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‘I don’t care who joins my choir’: Investigating attitudes to diversity and inclusivity in lower- and upper-voice choirs in the United Kingdom

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Abstract

Recreational choral singing has long been a mainstay of amateur and community music-making in the United Kingdom, and there is much existing evidence for the potential social, physical and psychological benefits of participation. However, participation in lower- and upper-voice choirs is declining due to low recruitment rates, the ageing of members and the lasting impact of the COVID-19 pandemic. In this article, we draw on the findings of a recent online survey of 907 participants in mixed-, lower- and upper-voice choirs to examine the factors underlying these issues. Using descriptive statistics to show demographic trends and qualitative thematic analysis to identify experiences shared across choirs, we highlight how the development of some lower- and upper-voice choirs has been affected by a homogeneous demographic with limited recognition of – and, in some cases, resistance towards – wider societal issues of diversity and inclusivity. We analyse choirs’ use of inclusion policies, and contrast examples of good practice with evidence of widespread exclusionary attitudes among individual choir members, especially in relation to race, ethnicity, gender and sexuality. We conclude by making initial recommendations for how choirs might recognise and address such challenges, and call for a shift in the research agenda to pay greater attention to exclusionary factors in amateur and community music participation.

Keywords: choir; diversity; inclusivity; recreation; singing; survey

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Lower- and upper-voice choirs in the United Kingdom

Recreational choral singing

Singing in a choir as a recreational activity has been a feature of amateur musical life in the United Kingdom and elsewhere for many decades (Finnegan 2007). Unlike some music-making activities, singing requires no previous experience or investment in musical instruments or teaching aids, and is therefore widely accessible. It is also replete with potential social, physical and psychological benefits (Moss et al. 2018; Pitts 2020; Williams et al. 2018). Past research has demonstrated that singing may improve mood and relaxation (Beck et al. 2000), cognitive function (Pentikäinen et al. 2021) and social bonding (Jacob et al. 2011; Weinstein et al. 2016). As modes of ‘communal music-making’, amateur choirs often ‘have a very strong sense of place and a deep rootedness to the people they perform with and for’ (Higgins 2012: 4). They both build community for their participants (Einarsdottir and Gudmundsdottir 2016) and contribute to local communities through providing access to live music for family and friends and engaging in charitable fundraising and events (Southcott 2009). Indeed, the rise of the ‘community choir’ (Bell 2008) – typically an inclusive, non-auditioned group open to those from diverse sociocultural backgrounds (cf. Coffman and Coffman 2023; Hardcastle and Southcott 2022) – makes explicit the social benefits of recreational singing.

However, assertions of such benefits have been challenged by some researchers, who have highlighted that claims including those linking singing directly with individual and communal wellbeing are not substantiated by robust research data (Clift 2012). There is also evidence that singing in a choir can have negative impacts relating to social issues (such as relationships with a musical director or other singers) and aesthetic issues (such as musical preferences and performance pressures) (Bonshor 2017; Kreutz and Brünger 2012). Outcomes can also vary depending on whether participants are amateurs or professionals

(Bailey and Davidson 2005) or male or female (Sandgren 2009). Furthermore, some of the positive effects of choral singing have been found to be similar to those experienced in other leisure activities such as knitting (Lamont and Ranaweera 2020). Despite strong assertions in the research literature and increasingly in the media that ‘singing is good for your body and mind’ (Mosley 2021), there remain further pressing questions about the extent to which communal music-making through recreational singing is inclusive and accessible for participants from diverse sociocultural backgrounds.

Lower- and upper-voice choirs

In this article, we focus upon the particular phenomenon of male- and female-voice choirs. Male-voice choirs have a long history in many parts of the United Kingdom, where they were initially established in the nineteenth century in regions dominated by heavy industries such as coal mining, or in association with local police constabularies or sports clubs. Several well-established male-voice choirs – including Only Men Aloud, Hereford Police Male Voice Choir and Brighton Gay Men’s Chorus – gained a popular following after a talent show televised by the British Broadcasting Corporation (*Last Choir Standing* 2008). Their female counterparts, ‘women’s’ or ‘ladies’ choirs, later attracted attention through the Military Wives Choirs Foundation, popularised by the television series fronted by conductor Gareth Malone (*The Choir: Military Wives* 2011; *The Choir: New Military Wives* 2014) and evaluated by Stephen Clift (Clift et al. 2016).

Our research was prompted by a commission from Peterborough Sings!, an organisation that promotes choral singing by running choirs, festivals and education projects. Their brief was initially to investigate the current organisation of male-voice choirs and provide evidence to guard against the decline of the sector (Davies 2012; Harry 2018; Wiltshire 1993); we extended this to include a comparison with female- and mixed-voice

choirs, allowing us to contextualise our findings within broader scholarly discourse on community music participation and recreational, lifelong music-making. In line with past surveys of male-voice singing in the United Kingdom (Davies 2012), we sought to gather data from as many choirs as possible in order for our results to best reflect the heterogeneity of the field. In this article we primarily draw upon our analysis of the demographic trends in our data; elsewhere we have written in more detail about the distinctive practices characterising some of the individual choirs represented in our sample (Pitts and MacGregor forthcoming). However, in contrast to previous survey research, we use the updated terms ‘lower-voice’ (LV) and ‘upper-voice’ (UV) choirs to refer to male- and female-voice choirs. Given what is known about the singing experiences of individuals with changing voices (Ashley 2009; Freer 2016) and transgender individuals (Palkki 2020), we aim to avoid traditional gendered terminology that risks reinforcing exclusionary, cisgendered and heteronormative attitudes.

