

Queensland Music Festival's Help is on its Way project: Evaluation report

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Queensland Music Festival's *Help is on its Way* Project

Evaluation Report

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Peter Young
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Acknowledgements

The research team acknowledges the Traditional Owners of the lands on which we work and live and the lands on which we conducted this research. We also pay our respect to Elders past, present and emerging, and extend that respect to all First Nations' Peoples involved in this project and study.

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The research team who conducted this evaluation have expertise that spans music, mental health, arts-based research, and health program evaluation. Professor Brydie-Leigh Bartleet is Director of the Queensland Conservatorium Research Centre (QCRC), Griffith University, and one of the world's leading scholars on community music and social transformation. Professor Katherine Boydell is a Professor of Mental Health at the Black Dog Institute, and internationally recognised as a leader in qualitative inquiry and arts-based knowledge translation in the field of early psychosis. Peter Young is a Senior Lecturer in Griffith's School of Human Services and Social Work, and has extensive experience as a practicing social worker and counsellor, having previously served as the Director of Policy and Research in the Queensland Department of Housing. Jack Walton is this project's Senior Research Assistant, and a doctoral candidate at the Queensland Conservatorium Griffith University where he is studying music and educational assessment.

The photographs featured throughout the report of the *Help is on its Way* performance in Brisbane have been provided by Peter Young.

Executive Summary

This report describes the outcomes of a research evaluation of the 2019 Queensland Music Festival's (QMF) project, *Help is on its Way*. The *Help is on its Way* project was the second national choral initiative to have been programmed as part of QMF's festival program in recent years with a focus on highlighting pressing social issues. In 2019, *Help is on its Way* sought to foster a dialogue around positive men's mental health, and also promote the importance of help seeking behaviours. The project engaged 3,916 choristers from 65 community choirs and 34 schools across all Australian states and territories.

In order to develop a more detailed understanding of participants' experiences of this project and its outcomes, Queensland Conservatorium Research Centre (QCRC) worked in collaboration with the Black Dog Institute to undertake a research evaluation of this initiative. The research involved a survey with 305 participants from the *Help is on its Way* massed choir, observations of the final rehearsal and performance, as well as a series of interviews and focus groups with several participating choirs, the massed choir director, and the QMF team running the project.



The findings show that many of the core aims of the *Help is on its Way* project were achieved. The evaluation strongly confirms that most participants experienced a highly positive, creative, and collegial singing experience that enhanced their own mental well-being, and raised their awareness of the importance of help seeking behaviours. In particular:

- 98% of the participants indicated that they believed participating in a project such as a massed choir could help reduce social isolation;
- 76% of the *Help is on its Way* participants reported a positive emotional experience in the choir rehearsals and performance;
- 92% of participants agreed that this project helped them feel part of the community, and 93% of participants said it helped them feel a sense of belonging;
- 93% of participants said they would have conversations about the *Help is on its Way* project with people they knew.

A number of the participants identified as having mental illnesses themselves, or as having had exposure to mental illness via relationships with others. Many of these participants provided compelling testimonies of the emotional connections and moving experiences they had during the project, and through choral singing in general.

The findings also point to the challenges and complexities of running a large project of this nature. The main points of departure for refining the project further in the future relate to venue selection; the continued refinement of general project organisation, logistical planning, and communication; and the continuation of pre-project workshops and masterclasses, which offer an opportunity to strengthen the profile of the project and to enable social justice, health, and well-being aims to be actively pursued.

This report has four main sections: The first section describes the project and research context, and the approach used in the research evaluation; the second and third sections describe and discuss the findings of the evaluation; and the final section offers conclusions, implications, and recommendations arising from the research.





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Section 1: Context and approach

Project and evaluation context

This research evaluation report focuses on the 2019 QMF project *Help is on its Way*. This project brought together 3,916 choristers to form a massed choir with a focus on highlighting the importance of positive men's mental health. Additionally, it offered 6,442 participant experiences, 82 independent concerts, and attracted an audience of 15,112. *Help is on its Way* is the second socially-oriented massed choir project included in a QMF program, following *You're the Voice* in 2017, which drew attention to domestic and family violence.

Prior to the commencement of the research, QCRC Director Professor Bartleet held a Program Logic and Theory of Change Workshop with the QMF team to help clarify the aims and intended outcomes of the research. For the purposes of this evaluation, this helped to clarify what *Help is on its Way* was seeking to do and how it planned to do it, and articulate the relationship between the aims, assumptions, activities, outputs, and intended outcomes. It also helped to identify what levels of outcomes were most feasible to measure given the research evaluation's short timeframe (e.g. this meant focusing more on the immediate outcomes). This workshop also produced key questions around which the research was then framed (see Appendices 1 & 2).

Broader research context

Links between singing and well-being have been a subject of scholarly interest since at least the 1960s (Clift, Hancox, Staricraft & Whitmore, 2008). In a systematic review of the literature, Clift et al. (2008) located 35 accounts of research about choral singing and well-being in non-clinical settings. The emphasis on the *non-clinical setting* is important, as it distinguishes this body of work from other programs of research about music, health, and well-being, which reflect interests in the applications of music in clinical settings—as is the case, for example, in a large body of music therapy research.

