channels of communication and how they preferred. The items included in the table were asked in common to all three groups.

For Musical Directors, 86.4% reported that the Foundation has a role in overseeing the development of the choir network, and 59.1% believed they also assessed the musical standard of individual choirs. A number of Musical Directors (13.6%) also reported that they have no direct communication with the Foundation.

4. %s should be treated with caution given the small sample size

7. This option was not presented in the survey for committee members
Table 2 reports data on means of communication with the choir or choir committee.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Method of Communication</th>
<th>Choir members (464)</th>
<th>Committee members (173)</th>
<th>Musical directors (22)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Choir’s Facebook page</td>
<td>91.2</td>
<td>95.4</td>
<td>n/a</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Personal email</td>
<td>83.0</td>
<td>68.8</td>
<td>72.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Verbal announcements during choir practice</td>
<td>81.3</td>
<td>85.6</td>
<td>81.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Twitter</td>
<td>1.9</td>
<td>2.3</td>
<td>4.5</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 2: Communication with own choir/committee

Although a majority of participants indicated personal email and Facebook as preferred means of communication, many women again took the opportunity to indicate in written comments that they like to have communications face-to-face during rehearsals.

Participants were also asked to rate their experience of social media. A large majority of choir members rated their experience as positive (74.6%), with only 4.6% of members declaring that social media had had a negative effect on their experience. Committee members were similarly positive (79.7%), with only 5.2% indicating that there had been negative effects. Musical Directors also rated the impact of social media as positive (72.7%) with only 4.5% suggesting negative effects.

3.4. Repertoire and performance challenges

Choir and committee members were asked about views on the songs they were singing in the choir and also their experiences of performance events. Findings for both groups are combined in Table 3.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Question</th>
<th>Strongly Disagree</th>
<th>Disagree</th>
<th>Neither</th>
<th>Agree</th>
<th>Strongly Agree</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>The core repertoire creates a bond</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Choir members</td>
<td>3.7</td>
<td>3.2</td>
<td>14.0</td>
<td>53.2</td>
<td>25.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Committee members</td>
<td>5.8</td>
<td>3.5</td>
<td>9.2</td>
<td>55.5</td>
<td>26.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I can learn the core repertoire</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Choir members</td>
<td>1.3</td>
<td>1.5</td>
<td>10.1</td>
<td>54.3</td>
<td>32.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Committee members</td>
<td>1.2</td>
<td>3.5</td>
<td>4.6</td>
<td>57.8</td>
<td>32.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I enjoy performing with my choir</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Choir members</td>
<td>4.3</td>
<td>1.3</td>
<td>4.1</td>
<td>25.0</td>
<td>65.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Committee members</td>
<td>4.0</td>
<td>0.6</td>
<td>1.7</td>
<td>20.2</td>
<td>73.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I sometimes feel pressure from the choir to attend performances</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Choir members</td>
<td>56.0</td>
<td>34.7</td>
<td>5.4</td>
<td>3.9</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Committee members</td>
<td>56.6</td>
<td>30.7</td>
<td>7.5</td>
<td>5.2</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The performance element of choir membership is:</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Choir members</td>
<td>96.8</td>
<td>3.2</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Committee members</td>
<td>96.5</td>
<td>3.5</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The number of performances I am asked to attend</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Choir members</td>
<td>84.1</td>
<td>9.7</td>
<td>6.2</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Committee members</td>
<td>83.8</td>
<td>9.2</td>
<td>6.9</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I have gained confidence through performing with my choir</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Choir members</td>
<td>84.1</td>
<td>15.9</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Committee members</td>
<td>88.4</td>
<td>11.6</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Has singing with your MWC developed your musical ability?</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Choir members</td>
<td>80.2</td>
<td>19.8</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Committee members</td>
<td>85</td>
<td>15</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 3: Views of choir and committee members on songs and performances (%) Choir members (464), Committee members (173)

* This option was not presented in the musical directors’ survey
It is immediately clear that the distribution of answers for the two groups is very similar, with high levels of agreement that the core repertoire creates a bond and that performances are enjoyable. With respect to feelings of pressure associated with performances, just over half of both groups report ‘never’ feeling under pressure, and well over 80% of both groups regard the number of performances they are asked to attend as ‘manageable’. But a substantial proportion of respondents do feel such pressure at least ‘some of the time’ and a minority feel pressure more often than this. Just under 10% of choir and committee members suggest that there are ‘too many’ performances. Nevertheless, virtually everyone in both groups regard the performance element of choir membership as ‘positive’. Most participants also report gaining confidence from performing with their choir and feel their musical ability has developed (over 80% for both groups).

Table 4 reports further information on how participants access musical material.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>I access learning tracks via:</th>
<th>Office 365</th>
<th>Choir CD</th>
<th>Email from MD</th>
<th>Other</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Choir members</td>
<td>15.5</td>
<td>13.6</td>
<td>43.1</td>
<td>27.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Committee members</td>
<td>33.5</td>
<td>18.5</td>
<td>23.7</td>
<td>24.3</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Would you like more shared music?</th>
<th>Yes</th>
<th>No</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Choir members</td>
<td>77.4</td>
<td>22.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Committee members</td>
<td>84.4</td>
<td>15.6</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>If musical training were provided, how would you like it delivered?</th>
<th>Online</th>
<th>Local (in own choir)</th>
<th>Regional</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Choir members</td>
<td>8.4</td>
<td>75.0</td>
<td>16.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Committee members</td>
<td>5.8</td>
<td>72.8</td>
<td>21.4</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Participants in both groups access their learning material in a variety of different ways. For choir members the modal route is a CD provided by the Musical Director, while the modal route for committee members is Office 365. A large majority in both groups would like to see more shared repertoire and would appreciate some musical training from the Foundation delivered on a local level within their own choir.