Throughout the twentieth century, the close association between LV and UV choirs and their local communities was at least in part responsible for the wax and wane of their success. For example, in areas of relative isolation such as Cornwall, choirs driven by a desire for male camaraderie sometimes dissolved when they were unable to access appropriate rehearsal and performance venues (Skinner 2013). Some choirs with origins in heavy industries folded during periods of economic downturn or turned to a shared religious ethos or community of musical practice for sustenance (Gibson 2016; Kenny 2016). The co-dependency between choirs and their regional cultures therefore contributed to limitations in both social and musical development. Research has traced the earliest stultification of some LV choirs back to the 1940s, when ‘any post-war development which existed, came not in musical matters but rather in an extension of previous activities which in turn led to the ossifying of the repertoire and a reliance on all things traditional’ (Wiltshire 1993: 207).

Despite the success of television programmes such as *Last Choir Standing* and *The Choir*, those in the LV choral sector, particularly, have perceived a continuing decline in popularity and participation. In part, this has been due to issues such as low recruitment rates, the ageing of members and the lasting impact of the COVID-19 pandemic (Ashley 2020). In 2012, Peter Davies – himself a LV choir director – gathered data from 478 LV choirs across the United Kingdom and concluded that,

> [although] the UK has a few stunning male choirs led by professional, well paid, dedicated music teams [...] the majority, however, struggle with recruitment, learning, skill levels and sound production. Nevertheless appreciated by audiences, they do demonstrate problem areas when in concert or competition. (Davies 2012: n.pag.)

Likewise, Edward-Rhys Harry – another LV choir director – has suggested that the very existence of such choirs is ‘threatened’ by attitudes that ‘are often unaccepting of contemporary choral repertoire’ and the desire to ‘keep a proud distance from choral or conductor education’ (Harry 2018: n.pag.).

The decline of recreational singing in LV and UV choirs in the United Kingdom was impacted further by the COVID-19 pandemic, which from March 2020 restricted the activities of amateur music groups. At this time, meeting together indoors was prohibited and singing was perceived to be a particularly high risk activity, due to the potential aerosol spread of the highly infectious coronavirus (PHE 2020). For choir members who had previously gained much of their musical and social enjoyment from singing regularly with others, the social isolation of lockdown was exacerbated by the loss of weekly rehearsals, and the move to virtual singing – where it happened – was often felt to be a poor substitute for the excitement of working towards a live concert (Theorell et al. 2023; Youngblood et al. 2021; Zhu and Pitts 2021). The pandemic presented a significant challenge to the longer-term survival of LV and UV choirs, particularly those with more vulnerable members. The

disruption to routine meant that well-established hobbies were open to re-evaluation, and attendance and participation rates have been slow to recover across the arts (cf. Walmsley et al. 2022).

Diversity and inclusivity

During the analysis of our research data (discussed later in this article), we noted the significant recurrence of themes surrounding issues of diversity and inclusivity. Our own positionality as researchers within institutions that place high value upon working towards equality, diversity and inclusion attuned us to these themes,[1] which offered a helpful lens upon many other aspects of our analysis, ranging from demographic trends to challenges instigated by the COVID-19 pandemic. Previously, with some notable exceptions (Mantie and Talbot 2020; Parkinson 2020; Yerichuk 2015), challenges associated with diversity and inclusivity have attracted relatively little research attention in relation to communal music-making and recreational choral singing.

Within the field of community music, researchers have typically used the terms ‘inclusion’ and ‘inclusivity’ normatively, interchangeably and without definition. Only a few have defined how participants in communal music-making make musical choices (such as creating flexible structures and processes for participation) and social choices (including recognising and reducing barriers and oppressions) to foster active and ongoing inclusivity (Yerichuk and Krar 2019). The consideration of diversity and inclusivity – particularly in relation to the characteristics of race, ethnicity, gender and sexuality – has been especially uncommon in research into recreational choral singing (Parkinson 2018). However, experiences of inclusion and belonging are often important to choir participants (Parkinson 2020), and those who lapse in singing sometimes do so because of an unwelcoming

[1] See, for example, the Equality, Diversity and Inclusion in Music Studies Network (EDIMS 2024).

environment or relational friction (Kreutz and Brünger 2012; cf. Pitts and Robinson 2016). Yet although some research has uncovered exclusionary behaviours among choir participants – such as the formation of cliques (Kreutz and Brünger 2012), low levels of commitment or attendance (Parkinson 2020) or the perpetuation of racialised or gendered stereotypes (Mantie and Talbot 2020) – the potential impact of such problems upon recreational singing opportunities has rarely been considered.