More recently, Clift, Manship, and Stephens (2017) reviewed research into links between singing and well-being. The authors noted a general consensus on the value of singing for health and well-being, and offered a concise overview of the research landscape:

Principal benefits from group singing, identified from the earliest studies, are a more positive mood and increase in psychological and social well-

being. These effects, observable even after a single singing session and strengthening over time, have been reported in studies of: established choirs (Beck et al., 2000; Clift and Hancox, 2001, 2011; Kreutz et al., 2004); women in prison (Silber, 2004), homeless people (Bailey and Davidson, 2015); older people in care settings (Skingley and Bungay, 2010; Bungay et al., 2010; Skingley and Vella-Burrows, 2010); people experiencing chronic pain (Hopper, Curtiz, Hodge et al., 2016); people with COPD (Morrison, et al., 2013; Skingley, Page, Clift et al., 2014), and people in choirs for people affected by cancer (Fancourt et al., 2016). A definitive demonstration of improvement in mental health-related quality of life comes from a randomised controlled trial of a weekly community singing programme for older people living independently (Coulton et al., 2015; Skingley, Martin and Clift, 2014). This study found significant improvements at the end of the intervention, and showed that such benefits were maintained on three-month follow-up. (Clift, Manship & Stephens, 2017, pp. 53–54)

A small amount of research has focused more specifically on the effects of singing for people experiencing mental health issues. This body of work includes Grocke, Bloch, and Castle (2009) and Grocke et al. (2014) whose studies were conducted in music therapy contexts. Specifically, Clift and Morrison (2011), and Clift, Manship, and Stephens (2017) report findings from non-clinical group singing projects in the UK. Petchkovsky, Robertson-Gillam, and Kropotov (2013) studied improvements in depression after choir therapy. Ahessy (2016) also studied the use of a music therapy choir to treat depression, and Sun and Buys (2016) studied the effects of a community singing program on mental outcomes for Australian First Nations' Peoples. Added to this, a recent World Health Organization (WHO) report finds evidence of the contribution of singing, music, and the arts to the promotion of good health and the prevention of a range of mental and physical health conditions. It outlines a growing evidence base to show the ways in which singing and music can help people experiencing mental illness at all stages of the life-course; for example, by supporting recovery from perinatal mental illness and after trauma and abuse (Fancourt & Finn, 2019).

Although the general conclusions of this body of research strongly support singing as a beneficial activity for those suffering mental illness, a general limitation of the extant research about singing and mental health issues relates to their scale and associated methodological restrictions, leading Clift, Manship, and Stephens (2017) to call for “larger and better controlled studies” (p. 1). Given the non-clinical nature of the *Help is on its Way* project, and the time constraints on the research evaluation, it was not feasible or desirable to implement strict controls in this study: rather, the findings of this report are best positioned to contribute to the emerging body of knowledge relating to singing and mental health in the context of community-embedded, massed choral participation initiatives.

Research questions

The main questions that guided the research were developed in the preliminary stage of the project during the Program Logic and Theory of Change workshop session led by Professor Bartleet. The primary research question identified was: *How effective are arts projects like Help is on its Way in improving participants' mental well-being?*

Two secondary research questions were also identified:

1. Were surveyed participants encouraged by the project to seek help, or seek advice on behalf of someone close to them?
2. What were participants reasons for engagement?

Method

The main approach used to gather data was an online participant survey, which was made available to choir participants directly after the project in July 2019. It was decided that this approach would be the most effective in view of time and resource constraints. The selection of this approach also accounted for the nature of the massed choir project, which involved over 3,916 choristers from both metro and regional areas. The survey was constructed on the basis of previous research undertaken by members of the team (including Professor Boydell's research at the Big Anxiety Festival), as well as insights from the Program Logic and Theory of Change Workshop held with the QMF team in advance of the project. Ethical clearance for the project was provided by Griffith University (reference no. 2019/333).

After discussion between the QMF and research team, the *Culture Counts* online data analytics platform was selected as the platform through which the survey would be constructed and disseminated. The main reason for this choice was that QMF have used the platform for a number of years to gather data on various festival projects, and this provided consistency with historical data-gathering activities. For the same reason, a small number of the questions included in the survey were provided by the QMF team to allow for alignment with previous surveys. The platform also allowed the research team to add a significant number of extra qualitative and quantitative questions relating to mental health and well-being.