3.5. Personal and social development, health and wellbeing

Tables 5 and 6 report choir and committee members responses to ten statements designed to assess the effects of belonging to a Military Wives Choir on the women in the survey, as well as issues related to their partners and families.

In terms of personal effects of membership we can see that a majority of women in the sample report:

- Increased numbers of friends
- Positive effects on health
- Increased levels of personal confidence
- A stronger sense of wellbeing
- Development of new skills
- A strengthened sense of personal identity

It should be noted, however, that for the last four of these effects, over a quarter of participants disagreed or felt they neither agreed nor disagreed. Part of the reason for this may well be that these women felt that even prior to joining a choir, they already had a sense of confidence, wellbeing and personal identity, and that they already had skills associated with working together in groups and singing.

Table 5: Personal and social development, health and wellbeing (%) Choir members (464), Committee members (173)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Personal effects of membership</th>
<th>Strongly Disagree</th>
<th>Disagree</th>
<th>Neither</th>
<th>Agree</th>
<th>Strongly Agree</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Membership of the MWC has increased the number of friends I have</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Choir members</td>
<td>1.9</td>
<td>1.5</td>
<td>10.3</td>
<td>45.5</td>
<td>40.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Committee members</td>
<td>5.8</td>
<td>1.2</td>
<td>6.9</td>
<td>36.4</td>
<td>49.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The effect on my health of singing in a MWC is (positive)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Choir members</td>
<td>0.9</td>
<td>1.1</td>
<td>16.8</td>
<td>54.3</td>
<td>26.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Committee members</td>
<td>0.6</td>
<td>0.6</td>
<td>20.2</td>
<td>50.3</td>
<td>28.3</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

| My personal confidence has grown through membership of the MWC | | | | |
| Choir members | 1.7 | 6.0 | 29.1 | 42.9 | 20.3 |
| Committee members | 1.7 | 7.5 | 18.5 | 38.2 | 34.1 |
| I have a stronger sense of wellbeing since joining MWC | | | | |
| Choir members | 2.8 | 2.8 | 23.1 | 53.0 | 18.3 |
| Committee members | 1.2 | 3.5 | 21.4 | 49.1 | 24.9 |
| Membership of the MWC has enabled me to develop new personal skills | | | | |
| Choir members | 2.2 | 8.4 | 36.4 | 38.1 | 14.9 |
| Committee members | No: 52.2 | Yes: 48.0 | |
| Membership of the MWC has developed my own sense of identity | | | | |
| Choir members | 2.8 | 11.2 | 32.1 | 41.2 | 12.7 |
| Committee members | 0.6 | 8.7 | 30.6 | 39.3 | 20.8 |

---

9 Shared music refers to music identified by choirs or musical directors and made available to the whole network
10 Wording of the response scale on the questionnaire is from very negative to very positive
11 Wording of this item differed for choir and committee members (see section above on committee member skills)
3.6. Qualitative evidence on the impacts of choir membership

At the core of the mission of the Military Wives Choirs Foundation is the goal of supporting the personal wellbeing and welfare of military wives and a central focus of the questionnaire was to assess the extent to which respondents felt that this was the case. In addition to responding to the structured items on the questionnaire, choir members were also offered the opportunity to write something on the contribution the choirs have made to their personal skills, sense of wellbeing and health. The data gathered in response to these requests is of particular value in understanding the powerful impacts that group singing and performance can have for the women involved.

Positive effects on partners and families are also reported in Table 6. It is clear that for both groups of families, partners and husbands are supportive of the choirs (in excess of 80%).

Interestingly, while over half of both groups report that their families have benefited from the participants’ involvement in the choirs, over a third is noncommittal about this and a small minority actually disagree.

Choir members, but not committee members, were also asked whether their families enjoy attending Military Wives Choirs events. Just over half agreed that they did (53.4%), just over a third were neutral (37.7%), and a minority disagreed (8.9%).

Table 6: Effects on partners and families (%) Choir members (464), Committee members (173)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Effect</th>
<th>Choir members</th>
<th>Committee members</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>My family/husband/partner is supportive of my involvement with the MWC</td>
<td>Strongly Agree 46.6%</td>
<td>Strongly Agree 49.1%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>My membership of MWC has positively affected my family</td>
<td>Strongly Agree 41.6%</td>
<td>Strongly Agree 43.4%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Military rank is important to members of MWC</td>
<td>Strongly Agree 4.5%</td>
<td>Strongly Agree 1.7%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Choir members

Personal skills

The principal themes expressed in relation to skills development were:

- Improvements in singing
- Learning to read music and improved knowledge of music
- Greater self confidence in communication
- Improved social skills
- Improved organisational abilities
- Improved leadership and teaching abilities
- Generalisation of skills to other aspects of life

The following quotations are representative of comments coming from just under 60 participants:

Confidence to speak to strangers. Confidence to sing a solo in front of a large audience.
I can speak in public without freezing.
Mixing with women of all types and ages.
Leadership, collective decision-making, singing and revived reading music.
Singing in my baby groups with confidence and lifting the spirits of the other mums. Entertains my baby and others with laughter.
Speaking in front of an audience. Helping our MD to lead a sectional rehearsal.
Helping my reading of music and sight reading.
Refreshed my sight singing and musical theory. Also encouraged me to meet new people, social skills.