In contrast, recent reports into other areas of music-making have begun to address issues of diversity and inclusivity, such as the absence of Global Majority[2] musicians in music industries across all genres and in music education at all levels (Bull et al. 2022; Gross and Musgrave 2017). Campaigning organisations such as Black Lives in Music are becoming influential within public debate and supporting initiatives to increase the presence of under-represented players in the orchestral sector (Gittens et al. 2021a, 2021b), and research has documented various attempts to reduce unconscious bias in professional audition and recruitment practices (Cheng 2020: 84–85; Goldin and Rouse 2000). Issues around perceived exclusivity and sociomusical gatekeeping have also begun to be identified in some supposedly inclusive and accessible modes of amateur, communal music-making, such as folk music clubs (Hield and Mansfield 2019) and entry and re-entry ensembles for older adults (Pitts et al. 2015).

Nevertheless, given the relative lack of investigation into diversity and inclusivity in communal music-making settings in comparison to professional and educational spheres, we decided to use these emergent themes to frame our analysis of LV and UV choirs. In line with previous research in community music, we define diversity as cultural pluralism among participants according to intersectional identities such as race, class, gender, age and health

[2] Global Majority refers to those of Indigenous, African, Asian or Latin American descent who constitute the majority of the global population. This term is used in preference to older formulations such as Black and Minority Ethnicity (BAME), in line with recent research by Global Majority scholars (e.g., Hendry 2023) and advocates (e.g., Black Lives in Music).

(Parkinson 2018; Yerichuk 2015). Rather than using the static term ‘inclusion’, we ‘adopt the term “inclusivity” to signal the deliberate, active, ongoing process necessary for inclusive community music’ (Yerichuk and Krar 2019: 184). Following Anna Bull’s assertion that establishing and sustaining diversity and inclusivity in music-making can be slowed by delays in ‘agreeing on the pace and scope of change and choosing which areas to prioritise’ (Bull et al. 2022: 15; cf. Bull 2019; Bull and Scharff 2023), we contend that this focus is necessary in order to address many of the recruitment and retention challenges faced by LV and UV choirs.

Methodology

Research questions

In order to gain insight into the current state of LV and UV choirs in the United Kingdom, during 2022 the Sheffield Performer and Audience Research Centre worked in collaboration with the music education charity, Peterborough Sings!, to design and administer an online survey. Although Peterborough Sings! was instrumental in distributing the survey and disseminating its findings, the gathering and analysis of data was undertaken exclusively by the Sheffield Performer and Audience Research Centre. This reduced potential bias in the research process, since both researchers were ‘outsiders’ to the LV and UV choir network and did not have preconceived expectations of the data (Berger 2015). However, in order to ensure sensitivity to the cultures and norms of the research population, the researchers regularly consulted Peterborough Sings! to learn from their ‘insider’ perspective.

The survey aimed to address the following research questions:

RQ1. What are the characteristics and practices of LV and UV choirs in the United Kingdom?

RQ2. What are the challenges to LV and UV choirs in sustaining membership?

RQ3. What recommendations and strategies can be made to support the diversity, sustainability and development of the amateur choral sector in the United Kingdom?

In this article, we provide an overview of RQ1 and RQ2 in the findings concerning choir participant demographics and choirs’ perceived challenges. In the subsequent discussion and conclusion we primarily address RQ3 and its contribution to the ongoing research agenda. Our survey gathered data relating to diverse interrelated topics including participants’ experiences of music teaching and learning, choir management and governance, musical directors and accompanists, rehearsals and repertory, and concerts and competitions, but some of these subjects fall outside the scope of the present article. The full report of our survey findings is available on the Peterborough Sings! website (Peterborough Sings! 2023), and an analysis of factors specifically relating to choirs’ education and ambition can be read elsewhere (Pitts and MacGregor forthcoming).

Survey design

The use of an online survey was appropriate for addressing the designated research questions in relation to a large, nationwide population of participants in recreational singing (Eichhorn 2021), since the format enabled the collection of both quantitative and qualitative data from across a geographically dispersed sample (Toepoel 2016). Using purposive and snowball sampling methods (Eichhorn 2021), the survey was distributed through social media, membership organisations such as Making Music (Making Music 2024) and direct contacts made by Peterborough Sings! with choirs in their existing networks. The breadth of distribution meant that our data collection went beyond the LV and UV brief initially proposed by Peterborough Sings!, and included responses from mixed voice (MV) choirs including traditional choral societies and community choirs, so extending the scope of our

research in ways that provided additional insights on choral singing experience in a range of contexts.

Three versions of the survey were designed to capture a range of perspectives: one for choir members, one for choir directors and one for members of choir committees (who undertake additional roles such as treasurer and secretary). As shown in *Box 1*, questions were presented in open-ended formats including free-text responses, and in closed-ended formats including Likert-type scales, multiple-choice answers and ranking questions (Eichhorn 2021). In line with the University of Sheffield Ethics Review Procedure, respondents began the survey by reading the participant information, and those who wished to participate continued by giving their informed consent. All participants were informed that they were able to miss out questions or withdraw from the survey should they wish.

