

Rockers of Ages Evaluation Summary

The Rockers of Ages Elders' Choirs is an initiative of the MUSE Community Music Trust, a charitable trust based in Christchurch. There are four choirs, one each in Kaiapoi, St Albans, Linwood and Sumner. The Rockers of Ages Choirs were started to provide an enjoyable activity in a non-threatening supportive environment that would lift people's spirits in areas that were badly affected by the Christchurch earthquakes and give them something positive to focus on. The cost of the tutors has so far been covered by a grant from adult education funding through Hagley Community College. Other in-kind support has been provided by the Communities Team of Community & Public Health, CDHB, Wellbeing North Canterbury and the Sumner Bays Union Trust.

Participative singing as a form of health promotion is underpinned by several streams of theoretical literature. Singing is used for its therapeutic benefit for people with a range of medical conditions including respiratory diseases and speech disorders. It has been used in the care of people with dementia and may assist in reducing snoring, and as a supportive therapy in coping with pain and with other chronic diseases. Singing provides an emotional uplift that improves psychological and emotional wellbeing which in turn promotes physical health. It also offers an opportunity for mastering new skills and therefore creating a sense of meaningful engagement in life that is becoming recognised as a crucial component of health promotion.

Group singing is of particular interest for older people because of the possibilities it offers for supporting physical, psychological and emotional health as people age, and providing meaningful social contact outside the home. These factors are known to contribute to long life and independent living as people age and to promote resilience in times of adversity and disruption.

The evaluation of the Rockers of Ages Initiative took place one year after the inception of the choirs. A quantitative survey of all choir members was carried out supported by short individual interviews with fifteen choir members who agreed to share their experiences.

Eighty one percent of choir members returned survey forms. Respondents were 88% women and 12% men. Survey respondents were mostly of New Zealand European ethnicity (94%) and 73% were over 65 years of age. Participants rated the singing and social contact aspects very highly (median 4.6 and 4.4 respectively) on a scale of 5, and most had experienced positive changes in their life since joining with respect to reduced stress, increased wellbeing, and increased social contacts. The majority (53%) had found no barriers to attending, but of those who did, the principal ones were not feeling well, finding some of the songs difficult, or caring for others.

The results of the interviews showed that the time and location of the choirs and good publicity had contributed to the initial successful uptake of people from the affected communities. Subsequently, the overwhelmingly positive experiences of those who joined the choirs had sustained their enthusiasm and commitment. Participants spoke of the uplifting and joyful experience of singing, increased confidence and a sense of achievement from the challenge of mastering new skills, and the pleasure of making

new friends. Restoration and healing after the earthquakes was also a strong theme, with a number of participants mentioning the choir as having reduced their anxiety and stress and helped them adjust to the distress and disruption in their lives. Many mentioned the critical role of the tutors who had engaged a wide range of participants by choosing appealing music within the reach of the majority but which provided enough stimulation and challenge for the more adept. They had also created a friendly and caring environment where participants felt safe.

The evaluation found that the choir initiative had successfully met its initial modest aim of providing an enjoyable activity in a non-threatening supportive environment that would lift people's spirits and give them something positive to focus on. While the singing appeared to be the primary attraction, the social contact was a resulting benefit that added to the total experience. Themes of spontaneous enjoyment and emotional uplift, as well as a sense of achievement and confidence were mentioned many times. The increase in networks of friends and contacts was also reported by most. The choir was also clearly promoting coping and resilience in a number of the participants who had been badly affected by the earthquake or by other life events that threatened to overwhelm them. The professional tutors were critical to this success but also the most vulnerable aspect of the project, as the existence of the choirs depended on ongoing funding being available. The evaluation concluded that the project was successfully promoting wellbeing among community-living older people and supporting the wider determinants of health in this population.

The study had a number of limitations: the results were based on self-report by a self-selected group of participants. There was no baseline survey with which to compare results after one year, and the interview participants were likely to have been the most enthusiastic members who were likely to have been biased towards making the most positive comments. In spite of these limitations the results are consistent with reports from international studies of similar initiatives and they have contributed to building the evidence base for participative singing as an effective form of health promotion.

The link to the full report of the evaluation has been made available on the Community and Public Health website at <http://www.cph.co.nz/Publications/Public-Health-Information-Reports/Default.asp>