Sense of wellbeing

Written responses on the theme of wellbeing were provided by 36 participants. In the main, women describe the positive impacts of choir membership and singing on their wellbeing, but there are also a small number of negative accounts. On the positive side, the principal themes are:

- A sense of happiness, enjoyment and being uplifted
- Unwinding and relaxing
- A sense of purpose and focus
- Something to look forward to
- Making new friends, especially when settling into a new base
- Time for myself away from being in a role
- A sense of camaraderie
- Promoting mental wellbeing in the face of challenges
The following comments illustrate these themes, and are characteristic of the general tenor of positive views:

I leave choir feeling more positive and uplifted
It gives me great joy. It has fulfilled a long-standing ambition
Look forward to choir night, feel happier and come away from practice feeling more positive
It’s when I am just ‘me, not ‘wife of’ or ‘mum of’
Great camaraderie... similar to what we see in husbands together
I have a greater sense of purpose
I found it really hard at this new posting, going to choir has helped me to settle down and find friends

Two participants disclosed a history of mental health challenges and described the positive impact that choir membership and singing on their sense of mental wellbeing:

I suffer from severe depression but having the choir and my wonderful friends has helped bring me back from some very dark times over the last 2 years
When, sometimes I feel low and depressed I come to choir rehearsal because it makes me happy and forget everything again

In contrast, five women (out of a total sample of 464) describe some of the tensions and difficulties they have experienced within choirs. These issues are particular and individual, so this negative feedback is given in full:

I have found my choir to be cliquey in terms of social and internal developments. Also the ethos of the choir seems to be sterile. Singing and performance only, no chance to have a quick coffee and chat unlike other choirs. It does not welcome any sense of entrepreneurial spirit or social or community welfare spirit among the members and immediate environs. All in all it seems a chore to get there but once there it is good but has the potential to be a lot better. I am very appreciative of the hard work that goes into it but it is a very closed inner circle that runs it and I do not feel that it is very open to suggestions. Sometimes, other times it has caused more stress than I have ever known!
Sometimes internal choir politics can get in the way of singing and affects enjoyment
Too many egos are causing a divide and putting strain onto my personal mental health and others around me
I was treated very badly by the choir I am in and has quite a negative impact on me and as I had physical problems anyway this did not help

Effects on health

A further request for written comments was made in connection with the statement about health effects of being a member of the choir and singing and just over 60 participants responded. Many of the comments addressed challenges to mental health (in the sense of mental illness, and not just a lack of mental wellbeing), but in addition, some perceived benefits to physical health and wellbeing were also identified.

The main themes were:

- Help with serious mental health conditions
- General improvements in wellbeing, confidence and morale
- Stronger sense of personal identity
- Release of tension and stress
- General improvement in fitness
- Coping with on-going stresses related to military life
- Social support given at a time of serious physical illness
- Helping with the symptoms of physical illness
- Strengthening of the voice

Here are some representative examples of comments made (* details omitted to ensure anonymity). Some include reference to more than one theme. Firstly, mental health and wellbeing:

I had a breakdown in December and am slowly rebuilding my life. Being part of the choir has made me alive again
I started with a lack of confidence, anxiety and depression, this has helped immensely and feel like a total different person now because of it
I was suffering from post traumatic stress due to two [serious events]*. It encouraged me to step out of the house. Especially when my husband was away
Coping with depression, I have found that singing really helps boost me
I have been diagnosed with PTSD and it has had a huge impact on my recovery and acceptance
I have been on the verge of depression but meeting weekly to sing with other women gave me a boost
My depression has improved
Uplifts my mood and promotes a feeling of wellbeing when I attend rehearsals and concerts
Assists in winding down at the end of a long day at work as I forget all about it and sing
Benefits in the face of physical health challenges were also described:

I was unwell for four months with [serious health problems]*. I still attended choir as I would have been in pain anyway but enjoyed seeing people and it helped me through a difficult time. Something else to focus on other than the pain.

I’ve had [a serious health condition]* for the last two-and-a-half years and have had a lot of ups and downs with my health and the choir has helped me get through this. There are some weeks I can’t attend choir when I am ill but I always manage to catch up.

Recently diagnosed with [a serious health condition]*, the MWC and its network has given me invaluable support.

Breathing techniques help with asthma.

I cycle to choir and the singing and breathing I feel is good for me.

Helps with symptoms of [a serious health condition]*.

As with the response to the enquiry about wellbeing, only a very small minority of women referred to challenges to health, and these are given in full:

I do find it quite stressful trying to be able to do gigs.

I always come away from choir rehearsals with hardly any voice and my throat hurting.

Not knowing how to sing properly has lead to an increase in sore throat/strains.

I got pneumonia from performing at the Jubilee concert!

I am disabled and I find the choir exhausts me. But I refuse to give it up.

I find it hard to sleep after a practice session!

Finally, a couple of women commented that since they were generally fit and active, they couldn’t detect any additional physical health benefits from singing. Or, having sung previously, they had already experienced whatever benefits might come from singing. It may be that these sentiments were quite wide spread in the choirs and accounts for the fact that a majority of women did not write comments. Interestingly in the structured section of the questionnaire just over 26% strongly agreed that singing helped with physical health but only approximately 13% gave comments.

3.7. Best and worst experiences of respondents

Of all the items included in the survey, the request to identify ‘the best and worst bits of your experience as a member of a Military Wives Choir’ provided the most fruitful source of insights into the women’s experiences of choirs. This request was included in all three surveys, and findings from each group will be considered in turn.

Choir members

All of the choir participants wrote a comment in response to this request, from a few words to several sentences. Just over half of women (51.3%) gave only positive accounts and many explicitly stated in addition that they had nothing negative to say about their experience of being part of a choir. The remainder (48.7%) also gave positive comments, but qualified them with some problem or challenge they had experienced.

The following comments are representative of the large number of wholly positive answers, and clearly highlight the value placed on many of the themes already highlighted above: friendship, understanding and support; personal time for self expression, relief from stress and worry, and the opportunity to sing and perform with the experience of joy and satisfaction they give, both to choir members and to audiences.

MWCF Sing from the Heart merchandise. Credit: Tom Mouat.
Apart from the cake? It is MY time, doing something I adore which relieves the stress of the week. I have new friends who have similar backgrounds to mine and understand my family dynamics. It is a wonderful support network and I couldn’t live with it now!

Being a member of a MWC has been a fantastic, positive experience for me. I have met wonderful people and have had life experiences I never expected. This is the ‘coffee morning’ for the 21st century. Thank you for giving me a fantastic hobby and creative outlet!