<<INSERT BOX 1>>

Data analysis

Following data cleaning to remove duplicate results, incomplete surveys and participants who withheld their consent, each remaining survey response was allocated an identifying code: XV, LV or UV (mixed-, lower- or upper-voice choir); M, D or C (member, director or committee); and a response number. For example, LV/M001 represented a member of a lower-voice choir and UV/D001 a director of an upper-voice choir. Quantitative data was used to calculate descriptive statistics comparing participants’ responses; qualitative data was analysed using multiple cycles of coding and categorisation (Saldaña 2009) to identify salient emergent themes relating to the research questions.

Findings

Choir participant demographics

After distribution online, the survey initially received responses from 587 choir members, 124 choir directors and 218 choir committee members, including participants from England, Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland. Following data cleaning, a total of 907 responses remained for analysis:

1. 330 participants from 184[3] different XV choirs: 206 members; 48 directors; 76 committee members.
2. 334 participants from 114 different LV choirs: 205 members; 40 directors; 88 committee members.
3. 243 participants from 94 different UV choirs: 157 members; 38 directors; 49 committee members.

Age and health

Across XV, LV and UV choirs, the modal age for choir members was 65 to 74. However, LV and UV choirs also had high percentages of members aged 75 or over (LV: 32%; UV: 31%), whereas the majority of XV respondents were aged between 50 and 74 (*Chart 1*). Notably, 16% of UV choir member respondents were aged under 34, in comparison to just 3% in XV and 2% in LV choirs.[4] Similar trends were evident among choir directors: LV choirs were the most likely to have a director aged 75 or over (XV: 2%; LV: 13%; UV: 5%), while UV choirs had a significant number of directors aged under 34 (XV: 27%; LV: 26%; UV: 35%).

In LV choirs, the most prevalent health concern among members was deafness or hearing impairment (*n*=29). Other frequently reported issues included chronic illnesses (*n*=19) and mobility impairments (*n*=14). In line with research indicating that hearing loss is

[3] Numbers of individual choirs represented by the data are approximate, since not all participants specified the identity of their choir.

[4] All percentages have been rounded to the nearest whole number.

more common among men than among women (NIDCD 2022), in UV choirs deafness was less prevalent. Chronic illnesses were most common among UV members (*n*=20), followed by mental health conditions (*n*=13) and physical or mobility impairment (*n*=7). Among choir directors, illness and disability was less common, although some indicated having a mental health condition (*n*=6), a chronic illness (*n*=3) or a hearing impairment (*n*=2).

<<INSERT CHART 1>>

Race and ethnicity

Survey responses indicated a high proportion of White British participants: 91% of XV choir members identified as White British (*n*=187). Other ethnicities represented included Western European, American, Canadian and Australian. In LV choirs, 98% of respondents identified as White British (*n*=201) and two identified as mixed race. UV choir members represented a more diverse range of ethnicities and were more likely to judge their choirs to be ‘close reflections’ of their local communities: 93% of members identified as White British (*n*=146) and other ethnicities included White Irish, White non-British, Asian/Asian British, Black/African/Caribbean/Black British, Western European, Eastern European and Jewish. Notably, some White British members of XV and LV choirs preferred to identify as Scottish (*n*=3), Welsh (*n*=3), Cornish (*n*=3) or English (*n*=1).

Gender and sexuality

All choir members and directors were asked to specify their gender and sexual identity, if they were willing. Out of 205 LV choir members, 188 identified as cisgender male. Others identified as cisgender female (*n*=3), transgender male (*n*=2), non-binary (*n*=1) or declined to

answer (*n*=11).[5] With regard to sexuality, 178 identified as heterosexual, six as homosexual and four as bisexual. Of the 36 LV choir directors who specified their gender, 23 identified as cisgender male and thirteen as cisgender female.

In UV choirs, all choir members identified as cisgender female (*n*=150) or declined to answer (*n*=7). The majority of choir members also identified as heterosexual (*n*=132), but others identified as homosexual (*n*=5) and bisexual (*n*=4). Of the 35 UV choir directors who specified their gender, 28 identified as cisgender female and seven as cisgender male.

Choirs' perceived challenges

Choir members, directors and committee members all highlighted age and health – and concomitant issues around recruitment, retention and attendance – as the most pressing challenges for their choirs (*Chart 2*). An ageing membership was particularly problematic for many LV choirs – perhaps because of what one member called, 'the obstinacy and inertia of men of a certain age' (LV/C057). In line with previous studies exploring the decline of LV choirs (Davies 2012; Skinner 2013; Wiltshire 1993), age was identified as problematic by 63 LV members (31%), nineteen LV directors (48%) and 36 LV committee members (40%). In contrast, in UV choirs age was mentioned by just sixteen members (10%), eleven directors (29%) and eleven committee members (23%). Old age was also associated with failing or fragile health – 'we're not as young as we were; this affects breathing, tone, accuracy, word learning' (LV/D039) – and could limit members' willingness to explore new genres: 'we tend to do a mixture of different musical styles but they don't necessarily appeal to everyone like, for example, one of the rock choirs might' (UV/M135).