In addition to the survey, a small number of interviews and focus groups were conducted by members of the research team in August and September 2019 to provide further depth to the research. Interview and focus group research participants included:

- Massed choir director Jonathon Welch
- Participating choir *Cheap Trill*
- Participating choir *Freedom Train*
- Participating choir *With One Voice*
- Choir leaders (as part of the choir focus groups)
- The QMF *Help is on its Way* team

Analysis

For analysis, the data were imported, and coded in NVivo 12, a data-analysis software package, from October to November 2019. The data were analysed using an interpretive thematic approach (Braun & Clarke, 2006) by the project's Senior Research Assistant. After analysing 10% of the data, the Senior Research Assistant sought feedback from the rest of the research team, after which he completed the analysis, incorporating feedback from the team (Campbell, Quincy, Osserman, & Pedersen, 2013). This report contextualises findings arising from the analysis in relation to guiding themes produced during the Program Logic and Theory of Change Workshop (Appendices 1 & 2).

Limitations

The main limitations of the research related to the scope of time and resources available to conduct the evaluation (with data collection from July-September, and final report delivery in December). That said, it was still possible to capture rich and detailed data about participants' experiences that will be further analysed and presented in academic publications in the future.



Section 2: Survey Findings

A general summary of the characteristics of the survey participant pool (n=305) follows:

- 41% had participated in QMF projects before
- 95% indicated that they would be likely to participate in a QMF project or project like *Help is on its Way* again—83% indicated “very likely” as a response
- 88.89% of respondents regularly sing in a choir outside of the *Help is on its Way* project
- 83.08% of participants identified as female, 16.54% as male, and 0.38% identified in another way
- Less than 1% identified as Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander
- The participants’ age range is shown in Table 1

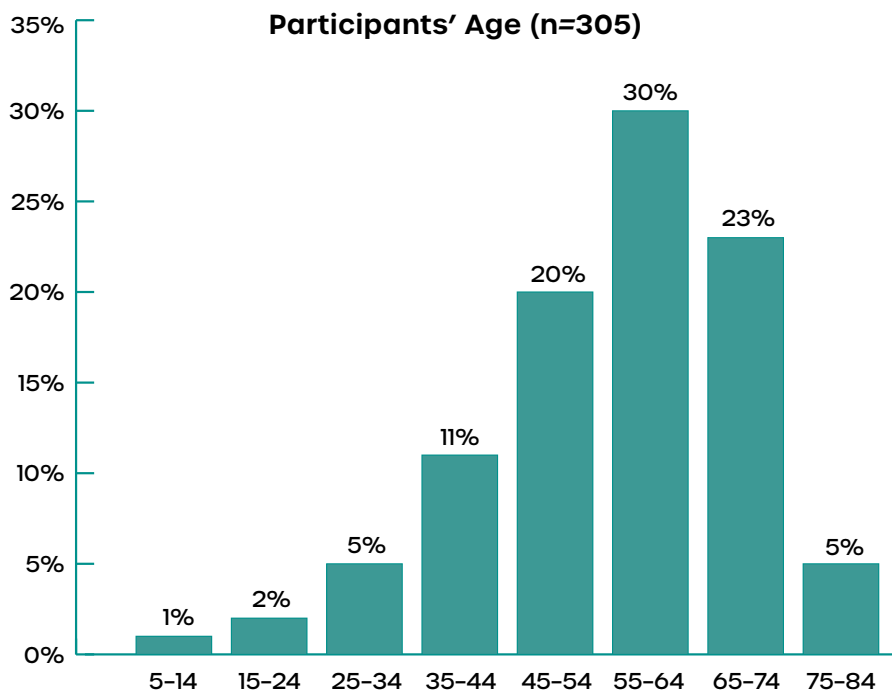


Table 1: Research participants’ age by percentage

QMF questions

The survey included a number of questions provided by the QMF team for purposes of consistency with data gathering around other parts of the festival and in relation to previous years. These questions were linked to particular dimensions in the Culture Counts platform. Responses to the questions and their corresponding dimensions are summarised below in Table 2.

Question	Dimension	Strongly Agree	Agree	Neutral	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
It's important that it's happening here	Local impact	68%	25%	5%	N/A	N/A
I improved my artistic skills	Artistic skills	35%	46%	13%	4%	1%
It opened up new opportunities for me	Opportunity	24%	37%	27%	8%	2%
It challenged me to think in a different way	Challenge	24%	46%	20%	6%	2%
I got to know people who are different to me	New people	34%	43%	15%	5%	1%
I was amazed by what we achieved	Achievement	52%	35%	7%	2%	1%
It felt like a real artistic experience	Authenticity	52%	36%	7%	2%	1%
It moved and inspired me	Meaning	62%	29%	5%	2%	N/A
I feel motivated to do more creative things in the future	Motivation	53%	35%	8%	2%	N/A
It helped me feel part of the community	Belonging	62%	30%	4%	2%	N/A
It made me feel positive about the community's future	Positivity	56%	34%	6%	1%	N/A

Table 2: Responses to survey questions provided by QMF

General awareness of mental health

A number of general questions were asked to establish participants' broader perspectives on mental health (Table 3).