Best bit: performing at the Military Musical Extravaganza, in Germany, with military bands from the UK and Germany. It was an honour and a privilege to perform with them.

Female camaraderie and the international mix of members is lovely. To build up songs together to a standard which we can perform, and then see the delight on the audiences faces is a real privilege, as is the opportunity to perform in some amazing venues. All great experiences so far – no “worst bits!”

I have been privileged to meet and become friends with a group of ladies who in the normal course of military life I would not have met. The choir is a source of mutual support and as I support my husband in the far from straightforward task of leaving the army and joining the civilian world, I have a safe place among people who understand the unique pressures of our way of life and to whom I do not need to explain myself. We have shared some amazing and unique experiences and I look forward to many more.

I really enjoy being part of a social group outside my place of work. It has been great to meet new people, make new friends and to be accepted for who I am. I have had the opportunity to sing a solo even thought I haven’t got the strongest voice in the choir. I don’t feel there are any negatives to being a part of a choir, it is quite simply a fantastic opportunity which I never thought I would have.

It’s something for me that isn’t organised by my husband’s regiment or the kids’ school! Being an army wife can be quite claustrophobic and it’s good to have somewhere to go to meet people who experience the same daily challenges and are considerate of them but don’t necessarily want to talk about them! I go to choir and I’m just ‘me’ not ‘his wife’ or ‘his mum’!

The best bit is knowing more faces locally and feeling well supported by choir members – we really are “Stronger together”. Another best bit is just the sheer joy of singing. There are no worse bits!
Internal politics

A succinct summing up of repeated narratives related to the first two or three themes is provided by one participant who wrote simply:

Best: Singing!!! Worst: politics!!!

Others, however, elaborated on their concerns regarding negative group dynamics and the activities of the committee. Some of the most powerful accounts came from women who had had experiences of two or more choirs, and so had the opportunity to compare some of the best experiences Military Wives Choirs can offer, with some of the least satisfactory circumstances. Here, for example, is a participant comparing the positive experience of two choirs, with a third that was very negative, and highlights the likely consequences for membership of such issues:

[The first choir] and my most recent were and are very positive experiences. It finally made me feel a part of the military family and not the odd ball out without kids. The second was very bad as there was a lot of politics. As I wasn’t part of a regiment I was made to feel like an outsider. I stayed for about 6 months but with nasty atmosphere people slowly left and finally I did too. I nearly didn’t go to the new choir but I figured I’d risk it for one night. Very glad I did because this one was immediately better on their 2nd ever night. People here just started talking to you because you were on your own. But made me feel instantly welcome. When the choir gets it right it’s amazing when it’s wrong it can be absolutely soul destroying

Other accounts elaborated on the attitudes and behaviours among women, and actions of the committee that serve to generate an unpleasant ‘atmosphere’.

On the negative side I find some members of the choir power mad either through their husband’s rank or position on the committee and there can be a lot of bitchiness

I sometimes feel that if I disagree with the committee I am branded as ‘negative’ and we are told we must all support the committee. It makes it difficult to give constructive criticism from a member’s point of view

I find that the committee can be patronising in their communication with the choir that is the worst part

Negative = jealousy, cattiness as is often found in a group of women. Lack of communication from committee and cliquiness within committee and their chosen ‘friends’ with an obvious favouritism

The worst part is that at times our chair person can be utterly condescending and on a power trip

The worst part is that bitchiness and cliques within the choir; comments are often made on Facebook or at rehearsals that are loaded or that I do not understand as I do not know (and have little interest in) the choir politics behind them

Worst: internal choir politics. “Stronger together” is sometimes said but not felt

Being badly treated after giving my opinion on a certain aspect of how the choir was run. I was badly supported by the choir and have since left as a result

On the other hand, a well-run committee and skilful chair can be helpful in containing and resolving tensions that may arise within any group. This is the only example of an account of positive leadership in the face of problems:

Negative – as there are a lot of women together it can turn quite bitchy or tense and I don’t like it at all. There is too much stress in life in general – I don’t need it in a hobby. However, I do understand that problems need to be resolved and communication is key. Our chair is very good at communicating issues and stamping out any problems quickly

Another participant commented:

Worst – politics can rear its ugly head and members can get quite worked up. We need a chair to proffer the voice of reason, but don’t have one

Musical concerns

A further source of difficulty for members of some choirs comes from the attitudes and behaviour of the musical director, clearly a key figure in the dynamics and success of any singing group. Related concerns, presumably partly at least under the control of the MD were: the effectiveness of rehearsals; dissatisfaction with the songs sung; the selection of people to singing solo parts; the pressures associated with too many performances; willingness of choir members to commit to performance; the quality of performances given, and the dress code required. It should be noted, however, in considering the comments below that choir committees in addition to the musical director may have a key role in deciding on repertoire, frequency of performances, venues and costumes.

The first account below, manages to cover most of these points:

Our choir does FAR TOO MANY GIGS and as a result people are reluctant to commit and the standard of performance is definitely below par, verging on the unacceptable. Our MD refuses to give section rehearsals, despite me having offered to assist with these, and the pressures associated with too many performances; willingness of choir members to commit to performance; the quality of performances given, and the dress code required. It should be noted, however, in considering the comments below that choir committees in addition to the musical director may have a key role in deciding on repertoire, frequency of performances, venues and costumes.

The first account below, manages to cover most of these points:

Our choir does FAR TOO MANY GIGS and as a result people are reluctant to commit and the standard of performance is definitely below par, verging on the unacceptable. Our MD refuses to give section rehearsals, despite me having offered to assist with these, and this hinders our ability to learn the parts effectively. With so many gigs, we are constantly fire fighting rather than learning songs to an acceptable level and perfecting them. Also object to having to wear fancy dress for gigs
... the choir is becoming increasingly ‘cliquey’, the standard of singing is falling due to an MD who seems to be frightened of saying anything negative and seems to want to be ‘part of the gang’ and doesn’t coach us well musically and changes the key of songs making it more difficult for members to sing, or some members/sections anyway. The repertoire is becoming dull and boring and I am not enjoying being part of my choir in the way that I was.