[5] Unexpected responses within LV choirs – such as the appearance of cisgender female members – may have arisen for several reasons. They may be examples of mistaken data entry, but they could also represent female members with lower vocal ranges or female accompanists.

<<INSERT CHART 2>>

For several choirs, ‘as the age has risen, it has been harder to attract younger members’ (LV/D036). This compounded existing issues of member recruitment. One choir member pointed out the difficulties in ‘attract[ing] and retain[ing] interested and engaged members with a desire to learn’ (LV/M137). Others added that this could be harder when competing against other choirs for membership (LV/M166) or when isolated in a rural area (LV/D024). More so than LV choir members (*n*=5), UV choir members (*n*=22) also saw recurring issues of attendance relating to family commitments: ‘a lot of retired members [means] choir [is] not always given the priority in their calendar I would like to see’ (UV/M009). UV choir participants mentioned constraints that were largely absent from LV choir participants’ comments, such as those resulting from maternity leave (UV/D005), childcare (UV/D034), partners serving with the Armed Forces (UV/D015) and parenting and grandparenting responsibilities (UV/C014).

Recruiting and retaining members was especially difficult in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic. Although meeting online or outdoors during lockdowns had been an option for many choirs, 30% of LV choir participants (*n*=100) and 35% of UV choir participants (*n*=84) said that the pandemic significantly affected the membership of their choirs. Approximately twenty participants described how their choirs had maintained a stable membership or grown in number: ‘we have ten MORE new singers, as people want to get into new activities, including singing’ (LV/C028). More frequently, however, choir membership decreased, sometimes substantially: ‘we lost almost half our members’ (LV/C075). In some instances elderly members passed away (LV/D012), while others developed debilitating health issues (UV/D027). Others found there was ‘much anxiety among members about returning to rehearsals’ (UV/C005). In addition, one LV committee member astutely observed a shift in

attendance and commitment priorities following the lifting of pandemic restrictions: ‘members are taking more holidays and seeing more of families now that they can again. This may be a short-term change but it means we are an ageing and declining group at present’ (LV/C046).

Discussion: Diversity and inclusivity

Overall, the demographic data collected from LV and UV choirs indicated limited diversity among participants’ backgrounds. Despite some variation in age, health, race, ethnicity, gender and sexuality, in many choirs there remained a significant trend towards homogeneity and monoculturalism, which was identified as impacting recruitment, retention and attendance. Respondents’ concerns around being able to recruit and retain younger singers across voice parts (*Chart 2*) – exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic – thereby reiterated the declines highlighted by Davies (2012) and Harry (2018).

In the following discussion, we begin to address how these issues intersected with participants’ direct responses to questions of diversity and inclusivity. First, we consider choirs’ inclusion policies and identify examples of good practice that supported member recruitment, retention and attendance. We then compare these examples to individual respondents’ exclusionary remarks relating to gender, sexuality, race and ethnicity, before making initial recommendations for how choirs might recognise and address such challenges.

‘It does not seem necessary’: Choirs’ inclusion policies

Choir committee members who responded to the survey were asked whether or not they had a mission statement or inclusion policy that determined the objectives and membership of their choirs. LV choirs were more likely to have a mission statement than UV choirs: 52% of LV

committee members – compared to 27% of UV committee members – said their mission or aims could be found in their constitution, on their website or elsewhere.

In contrast, the majority of both LV and UV choirs had not published inclusion policies: 73% of LV and 77% of UV committee members said they did not have (or did not know if they had) one. Four LV participants and one UV participant actively resisted the question, since, for example, an inclusion policy ‘would add nothing to the way we would seek to include members of any background’ (LV/C085) or ‘it does not seem necessary, this is the Cotswolds.[6] We have one member from an ethnic minority’ (UV/C003). There was also evidence of some slippage between the term ‘inclusive’ and language such as ‘welcoming’ (LV/C055), ‘open’ (UV/C011) or ‘accepting’ (LV/C056). Two participants emphasised that the use of auditions upheld a meritocratic – and by implication, equitable (cf. Littler 2013) – entry system: ‘we accept anyone who completes the audition as long as we have the space to do so’ (UV/C002). Others had a more explicit community focus and were ‘open to all with no auditions’ (LV/C065).

Where inclusion policies had been published, committee members said they could be found in their choir’s constitution (*n*=17), on their website (*n*=9) or elsewhere (*n*=9). Our analysis of public-facing policies revealed that many were based on templates from organisations such as the Charity Commission or Making Music, and therefore contained standard statements relating to protected characteristics. Within the context of a choir constitution, such as that belonging to Chester Male Voice Choir, this could include clauses such as:

> the Choir will show no bias in politics, religion, gender, race or disability and allow every opportunity for any male singer to participate as a chorister [...]. The Choir

[6] In the Cotswolds, located in central-southwest England the 2021 census reported that 96.3% of the population identified as White (compared to 81.0% of England as a whole) and 1.8% were unemployed (compared to 2.9% across England as a whole). The region also scored higher than the national median in measures such as disposable income, educational achievement and physical health (ONS 2021).