Question	Strongly Agree	Agree	Neutral	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
Anyone can experience a mental health problem	88%	10%	<1%	N/A	N/A
It is common for people who are experiencing a mental health problem to feel uncomfortable about asking for help	75%	22%	1%	1%	<1%
Stigma around mental health is a significant barrier that stops people with mental health problems from asking for help, and stops their friends and colleagues from asking if they are ok	68%	27%	2%	1%	1%
Based on your experience, to what degree do you believe participating in a massed choir such as this, with an overt mental health focus, can help to reduce stigma and normalise conversations about mental illness?	57%	34%	3%	2%	1%

Table 3: Participants' perspectives on mental health

Feelings Evoked

Several of the survey questions focused on the kinds of feelings experienced by the research participants. In response to being asked whether they were emotionally affected by the choir rehearsals and performance, most participants agreed that they were affected emotionally (76%), with only 9% indicating that they were not emotionally affected. 12% indicated a neutral response to the question. Table 4 summarises participants' responses to questions about the kinds of emotions they experienced through participation in the massed choir.

Questions	Strongly Agree	Agree	Neutral	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
I felt hopeful	44%	44%	8%	1%	1%
I felt proud	67%	26%	3%	1%	1%
I felt empathetic	59%	31%	7%	1%	1%
I felt empowered	52%	31%	12%	1%	1%
I felt a sense of belonging	67%	26%	4%	1%	1%
I felt roused	45%	34%	12%	4%	1%
I felt angry	1%	2%	5%	25%	65%
I felt confronted	2%	11%	12%	25%	48%
I felt distressed	2%	8%	7%	20%	60%
I felt in pain	1%	4%	6%	20%	66%

Table 4: Participants' feelings evoked by participation in the massed choir project

76% of the *Help is on its Way* participants had a positive emotional experience in the choir rehearsals and performance.

Self-reflection

A number of questions focused on participants' self-reflections during their experiences of the massed choir rehearsals and performance (Table 5). Although most participants agreed with the reflective question-statements, a reasonable number also indicated a neutral response. Table 6 provides a complementary perspective, and summarises responses to questions asked of participants about benefits they felt they had gained through participation. Participants generally agreed that they had benefited emotionally, socially, and spiritually. A slight majority also agreed that they had benefited physically; however, 46% of participants indicated a neutral position or disagreement in response to this item.

Questions	Strongly Agree	Agree	Neutral	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
I found myself reflecting on my own life during the massed choir rehearsals and the performance	23%	35%	24%	10%	5%
I found myself considering the lives of people I know during massed choir rehearsals and the performance	35%	42%	10%	6%	4%
The massed choir rehearsals and the performance helped me to better understand what it's like to have a mental illness	23%	41%	19%	11%	4%
The massed choir rehearsals and the performance made me think about my own mental health and well-being	32%	42%	12%	7%	4%
The material dealt with in the rehearsals and the performance felt relevant to my everyday life	28%	43%	19%	5%	3%
The massed choir rehearsals and the performance changed the way I think about mental illness	11%	30%	32%	16%	8%
Participating in this massed choir project has helped me to realise how common it is for people in my community to experience mental health challenges	39%	40%	14%	4%	1%

Table 5: Participants' responses to questions about self-reflection

Questions	Strongly Agree	Agree	Neutral	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
I have benefited physically	16%	37%	31%	10%	5%
I have benefited emotionally	40%	46%	8%	2%	2%
I have benefited socially	41%	45%	6%	2%	2%
I have benefited spiritually	34%	35%	18%	6%	5%

Table 6: Participants' responses to questions about the benefits of participation in the massed choir project

Connection

Connection was a theme strongly represented in the data. In response to being asked whether they had connected or had a conversation with somebody they didn't know over the course of participating in the massed choir, most participants agreed (86%), with 52% indicating that they "strongly agreed". 5% indicated that they had not connected or had a conversation with somebody they didn't know, while 7% provided neutral responses.

When asked about the degree to which participating in a community project such as a massed choir could help reduce social isolation, 98% of participants indicated that it would have a positive influence, and 73% indicated that the effect would be substantial.

Enabling

Responses to a number of questions (Table 7) highlighted that respondents felt participation in *Help is on its Way* enabled them significantly more in some areas than others. Participants most strongly agreed that they were enabled to share information related to the festival project on social media, and to have conversations about the project with people they knew. Participants felt least enabled to search the internet for more information related to mental health, talk with a person over the phone to find out more information about mental health and well-being, or to obtain some reading material about mental health and well-being.

Questions	Strongly Agree	Agree	Neutral	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
Participating in this massed choir project has given me greater confidence to talk to others about my own mental health	22%	37%	27%	9%	2%
Participating in this massed choir project has given me greater confidence to support a friend or colleague if I was worried about their mental health	36%	41%	17%	3%	1%
Search the internet for more information related to mental health and well-being	12%	26%	26%	19%	15%
Obtain some reading material about mental health and well-being (e.g. book, brochure)	12%	21%	29%	20%	16%
Talk with people in person or over the phone to find out more information about mental health and well-being	14%	21%	27%	18%	17%
Share information related to the festival project on social media such as Facebook or twitter	50%	26%	10%	6%	7%
Have conversations about the festival project with people you know	64%	29%	5%	1%	N/A
Try to change someone's mind about mental health or well-being (e.g. by talking to them or sharing something on social media)	26%	40%	19%	8%	5%
Seek out more information on the festival or other art about mental health	20%	36%	20%	15%	7%
Reconnect with someone you met at this festival project (e.g. on social media or in person)	30%	31%	18%	9%	9%