[Lady joined a new choir following a move and hoped it would be a positive experience. Sadly this wasn’t the case and the choir was awful. It wasn’t run properly with an overbearing MD who said the choir was her choir and it was rough if nobody liked it they could leave. I tried with a few other military wives to change things but to no avail.

It all boils down to the MD the worst experiences have been when we have had trouble with the MD.

The worst bit about being in the choir is the constant need to endlessly perform, leaving no time for polishing performances. I often find under-prepared singers are asked to perform to make up the numbers. This is stressful for them and does not do the choir’s reputation any good.

The following account reveals the key role the musical director plays through a comparison of a positive and negative experience of musical leadership in a choir:

The quality and attitude of MD: have had wonderfully positive experiences of highly musically competent MD who embraced the MWC repertoire and had a great understanding of military life. Also had experience of an MD with poor musical ability and little/no understanding of the ins and outs / up and downs of military life and little interest or passion for the MWC repertoire.

The pressures arising from too many performances appear to be a significant issue for a number of women. The following express this point particularly strongly:

We as a choir seem to have a gig on every week. Sometimes more than one is ridiculous. We are hopelessly over committed and do not sound good when we perform. Many girls in our choir have issues with being asked to wear a certain costume (not the black dress) and informed they cannot take part in certain gigs unless they wear them. I think this is very silly and girls should not be made to feel like this. As a consequence, many of us just go to choir to sing and don’t do the gigs at all.

The support and friendship is amazing and they’ve been there for me at the lowest, however, there are far too many performances (at LEAST once a week). The pressure to attend them is phenomenal. I can’t give up every weekend and have been so swamped with performances and pressure I’ve stopped going at all and am on the verge of leaving the choir. It’s not what I joined for. A small core of women do every performance and it’s causing tension within the choir with comments about why people stay in the choir and what’s the point of you being here etc. thrown around. The friendship and support is being drained away which is awful! If you don’t do every small gig you can’t do the bigger ones as they remove you from the lists.

Choir committee members

Over a hundred (108) committee members provided comments on the ‘best and worst bits’ of their experiences with Military Wives Choirs. Just under a third of respondents (28.7%) gave wholly positive comments, which is rather lower than for the non-committee members of choirs. Over two-thirds, in other words, tempered any positive comments with an account of some negative aspect of their experience of Military Wives. This difference may reflect the greater challenges experienced by committee members in fulfilling their various roles than is the case for regular members.

The wholly positive narratives echo those given above by choir members:

Being given the opportunity to sing solo parts. Being involved in amazing projects brought together with a fantastic MD and brilliant choir. Having an amazing MD who listens and helps each and every one of us.
Sometimes I think the ladies need to remember why we are there. Tensions can often run high and more social gatherings or another reason to bring the choirs together (like the Stronger Together album video of Wivesfest) would be a good idea to bolster morale occasionally.

There can unfortunately be clashes of personalities sometimes which can lead to an uncomfortable atmosphere.

For some women, these kinds of issues were clearly so challenging that they felt their personal wellbeing was compromised:

The worst is being a member of the committee and having too many people willing to voice an opinion on our performance as a committee, but the voicers never help and are the main antagonists in the choir. I have felt many times that it would be easier to quit than keep on going. It is only because I am really stubborn that I have continued, even though it has had a detrimental effect on my health (depression).

Musical concerns

As Chair I feel that I am expected to attend performances and can’t always due to family commitments. Too much is expected with little support. Sometimes performances are taking precedence over fun!

As we are a small choir the pressure to perform is high, when I’m not able to I have an immense guilt trip.

Rehearsing/performing core pieces with other choirs who have learned them differently, and also having ‘enthusiastic volunteers as MD’s’ who are unable to teach the music and used just the back tracks or the MVC CDs to learn songs.

Every choir sings the core songs slightly differently and this can be hard to adapt to in half-an-hour before a concert when you are assisting another choir out for numbers!

Doing sub-standard performances because the Chair is deluded about our ability, letting down bookings at the last minute because no one can be bothered to turn up and lying about why we are cancelling...

The sense of community, belonging to something that is valued and respected, meeting lots of different people, sharing experiences and skills with them.
Views on the role of the Foundation

A few participants in the committee members’ survey gave negative feedback on the role of the Foundation. These are given here in full.

All the rules and regulations with the Foundation that don’t make sense.
The lack of input from the Foundation especially when we were starting up
Lack of trust of Foundation, sniping between choirs, how all are funded differently, power crazy members.
Not knowing how to deal with choir members with mental health problems and not getting support from Foundation/SSAFA when requested
I am part of a fledgling choir that has low member numbers and feel that we are nowhere near the standard of other choirs. This makes me feel slightly intimidated but also that we are not really catered for with the MWCF. We struggled to find an MD and some assistance in doing so would have been very welcome
When we needed support in a particularly horrible period we didn’t feel supported. We had to find our own solution using local resources. We felt it would have been a more positive outcome if the Foundation actually spoke up for choirs

Wellbeing and health

As the focus of the choir committee survey was more on the experiences respondents had as committee members, opportunities to write in response to open questions were oriented in this direction, rather than asking for comments about the benefits of being a member of the Military Wives Choirs and, in particular, about wellbeing and health. Perhaps for this reason, some of the committee member respondents took the opportunity to write positively about the impacts choir membership had had on them. A number of very striking testimonials were given:

I have found life-long friends and have had a huge and unexpected amount of support during my [health difficulties]*
As you get older (60 next birthday) you lose a little confidence, and singing has helped me regain lost confidence. I look forward to every rehearsal, although at the moment I am recovering from a heart attack and have not been able to get to everyone. While I was in hospital, my MD rang, and the whole choir sang Stronger Together to me over the phone. Wonderful!
When I joined the MWCF was I was on anti-depressants and suffering from [problems with depression]*. Within 6 months I was off anti-depressants and improving. I wouldn’t say I’m completely cured but my weekly choir fix is an important part of my life, it gives me focus
The sense of sisterhood created by the MWCF has been fantastic. I’m in poor health and without the choir there would be a real danger of my hermitting myself away. It gives me a sense of purpose

Musical directors

Nineteen of the 22 musical directors participating in the survey gave feedback on their ‘best and worst’ experiences of Military Wives Choirs. Comments generally revolved around the internal tensions and challenges within their choirs and also the musical aspects of their work.