> should reflect diversity in society and will not support any discrimination on the grounds of age, gender, disability, politics, creed, or ethnicity. (CMVC 2022: 1)

Choirs with tailored inclusion policies were more likely to supplement generic statements with details of how inclusivity would be worked out in practice, such as in the Equality and Diversity Policy belonging to St Edmundsbury Male Voice Choir:

> we aim to provide accessibility, delivered in a way that accommodates the needs of each individual and does not exclude anyone. SEMVC intends to embed its values statement around equality and diversity into everyday practice, policies, and procedures so that they become the norm. Equality and diversity are a consideration in items for discussion and in decision making at committee meetings. (SEMVC 2021: 1)

Unsurprisingly, choirs aimed specifically at gender and sexual minorities showed greater awareness of nuanced, publicly accessible inclusion policies. The XV choir Rainbow Chorus, based in Brighton and Hove, extended its list of protected characteristics with ‘in addition, [we] will not tolerate discrimination on the basis of gender, gender identity, HIV or AIDS status, political belief, refugee or asylum seeker status’ (Rainbow Chorus 2021: 1). They emphasised the opportunity to go above and beyond standard equal opportunities practice, and aspired ‘to be recognised as a beacon of good practice amongst LGBTQ+ communities’ (Rainbow Chorus 2021: 1) by valuing and explicitly recognising the challenges faced by specific minorities such as the transgender community.

‘Frankly, is this question relevant?’ Choirs’ exclusionary attitudes

Despite choirs such as St Edmundsbury Male Voice Choir and Rainbow Chorus demonstrating the potential for good practice around issues of diversity and inclusivity, these attitudes did not appear to be widespread among survey respondents. In the demographic

portions of the survey, a substantial number of participants expressed disengaged or discriminatory attitudes towards inclusive principles – especially relating to gender, sexuality, race and ethnicity.

Gender and sexuality

Questions surrounding gender and sexuality provoked confusion and opposition from some participants. In both LV and UV choirs, some members and directors specified a preference for the terms ‘male’ (*n*=17) or ‘female’ (*n*=21) rather than ‘cisgender male’ or ‘cisgender female’. For four participants this arose from a misunderstanding of the terms (‘I don’t understand these terms. I am female’ [UV/M101]), despite the provision of a definition in the survey. One other confessed an ‘old-fashioned’ preference (UV/M077). However, others believed questions of gender and sexuality to be at best, unnecessary, and at worst, offensive: ‘questions on sexual orientation are of little relevance to the subject matter’ (LV/M129); ‘sex is not assigned at birth but observed. I am not a cis woman but a woman. This question is offensive. Gender identity is unsubstantiated b*******’ (UV/M148).

Although inflammatory or dismissive comments regarding gender and sexuality were made by very few participants, there was slightly higher incidence among LV choir members (*n*=12; 6%) than among UV choir members (*n*=5; 3%). Research in gerontology suggests that social groups of ageing individuals can form homogeneous and inaccessible ‘groups of exclusion’ (Nielson et al. 2019: 28) determined by compliance with constructed social codes (Pietilä and Ojala 2021). It is possible that exclusionary attitudes towards gender and sexual minorities may stem from these entrenched codes within LV choirs: older men can be reluctant to disclose their gender or sexual identity because of historic stigmatisation (Simpson et al. 2018), and have been shown to be defensive of the perceived benefits of male-focussed spaces (Mackenzie et al. 2017; Milligan et al. 2016; Nurmi et al. 2018). Past

research into male-focussed recreational activity has suggested that although men may experience improved wellbeing as a result of engagement in gendered interventions (Milligan et al. 2016), they may also remain complicit in hegemonic ideologies of masculinity because of their perceived freedom from being ‘policed’ by women (Mackenzie et al. 2017). Even undergraduate members of all-male singing groups have been shown to lack ‘awareness of male privilege’ (Mantie and Talbot 2020: 52), and, while purporting to be open and inclusive, to make ‘auditioning decisions [that] inevitably rationalized the continuation of the all-male norm’ (58).

For some members and directors of LV and UV choirs, their attitude towards gender and sexuality appeared to stem from a well-intentioned sense of inclusivity:

> I don’t care who joins my choir – I don’t care what they like or are attracted to. If they want to work hard and sing well that’s just fine by me. It’s a question [th]at should [not] need asking. (LV/D032)

However, such apparently inclusive sentiments seem likely to ‘indicate the regulatory force of heteronormativity [...] and cisgenderism’ (Simpson et al. 2018: 871), especially when they failed to be converted into strategically-informed practices such as the development of inclusion policies.