Table 7: Participants' responses to questions about how they were enabled through participation in the massed choir project

Motivation to participate

Analysis suggested nine main reasons given by survey participants for participating in the *Help is on its Way* project. These related to:

1. Personal growth
2. The influences of others
3. Love of music making
4. The involvement of smaller choirs of which participants were members
5. Personal experiences
6. Being a part of the experience
7. Supporting the cause of the project
8. Personal health and well-being reasons
9. Being part of a community

In addition to support for the project, these reasons suggest that participants also recognised opportunities for self-development, including both the learning of skills, as well as opportunities for social and emotional growth. Some participants commented, for example:

This is our third QMF choir gig. Our kids love the experience. The score is well written and a valuable learning tool.

I thought it would be a positive experience for our little choir.

“I have recently joined Chunky Harmonies choir and am just exhilarated by the opportunity to sing with an upbeat happy lot and felt honoured to be invited to join the massed choir. I believe it was one of the great highs of my life. The opportunity to perform for an audience is one of my bucket list items, and to do so for a great cause, with an enthusiastic bunch, and a renowned Aussie icon was a great pleasure and exciting experience.”

In particular, a small number of participants indicated that their motivation to participate was influenced by direct experiences of mental health issues. For example, some participants wrote:

I am moving to Brisbane soon, and I thought it might help me to suss out a Brisbane choir to join. Also I have a long-term interest in mental health issues, and personal experience of depression.

Bucket list. I haven't sung in a choir since high school. Plus I have a son who tried to take his life 8 years ago ... he is still here

I live on a farm which is an hour's drive away from the corner store. My life revolves around supporting my husband in his passion and finding home schooling opportunities for my children to explore theirs. There's not a lot of opportunity for me to connect with others and explore passions of my own. One day I had a mental health issue (if you call non-stop screaming and crying uncontrollably an issue). I decided it was time to do something for me. I needed to sing. I got on the internet and tried to find where there might be a group that could get together for one off performances. I was looking for Chorusoz (although I didn't know what it was called) and I found the QMF. I had no idea that the John Farnham performance had occurred two years ago but wish that I had. When I read about the motivation for the

Help is on its Way program, I felt that it was designed for me specifically. I thought about ringing up and seeing if I could get a lift so that I could go to every performance throughout Queensland. After a quick dose of reality, I thought it was doable to drive the 2.5 hours to Chinchilla and the 8 hours to Brisbane and just do those two performances. I needed this. There's no choir in my nearest town and even when there was, my life was too busy with kids and cattle for me to entertain the idea of driving a two hour round trip on country roads in the dark to attend. I've changed my mind about that now and am in the process of getting together a group to sing on Thursday nights.

Reasons given also highlighted the influence of particular people— influential others—on motivation to participate in the project. Influential others included musical personalities, such as respected choir directors, as well as friends, family, and perhaps most poignantly, people with mental illness with whom participants were personally connected. Among the most cited influential others were choir director Jonathon Welch, Glenn Shorrock, and the leaders of the various choirs that participated in the project. Additionally, a number of participants highlighted prior experiences with the previous QMF project *You're the Voice* as influential, and Jonathon Welch was frequently recognised by name in association with that project.

Perhaps unsurprisingly, many participants also indicated that their participation was motivated through their participation in individual choirs which joined the project as a group, highlighting the importance of their involvement. Data also suggest that the massed choir format itself appealed to many participants, who appreciated the uniqueness of the opportunity to be involved in a project of this scale. For the many survey participants who were involved as members of smaller participating choirs, this aspect of the project likely lent an added degree of interest. In addition to the reasons outlined above, many participants also emphasised a basic love for making music—particularly singing, and choral participation—as well as a desire to support the cause of the project. Being a part of the experience appeared to be important to many participants, who were excited by the prospect of taking part.



Feelings evoked

In response to the question, *how did singing in the Help is on its Way massed choir project make you feel*, most respondents indicated that participation in the project evoked positive feelings. The main categories of positive emotion that emerged were:

- Positive challenge
- Social connection
- Empowerment
- Learning
- General positive comments

Many respondents provided simple comments that indicated positive experiences. Some examples of these kinds of responses are:

- “Enthused, energised, joyful”
- “Exuberant”
- “Wonderful happy and inspired”
- “Uplifted, empowered and happy”
- “Excited. Happy. Exhilarated.”

Other respondents provided more detail about the feelings that were evoked. Social connection and empowerment were particularly strong themes, and participants linked their positive feelings to support for the mental health focus of the project, as well as to the notable personalities involved, particularly Glenn Shorrock and Jonathon Welch. Some examples include:

A single voice is a single voice, but together we created magic. I’m not just referring to the sound, but the inclusiveness, sense of connection, and belonging somewhere that can make a difference.