Internal politics

As with the choir and committee members, a few of the musical directors also highlighted the negative aspects of disagreements and conflicts within choirs:

The worst is the bitchy politics and the dramas that arise with boring regularity (usually involving the same usual suspects) and the lack of experience/efficiency of the committee
Worst bits: when there are personal clashes between choir members

Musical concerns

Many of the directors referred to the satisfaction of helping women achieve their best and the joy of performance:

Having a hugely positive and supportive group of ladies to work with, who are responsive to new ideas and are extremely hard working. They are keen to perform to a high standard and are always enthusiastic about performing
Singing together and they hear themselves make a brilliant sound – the joy on their faces makes my day!
I enjoy every rehearsal, and it is hugely rewarding to see the ladies grow in their confidence
I like the sense of achievement the ladies have after performances
For a few musical directors, however, the musical aspects and performance challenges were a source of frustration:

My biggest challenge is the make-up of our particular choir (just three music readers and the at least three who really struggle either with pitch-matching, melodic memory or both)
Having to turn down events due to lack of available members sometimes, though we are trying to do joint ventures with our local choirs
The worst, the occasional and rare (fortunately) appalling organisation of venues and events
Getting a system in place to establish that any performance we undertook had the right number of singers and the correct repertoire to ensure a quality performance
It’s very rewarding when a more difficult song is completed and sounds great. It is dreadful trying to deal with those that cannot sing without trying to be too discouraging
4. Results: Interviews

Interviews were conducted face-to-face and by telephone with ten individuals: five women, past and present of Military Wives Choirs, five men in a variety of military positions, and husbands of women in a Military Wives choir. Interviews were conducted following an interview schedule but with some flexibility.

4.1. Military Wives Choir members

Of five wives interviewed, all reported finding great friendship and support in their participation with Military Wives Choirs. Three wives said participation brought about a feeling of ‘we are not alone’ and ‘we are all the same’; the lack of a rank barrier in the choir setting was a key theme with three wives discussing how they enjoyed that the difference between an officer and soldier was not relevant. This allowed them to develop friendships they might otherwise not have. Additionally, they felt that choir was about them, as opposed to their husband; in day-to-day life military life wives are seen as a dependant of their husband and, they often follow their husband from post to post, leading a fragmented life. Singing in a choir helped them to establish a sense of identity and develop confidence. In summary:

• Membership has brought about friendship and support
• The rank barrier is removed and ‘we are all the same’
• Membership provides a focus on ‘me’ and a stronger sense of identity

The key theme regarding how Military Wives Choir members view the Foundation is confusion. While the majority of interviewees agree that the Foundation is an umbrella that looks after, organises and sets protocol, they feel equally confused as to what the Foundation’s purpose is and, they feel unsupported by the Foundation. Several interviewees felt that once their choir was set up, the Foundation abandoned them; three wives felt that the Foundation had grown too large and no longer focused on the crux of why Military Wives Choirs exist, which is to bring together and support military wives. As the Foundation has grown, there are feelings that it has become too commercial and that there are too many choirs in too small an area.

Two Military Wives Choir committee members were interviewed and both would like the Foundation to play a more active role in the day-to-day running of choirs, to communicate more frequently and to offer on-going support, for example: appreciate advice on financial support and assistance regarding protocol.

Another key theme that emerged was that Military Wives Choirs feel left out of bigger events such as The Proms, where Gareth Malone auditioned 100 women from 44 Military Wives Choirs to take part. This often resulted in ill feeling, jealousy, arguing, politics and ‘fame-seeking’ between wives. In summary:

• The Foundation is seen as an umbrella and organiser
• The Foundation needs to clearly define its role: once a choir has been set up, how does the Foundation maintain their on-going relationship?
• What does membership of the Foundation offer Military Wives Choirs?
• Committee Members would like stronger communication, a closer relationship and continued support from the Foundation
• Singers feel left out of larger events and would like an equal focus to be placed on smaller grass-roots events such as fundraising
• Some work needs to take place in conflict resolution. I believe there are policies in place, but these need to be better communicated to Military Wives Choirs

4.2. Military personnel

Five military personnel were interviewed, all of whom were husbands of members of Military Wives Choirs. There were many contrasting opinions, but the material can be usefully organised under the following headings:
Participating in a Military Wives Choir

- Membership has brought about friendship and provided wives with a support network
- Wives are kept positively occupied during posting
- There are a lot of politics and "in-house fighting". One interviewee mentioned that his wife was nearly assaulted during a rehearsal
- Two interviewees reported that "I don’t see my wife as much as I used to” and “I have to look after the children when she is away with the choir”
- As military operations are reduced, there is concern that there might not be as much need for Military Wives Choirs

The Foundation

- The Foundation is seen as an umbrella and organiser
- The Foundation needs to clearly define its role and set more direction for choirs. One interviewee discussed how he felt the Foundation’s purpose was to continue setting up more and more choirs. Two interviewees discussed what they felt it should do, but said that they were not actually sure what it does do
- Where does the basic support lie regarding transport and insurance for choirs?
- There are too many choirs
- There is a lack of focus on choir activities at a grass-roots level