Race and ethnicity

Occasionally, similar comments implying inclusivity and goodwill surrounding racial and ethnic diversity were notable among participants. For example, ‘I didn’t answer regarding ethnicity of choir members because we are happy to embrace members from any background. There is no discrimination of any kind in our group’ (LV/M132). However, in comparison to the most recent census data from England and Wales – in which 74% of the population identified as White English, Welsh, Scottish, Northern Irish or British (ONS 2022) – the high

proportion of White British members suggested some degree of racial exclusivity among both LV and UV choirs. Indeed, participants in LV choirs were most likely to rate their choir as ‘not very much’ like their wider community in respect to ethnic diversity (*n*=54; 26%).

The pervasive Whiteness of many LV and UV choirs reflects inequalities that researchers have also identified in choral music education (Howard 2022), publications of sheet music for choirs (Bradley 2003), community choirs (Yerichuk 2015), recreational a cappella singing (Mantie and Talbot 2020) and congregational singing in churches (Moore 2021). In the United Kingdom, it may stem from the historic place of male-voice choirs in magnifying the ‘ethnic divisions’ emerging from industrial change and in-migration during the latter decades of the twentieth century (Skinner 2013: 294). In the same way in which male-voice choirs may have been complicit in fostering hegemonic masculinity (cf. Connell and Messerschmidt 2005; Mackenzie et al. 2017), in regions such as Cornwall they also acted as gatekeepers for local, White, working-class cultures during a period when ethnic diversity was otherwise increasing. This influence was reiterated by choir members who preferred to identify as Scottish, Welsh, Cornish or English, some of whom were members of Gaelic choirs (which promote the Gaelic language and traditional Highland musics) and Welsh language choirs. Despite the attempts of some survey respondents to shut down discussion of diversity and inclusivity, it is clear that there are challenges for amateur choirs to align more closely with changing social values.

Conclusions and recommendations

The breadth of responses to our survey highlighted the varied issues of diversity and inclusivity facing XV, LV and UV choirs across the United Kingdom. Most participants were aged between 65 and 74, many of whom experienced health problems such as deafness, chronic illness and mobility impairment. In XV, LV and UV choirs over 90% of respondents

were White British, and most also identified as cisgender and heterosexual. Directors and committee members highlighted the recruitment and retention of new singers as the greatest challenge for their choirs, especially when existing members were of a homogeneous, elderly demographic. In addition, many participants highlighted how the COVID-19 pandemic exacerbated such problems, with vulnerable members forced to leave and a lack of opportunities to reach younger members from more diverse backgrounds. The pandemic hastened the continuing decline in members’ age and health, and had a knock-on effect on recruitment, retention and attendance: ‘there has been a step change rather than a gradual decline in the physical condition of our older members’ (LV/M103).

However, as we discuss in our concluding recommendations, some organisations identified important opportunities for change as they emerged into the post-pandemic landscape of recreational choral singing. Several choirs diversified their usual programmes of rehearsals and performances to become more inclusive, offering support to more isolated members (LV/M095), providing education around singing and wellbeing (LV/M163) and attracting new audiences through creative fundraising projects such as choir videos (UV/C041), sponsored walks (UV/M036), charity busking (UV/M102) and online auctions (LV/C022). For some, such activities ‘strengthened the resolve of members to get back to singing’ (LV/C082) and made them ‘more determined and more aware of [its] benefits’ (UV/D014).

Nevertheless, our survey highlighted that unless these changes in attitude are matched by concurrent changes in policy, choirs risk embedding the potentially dismissive attitudes of those who believed inclusivity could be ‘implied’ (LV/C008) or who perceived hospitality to equate to inclusivity: ‘we are a welcoming organisation and a policy would add nothing to the way we would seek to include members of any background / ethnicity’ (LV/C085). Drawing on the inclusive practices captured by our survey – such as those of the St Edmundsbury

Male Voice Choir and Rainbow Chorus – we therefore recommend that more choirs utilise the wealth of resources now available for stimulating diversity and inclusivity in amateur musical participation.

‘Grow and prosper’: Recommendations for fostering diversity and inclusivity

Developing a detailed, public-facing inclusion policy can be the first step for choirs to acknowledge their potential to become ‘a beacon of good practice’ in recreational choral singing (Rainbow Chorus 2021: 1). In many cases this should be a straightforward process, since most choirs (especially if they have charitable status) have designated committees who meet regularly to evaluate organisational policy and practice. Indeed, one survey respondent acknowledged, ‘we do [have an inclusion policy] but it is unwritten. Thanks, you have just made me aware of our next committee task!’ (LV/C003).