Top of the world that I was contributing to the effort of creating awareness about a very important social issue.

Simply being and performing with like-minded people from the local and wider community; for a worthwhile cause in a huge venue with highly accredited and professional Australian musicians was a definite and memorable life highlight.

The spirit of togetherness is palpable in a massed choir. It also increased the togetherness of our community choir. I get a kick out of seeing the effect singing with a massed choir has on seasoned performers (e.g. Glenn Shorrock and John Farnham). They love it!! It’s about giving to Self and others.

“It made me feel human again. I can’t tell you how much of a robot I feel like, as a mother and a farmer’s wife. All of a sudden, I had a purpose and a passion and something just for me. I felt alive, real, energised, important, validated, excited and connected.”

A smaller number of participants described negative feelings, which could be generally described more as frustrations. Responses that fell into this category usually overlapped with critiques of some part of the project’s organisation, and

common references were made to venue choice as well as the arrangement of participants within the venue and their experiences of the sound in the performance. Some comments that highlight the main issues raised are:

The practice the week before was moving because we sang with 600 people and the acoustics were amazing – a sense of being surrounded by sound. The sound was more muffled at the Convention Centre performance but still moving to be part of a large choir.

I couldn't hear any of the singers around me as the band was way too loud and the acoustics in the convention centre were terrible for a mass singing project. The Piazza at South Bank was heaps better.

Challenges

Respondents highlighted a number of challenges that they confronted in the course of participating in the massed choir. Challenges were variously framed as both positive and negative, and they frequently overlapped with other themes addressed in this report. The main themes addressed in terms of challenges related to:

- The logistics of being involved in the project
- Personal challenges
- The process of preparing for the project
- The music itself

Given the size and scale of this project, it is unsurprising that there were comments made from some participants in relation to logistical challenges. The main issues that were identified related to travel (including locating parking at rehearsal and performance venues) as well as challenges imposed by physical distance during the preparation period. For participants coming from afar, cost (including airfares and accommodation) was sometimes noted as a challenge. Access to materials and information relating to rehearsals was also problematic for a small number of participants. Some comments which summarise these challenges follow:

I don't think it came together as easily as last time in the early stages ... I felt there were organisational issue[s] affecting information about the venue and practices which were made late in the process ... it did all end okay but left me feeling out of the loop

It's a long way from Cairns to Brisbane.

The personal challenges identified by participants included both physical and emotional challenges. Some participants found the rehearsals to be long and tiring. For some this meant that finding the time to properly commit was difficult, while others were simply found they experienced fatigue at times. This was most sharply evident in the cases of participants with pre-existing health conditions. For example, one such participant noted:

I have a chronic health issue so I needed to look after myself even better to participate fully. Preparing for the project gave a new focus so it helped me be distracted from content pain I live with all day, every day.

Emotional challenges that were cited generally related to anxiety and nervousness. Some examples of comments from participants follow:

- "As I deal with mid-high anxiety, definitely trying to control my nerves and being surrounded by A LOT more people than I'm used to."
- "I suffer from anxiety and I am unable to drive myself to projects. My partner gave me lifts."
- "The biggest challenge for me is overcoming my own anxiety to attend."
- "Wanting to do a good job and not knowing whether you would be good enough."
- "Overcoming fear."
- "Not losing my voice (I was quite sick with asthma on the day, and stayed off my medication so I would have a voice) so now I had to take really strong meds to recover."

A small number of participants explicitly framed challenges in a positive manner. Some comments to this end included:

- "It was so much fun and challenged my anxiety, it was a real buzz!"
- "Challenged, emotional, included."
- "Challenged and rewarded."
- "Challenging but singing in the massed choir made me happy and feel good."
- "I felt like it was challenging but it me feel good."

A number of participants noted that preparation for the project could be difficult if participating as an individual, and some noted that the rehearsal tracks were helpful. Others described challenging experiences relating to the music itself. Some noted that the arrangement was complex, which was viewed both positively and critically:

The arrangement was challenging. Which is great.

The complexity of the harmony parts and the fact that no-one could learn lead to sing on the day.

The music was OK, a lot of key changes for *a capella* singers (most of whom do not read music) but we got the hang of it.

A number of participants cited repeated changes to the arrangement as being problematic, and some noted that the arrangement was not to the taste of some performers in the choirs. One participant noted, for example:

Many months of rehearsals and the choir didn't like the arrangement that much, quite different to our arrangements Basses in my choir don't LOVE bom bom boms. But at the end they didn't mind it as much. It was a really big challenge for many of them.

Given the large number of participants from such diverse musical backgrounds, perspectives were mixed on this point, with some participants commenting on the positive influence of their participation, while others described frustrations associated with issues such as needing to work on the music for an extended period of time.

Notwithstanding these difficulties, participants also noted benefits for their choirs:

Thanks to the bus trip I now feel a much stronger connection to my home Choir as we now know each other so much better

I got to get to know my own choir a lot more because we don't have a lot of time when we attend choir as we are busy rehearsing singing and there is no time for talking.