Welfare

- Three interviewees felt that there wasn’t a great deal of interaction between Military Wives Choirs and Welfare Services; one interviewee was not sure of any interaction; and one interviewee felt that the Choir on his base was fairly well self-policing and suggested that involving Welfare Services may not be a positive thing
- One interviewee suggested that a Welfare Officer could attend choir rehearsals every few months; offering wives the opportunity to discuss any problems in a more comfortable environment
- Another interviewee suggested that wives could be trained to work with Welfare Services, as they have a raised profile on base, which makes them more accessible to other wives

Suggestions

- The Foundation needs to publicise Military Wives Choirs more effectively. One interviewee suggested a publication would be of great benefit and support to Military Wives Choirs
- The Foundation should offer some funding to choirs with regards to their uniform, supporting smaller and struggling choirs and providing banners for choirs to place around the Garrison
- Wives should be invited to perform at military functions that they are not usually invited to, to better integrate choirs on military bases

5. Discussion and recommendations

5.1. Limitations of the current study

Before considering the major findings from this study and making recommendations, it is important to recognise its limitations.

The study involves the use of on-line short questionnaires of choir and committee members and musical directors with data gathered in September 2014. Participation was voluntary and anonymous and so it cannot be determined whether all choirs in the network were represented nor can the representativeness of the sample achieved be assessed. Given the estimated number of choir and committee members and musical directors at the time of the survey, the response rate by the deadline initially given was considered moderate but acceptable. Examination of the profile of the respondents also appeared fairly representative of the network as a whole in terms of military affiliation, age and length of choir membership.

The picture obtained is also cross-sectional and anonymous both personally and with respect to choirs, so data cannot be broken down according to the length of time specific choirs have been running, nor by base or whether respondents were in the UK or overseas. In addition, the study is restricted to current members of choirs, and through the survey no data were gathered from women who had been members of a choir but then decided to leave, and nor from women who have never been part of a Military Wives Choir. Both of these groups are likely to provide interesting insights into the potential role of choirs in supporting the welfare of women and their families on military bases, and the potential of increasing the scale of provision of opportunities for women to sing across the armed forces.

A further limitation is that of necessity the questionnaire was specially developed for this study and refined through discussion with staff of the Foundation. Some small-scale piloting also took place to iron out any lack of clarity in wording. However, the questionnaire was not tested for reliability and validity. In addition, it could ideally have been supplemented with validated measures of health status and wellbeing.

It should be recognised that these limitations are not necessarily weaknesses. All research has limitations due to the conditions and constraints under which it is conducted. In the present case, the Military Wives Choirs Foundation asked for a rapid survey and production of a report over a period from mid-September to the end of October 2014, achieved with a relatively small budget. Structured data from the survey has been straightforward to process and report, but given the wealth of the qualitative data provided by survey respondents, the textual analysis presented above is necessarily preliminary, and there is scope for further fine-grained thematic analysis of the written accounts, together with some quantification of the incidence of different categories and themes. Nevertheless, the broad features of both positive and negative feedback obtained through the surveys were clear and are well reflected in the illustrative examples selected for this report.
5.2. What this study adds to the research literature on singing

The main focus of this study was to address the aims and objectives agreed with the Military Wives Choirs Foundation to help them more fully appreciate the value of the choirs for their members and the challenges they are facing. It is hoped that the findings are of some assistance to the Foundation in formulating future strategic directions. Beyond that, however, this study makes an important contribution to the growing body of international research literature on singing and its benefits. This is the first survey of women participating in singing groups in military settings highlighting the value of singing for their personal and social wellbeing. It is also the first study of its kind of a national/international network of singing groups which documents not only the reported benefits participants have experienced, but also highlighted some of the tensions and challenges that can arise in singing groups that are established over time, and operating within both the framework of a national organisation, and the wider context of military services. Some parallels may be drawn with the ongoing evaluation of the network of singing groups for people affected by cancer in Wales, and the Foundation may wish to pursue discussions with Tenovus, the charity supporting this network.

While the De Haan Centre has now run three singing for health projects, in which small networks of choirs were established, the nature of these projects was more specifically focused on the health and wellbeing and in two cases involved people with enduring health issues. However, these projects ran for a fixed period of time and while individual singing groups established for the purposes of research continued after the end of the projects, no over-arching organisation continued to support and guide activities within these continuing groups.

5.3. Principal findings

Surveys were conducted over the period 16-30 September 2014. A total of 464 choir members, 173 committee members and 22 Musical Directors across the Military Wives network, participated in the study. Principal findings were:

A high degree of consensus among choir members, committee members and musical directors on the role of the MWCF in developing a national profile for Military Wives Choirs; providing core songs shared across the network; answering queries from committees; providing advice on running choirs; planning multi-choir performances and assisting in dispute resolution.

Facebook, Office 365 and email are all widely used for communication between choirs and the Foundation, and Facebook and email within choirs, but in relation to communication within choirs, direct personal communication in choir practice settings is also highly preferred. The large majority of respondents rated their experience of social media as positive, but a small minority of respondents reported negative experiences.

Large majorities of choir and committee members agreed that the core repertoire created bonds within choirs and the wider network; that singing in choirs had developed their musical ability; that performances were a positive experience, and that they had gained in confidence through performance. However, while a large majority felt that the number of performances they were asked to attend was ‘manageable’, just under half of all respondents felt pressure to attend performances, at least ‘some of the time’.

Large majorities of choir and committee members report positive benefits from their membership of their choirs, including:

- Increased numbers of friends
- Positive effects on health
- Increased levels of personal confidence in the structured section of the questionnaire
- A stronger sense of wellbeing
- Development of new skills
- A strengthened sense of personal identity

There was some variability, however, with these items, and disagreement may reflect a sense that confidence, skills and wellbeing, for example, were already high and so had not improved.