The report ‘Grow and Prosper’, developed by a working group of the Snowdown Colliery Welfare Male Voice Choir in response to the 2017 Peterborough Male Voice Choir Conference, offers a helpful example of the processes involved in initiating good practice surrounding diversity and inclusivity (SCWMVC 2019). The report makes suggestions for how the choir could develop its values, recruitment and approaches to communications and concerts to ensure it continues to thrive as it approaches its 100th anniversary. Importantly, ‘Grow and Prosper’ acknowledges the choir’s long and valuable history, without letting it stand in the way of progress:

> we take the best from developments elsewhere – we value our heritage but learn from other choirs. We also look for new music that will increase our appeal to new audiences and new technology that will help to support our learning process. (SCWMVC 2019: 2)

Although the report does not explicitly incorporate a statement of protected characteristics or equal opportunities, it instead lists practical changes that are likely to have a trickle-down effect on the choir’s diversity and inclusivity. For example, it proposes ‘a more transparent and open leadership style’ so that members can contribute to committee meetings; ‘open singing days [and] open rehearsals at different venues’ to attract new members; and a ‘joint concert with [a] local school, joint concert with [a] disability group, [or a] concert in a deprived area community centre’ to reach a more diverse audience (SCWMVC 2019: 2–3).

Like many of the LV choirs that took part in the present survey, Snowdown Colliery Welfare Male Voice Choir has participated in conferences and festivals organised by Peterborough Sings!, where space is made for choirs to share good practice both in singing and in community-building. The findings of the present survey were shared widely at the 2023 Peterborough Male Voice Choir Conference and at the inaugural Peterborough International Women’s Choral Festival 2023 – a new networking opportunity for UV choirs. As a result, Peterborough Sings! was awarded further funding by Arts Council England to run development projects with five LV choirs across the country, including focussed relationship-building work with specific under-represented communities; equality, diversity and inclusion training for leadership groups; and recruitment projects aimed at diversification. This combination of outreach and training should equip choirs not just to attract new members from different backgrounds, but to foster valuable spaces for expanding notions of diversity and normalising counter-hegemonic discourse (Willis and Vickery 2022). In then realising this discourse through concrete policy and practice, it is possible that LV and UV choirs will continue to offer many more people ‘the sheer joy of belonging to a choir’ (LV/M005).

Looking forward as researchers

The ongoing funded projects run by Peterborough Sings! are testament to the valuable contribution of our nationwide survey of XV, LV and UV choirs to the wider field of communal music-making. The survey highlighted the need for a cultural shift among some choirs in order to make them accessible and inclusive to participants from varied backgrounds. However, it also demonstrated the need for this work to be supported by constructive partnerships with expert organisations so that choirs can access specialist training in areas such as diversifying recruitment and can embed inclusive new policies and practices.

Fortunately, advice and expertise for diversity and inclusivity initiatives in communal music-making is increasingly available, in part through charities and networks that offer self-analysis tools for assessing inclusivity,[7] workshops and training on equality and diversity[8] and model inclusion policies.[9] Furthermore, the recent Arts Council England strategy *Let’s Create* (2021) specifically highlighted ‘inclusivity and relevance’ as one of its four core investment principles for 2020 to 2030, outlining the aim that ‘England’s diversity is fully reflected in the organisations and individuals that we support and in the culture they produce’ (44). Although their support does not extend to the whole of the United Kingdom, they have already awarded funding to emerging inclusion programmes such as Making Music INCLUDE, which offers groups dedicated support and funding to review and improve diversity and inclusivity among their participants.[10]

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[7] I’M IN – The Inclusive Music Index is an online self-analysis tool designed for music organisations by Music Masters. The Independent Route can be accessed by anyone, for free (Music Masters 2023).

[8] In the United Kingdom, members of organisations such as the Musicians’ Union, Independent Society of Musicians, Making Music and Music Mark can access equality, diversity and inclusion training and support online, and join nationwide networks of under-represented musicians.

[9] For example, Making Music offers members a model policy that can be adapted for their specific setting (Making Music 2023a).

[10] ‘INCLUDE aims to help member groups in Levelling Up for Culture Places in England connect with new members of their community and include a wider diversity of people in their normal activities. Diversity means including the widest range of people from your community and recognising, respecting and celebrating each other’s differences. This includes a broad range of identities such as ethnicity, disability, neurodiversity, gender, sexuality, and socioeconomic background’ (Making Music 2023b: n. pag.).

Since there is now growing support for inclusivity initiatives from influential organisations such as Arts Council England, ongoing research is needed to identify the most effective enabling factors in diversifying recreational and community music participation, and to address any remaining barriers. Although past research has emphasised the substantial benefits to those who are currently engaged in communal music-making, it has tended to neglect the more difficult questions of who is not involved and why this is the case. These are sensitive issues, and it is understandable that in our current research we encountered some resistance to considering topics such as racial diversity and gender identity. In comparison to many places of education and employment – where training in equality, diversity and inclusivity is now legally required – recreational organisations are more likely ‘to recruit and retain a homogenous pool of volunteers’ (Legg and Karner 2021: 968) who may not be fluent in the language and debates surrounding inclusive policy. However, as choirs begin to consider routes into addressing equality and diversity offered by organisations such as Peterborough Sings!, Making Music and Music Masters, further evaluation and insight will be essential for ensuring the best possible outcomes both for existing participants and their wider communities. Such research will have the potential to establish a new arena for understanding how social attitudes are developed over time (D’Urso et al. 2023) and how normative assumptions surrounding recreational singing are expanded and transformed.

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