It was truly uplifting to be a part of such a large massed choir. All choir members thoroughly enjoyed participating and it gave the group a goal to focus on over winter. It was also great to, mingle with and hear other choirs.

Comparisons to home choir experiences

Many of the survey participants were involved in the massed choir as regular members of smaller choirs, and these participants noted a range of similarities and differences. The main similarities related to:

- The focus of the choirs, including both social justice issues and the kinds of repertoire selected
- The diversity of the participants in the choirs
- The ethos of the choirs, with emphases on support and inclusion
- The experience of singing with others in a choral setting

Similar themes were also reflected upon as differences between the massed choir and participants' regular choirs. Some identified a difference in focus—for example:

Similar in that my choir focuses, in part, on growing in awareness of and commitment to improving social justice issues. Different in that my choir has a deeper spiritual and liturgical focus.

It gave our choir a reason to step outside our own ideas ... an opportunity to be involved in something so much bigger and better known than we can experience ... a time to think of others instead of ourselves

the focused message is not a day to day project in our choir, however the uplifting and friendliness is.

Others felt that the massed choir included some internal segregation between choir groups that were otherwise tight-knit:

We are quite a tight unit at choir so it felt a little bit more like us and them or tribes in some ways as people kept mostly to their own choir groups. We also focus on process more than outcome in our regular choir sessions.

Some participants also noted similarities and differences in relation to choir participants, and the overall ethos of the choirs. Inclusivity was a notable similarity, while one of the notable differences related to gender-specificity in some groups:

With One Voice operates in the same way, it includes people no matter who, whether they can sing, are different races or have physical problems or mental problems which is wonderful.

Women in Harmony is only women. This was mixed.

Similar in the way that we are a very close knit choir—we come from different cultural and religious backgrounds but all choir members are there for each other at all times. It is however only women so it was great to sing with male voices—and in English as we sing in many different languages in our home choir.

Unsurprisingly, many participants commented on the scale of the massed choir compared to their usual choirs. A number of participants agreed that the massed choir configuration allowed for a powerful experience—some comments follow:

Oh gosh. I LOVE Cheep Trill. It is chicken soup for my soul. But singing in this massed choir ... this is whole next level. You don't get the chance to know people when there's so many I guess, so that is different.

Much greater emotion and excitement because of the enormity of the project

It was interesting and educational to be conducted by Jonathon. Hearing that many voices together was phenomenal. It strengthened my bond with my own choir.

I find it easier to sing in a massed choir than the regular home choir; we all sing in tune in massed choir.

More people that was there the volume was amazing and it just gave the performance that energy that lots of choirs are lacking.

More impact on my emotions due to the sheer scale of the project.

Related to this experience, many participants highlighted connection as a notable point of comparison. On the one hand, responses indicated that participating in the massed choir fostered feelings of connection, whilst others felt that they experienced a greater sense of connection in their own smaller choirs:

Feel a stronger sense of connection with my choir at home than I did with the massed choir.

A much shorter project but equally inspiring and connecting.

Very similar but just with a different director and more people. It is easier to 'hide' in a large group so I prefer a much smaller group like my choir, but it was an experience to learn from and an enjoyable comparison.

Similar: Generous tuition from exceptional musicians (Jonathon Welch and Emma Dean); the experience of performing in my section as one voice.

Different: More able to relax and enjoy the experience of singing with others due to the large numbers.

Home Choir is more personal.

This was a more social experience, particularly the warm up and rehearsing with the performers.

Helpfulness of choral participation for people with mental illness

A range of themes were identified in relation to perceptions of ways in which participating in a choir could be helpful for people with—or at risk of—mental health issues. These were:

- Descriptions of general benefits of music, singing, and choral participation
- Benefits related to recovery and stabilisation
- Benefits related to social connection and support
- Helpfulness being dependent on circumstances
- Benefits related to refocusing thoughts
- General affirmations
- Negative responses

Many participants provided general affirmations without going into detail as to why choral participation might be helpful, and others provided simple explanations of benefits, such as increased happiness and sense of achievement through participation. Some participants noted that singing in choirs had helped them, or others close to them, to deal with mental illness:

Absolutely helpful—gives you a sense of belonging. It is an uplifting experience. I have been battling mental health issues for three years after workplace bullying, and a physical assault—music (and singing) helps overcome depression. I joined the choir I am currently in—at this time—it was out of my comfort zone, but also gave me something to look forward to.

We know firsthand that the choir has benefited the mental health of many of our members.

Yes. My son has mental illness and he benefits greatly from singing as it's good therapy, mentally, physically, emotionally, spiritually and socially. Which I do as well, being his carer.

Absolutely and we have many members in our choir experiencing depression and anxiety, who join our choir by referrals from their GP's

Having suffered genetic mental ill health my entire life, I can truly say that music helps enormously. Some music saddens me, but overall, I feel so alive when I sing or listen to music that I enjoy.