Military wives also reported support from their family/husband/partner, positive effects on their families and disagreed that military rank is important in the choirs. Some women, however, signalled lack of support and over 40% did not agree that choirs had had a positive effect on their families. A small minority of women were also conscious of the role of military rank within their choirs.

Over and above the structured items on the questionnaires, the most valuable and insightful source of information in the surveys came from the open questions.

Choir and committee members provided many examples of personal skill development, improvements in wellbeing and positive effects on health. The themes found in comments about health, included:

- General improvements in wellbeing, confidence and morale
- Stronger sense of personal identity
- Release of tension and stress
- Coping with on-going stresses related to military life
- Social support given at a time of serious physical illness
- Help with serious mental health conditions

The richest qualitative material was provided by respondents when asked to identify ‘the best and worst bits of your experience as a member of a Military Wives Choir.’ A great deal of positive feedback came from this question. Over half of the choir members, for example, gave only positive accounts and many explicitly stated that they had nothing negative to say about their experiences. The recurrent negative themes expressed in all three surveys, however, related to ‘internal politics’ and issues related to the central activity of the choirs: singing and performances.
In the survey of choir members, for example, just under half of all participants qualified favourable comments with descriptions of the ‘worst’ challenges:

- Attitudes and behaviours of women within the choir
- Attitudes and behaviours of committee members
- Rank of husband affecting the group dynamic
- Concerns about the approach of the musical director
- Favouritism or disputes in the selection of soloists
- Expectations and pressures related to performances
- Feelings of being under-prepared to perform
- Limited nature of the repertoire

The two major negative themes represented in comments from all three samples were described as ‘internal politics’ and ‘musical issues’.

The limited number of interviews undertaken generally reinforced the findings from the surveys but also reflected the particular circumstances and experiences of the interviewees. They point, however, to the value of more extensive interviewing to further elaborate on the findings from the surveys.

5.4. Recommendations

A number of recommendations can be made from the findings of this study which the Foundation could consider in relation to supporting choirs in the network, as well as suggestions for possible further research. For the Foundation, the following issues stand out:

- A number of channels of communication operate within the Military Wives Choirs network, and the Foundation may wish to review this situation. In particular, there are differences in the use and preferences of choir and committee members regarding personal email and Facebook.
- Substantial numbers of choir and committee members feel at least some pressure over the number of performances expected, and the Foundation may wish to reinforce existing guidance on this.
- There is interest among choir and committee members and musical directors in musical training and musical review provided by the Foundation, with a clear preference for this happening at the level of each choir. The Foundation could explore whether further training support is possible at a local level and how it could be delivered.
- Choir and committee members report accessing learning tracks for songs fairly evenly across four different routes (e.g. Choir CD, email from musical director, Office 365 and ‘other’). The Foundation may wish to consider whether a single source of learning tracks should be promoted.
- A recurrent negative theme running through the qualitative feedback related to what is often referred to as ‘internal politics’. The Foundation may wish to consider how it could help committee and choir members avoid these issues, and effectively address them when they arise. The Foundation could consider offering ‘ground rules’ for members and further guidance and training for committee members, drawing on example of the kinds of issues that can lead to tensions in choirs. Guidance on what to avoid in the use of Facebook may also be helpful.
- While generally women do not think that military rank is an issue within choirs, a minority of women do feel this, and the Foundation may wish to consider how this could be positively addressed.
5.5. Further research

With respect to research, the current survey is unique in being the first study of a national network of choirs. Information on the benefits of group singing gained from the surveys confirm the general tenor of findings from previous studies, but also highlight issues relating to sources of tensions within groups and challenges associated with repertoire, musical direction and performance, which have not emerged from previous studies.

There is considerable scope for further research, both to help the Foundation with its work, but also to pursue basic scientific questions on how, why, when and for whom, singing is beneficial for wellbeing and health. Further directions might include:

- Surveys of women who have been a member and a choir and then left or of women who are not members of a choir and have no interest in joining, would be of interest
- Longitudinal studies of newly formed choirs playing closer attention to the wellbeing and health of members of choirs and the health benefits of regular singing and effects on the family
- Research on the extent to which membership of choirs leads to less reliance on military welfare and health services
- Research on the negative dynamics that can arise within choirs and between members and their partners/families
- Research comparing the experiences of members of military and other choirs associated with services (e.g. police choirs, fire services choirs), organisations and workplaces, and in the community
- Basic science 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 rhythms

A larger scale research project with a focus on health and wellbeing issues would require substantial funding and the Foundation may wish to consider partnerships with a university research centre and other relevant organisations in making an application for funding to major statutory or charitable funding bodies.

7. References


Military wives on the benefits they have experienced from being part of a choir:

I have been privileged to meet and become friends with a group of ladies who in the normal course of military life I would not have met. The choir is a source of mutual support and as I support my husband in the far from straightforward task of leaving the army and joining the civilian world, I have a safe place among people who understand the unique pressures of our way of life and to whom I do not need to explain myself. We have shared some amazing and unique experiences and I look forward to many more.

I had a breakdown in December and am slowly rebuilding my life. Being part of the choir has made me alive again

I really enjoy being part of a social group outside my place of work. It has been great to meet new people, make new friends and to be accepted for who I am. I have had the opportunity to sing a solo even thought I haven’t got the strongest voice in the choir. I don’t feel there are any negatives to being a part of a choir, it is quite simply a fantastic opportunity which I never thought I would have.

I have been diagnosed with PTSD and it has had a huge impact on my recovery and acceptance

It’s something for me that isn’t organised by my husband’s regiment or the kids’ school! Being an army wife can be quite claustrophobic and it’s good to have somewhere to go to meet people who experience the same daily challenges and are considerate of them but don’t necessarily want to talk about them! I go to choir and I’m just ‘me’ not ‘his wife’ or ‘his mum’!