“As a person on my own mental health journey, I can 100% recommend choir participation as a self-care activity. After the initial apprehension at trying something new, being part of my choir for the past four years has helped me feel connected and included in life again. I can be myself without judgement and have made some lifelong friends. When we really nail a song complete with harmonies, the feeling of achievement is amazing Giving back to the community in ways such as singing to create joy for our audience as well as ourselves also does so much towards building positive mental health. I can say without question that joining this community choir has been one of the key contributing factors in my recovery and management of mental health issues.”

By far the most cited benefits of choral participation for people with mental illness related to social connection and support—participants broadly agreed that this was likely to be one of the most helpful aspects of joining a choir.

Examples of comments include:

Yes, it gives you something to focus on and a sense of belonging where it doesn't matter who you are or where you are from or how much money you have or what issues you have in your life, we are all just singing, which makes us all equal while we are singing.

Absolutely. The sense of community and belonging and a shared experience helps immensely.

Absolutely. They will feel connected to other people, one of the most important human needs.

Provides peer support through sharing a common interest and singing is uplifting.

Definitely, socially, people would be able to meet other people with shared interest and form friendships. Being around other people reduces the feeling of isolation and loneliness. Spiritually, music heals, it's soothing and the lyrics often have a message to the listener, and the singer alike.

A smaller number of participants indicated that the helpfulness of participating in a choir would depend on the kind of choir in which a person with mental illness might be participating. The ethos of the choir in particular was highlighted:

Depends on what sort of choir and how much emphasis is placed on getting parts correct, especially if there is no accompaniment. There are so many options out there so I think people can find something to suit their skill and commitment level.

Depends on the choir. It could help or it could make them feel worse.

Yes, as long as they felt welcome no matter what their vocal ability.

I think it would as long as the choir itself was supportive and the performance goals could be achieved over a relatively long timeframe.

A very small number of participants were of the opinion that choral participation would not be helpful:

No, people with a health issues do not wish to acknowledge problems, but it may help the people around them to encourage their friends/family to find help.

No. It can be stressful and sometimes boring and repetitive.

Reflections on the operations of the project

Some participants made comments about the project operations. Mixed comments were provided about the organisation of the project—some participants complimented the organisational efforts of the project team, while others expressed frustrations at some aspects of their experiences. For example:

Hats off to the organisers and all the musical directors. I loved the experience and so did my family who came to hear me sing in the big choir, two of them visiting from overseas. WELL DONE!

The performance was great but there were significant administration, planning and logistics issues that detracted from it being as enjoyable and fulfilling as *You're the Voice*.

A number of participants compared the *Help is on its Way* project to the previous *You're the Voice* project, noting in particular the difference in venue: participants' views were similarly mixed, some noting a preference for the Suncorp Piazza, others complimenting the choice of the convention centre. One participant explained:

I have nothing but good memories from the project. It was, once again, an overwhelmingly good experience. However, I would like to make a suggestion to move any future massed choir projects back to the Piazza. Being in the Convention Centre seemed to diminish the impact that I felt at the Piazza in 2017. While the facilities are fantastic, it seemed to have a more productionised feel, which tended towards losing the community atmosphere. It was difficult to hear the entire choir over the band in the Conference Centre, whereas the choir could clearly be heard at the Piazza in 2017. This is just an observation from a choir participant point of view and not a criticism at all.

A number of participants were concerned about the location of the pop-up project, noting that the placement near other venues was problematic.

Great. But it didn't have the same vibe as *You're the Voice*. Couldn't hear the other parts singing. We had to wait too long to go back in before the concert. Pop-up performance spot at Southbank was sandwiched between two restaurants playing loud music and the busy beach. And was a very, very long walk to and from the Convention Centre.



Section 3: Interview and Focus Group Findings

The interviews conducted in the weeks following the project provided richly textured data that highlighted the experiences of several key groups and people. Members of several choirs were given the opportunity to provide detailed insights into their experiences, and interviews conducted with Jonathon Welch and the QMF team responsible for *Help is on its Way* provided valuable inside perspectives that complement findings from the survey.

Facilitator Perspectives

This section summarises the main themes arising from the focus group session conducted with the QMF team and the interview conducted with Jonathon Welch after the project. The interview conducted with Jonathon Welch was broadly focused on his thinking about and experiences with health and well-being-focused choral initiatives, while the QMF team focus group provided helpful operational insights and reflections on the implementation of the project across Queensland. The findings discussed here are especially useful in the context of this report for the reason that they provide a different perspective to that of the *Help is on its Way* choristers that were surveyed. In some cases, similar strengths and challenges were identified, while in other cases the data shed light on aspects of the project that remained relatively hidden to the survey participants.

Benefits and engagement

Jonathon outlined a number of benefits that he felt would have materialised for participants in the *Help is on its Way* project, noting that he felt the “benefits are many”. As part of this he emphasised that much of the rehearsal work was focused on imparting skills to the participants, and also the conductors of the choirs that participated. For Jonathon, this was, in part, about enabling the participants to participate in “something bigger”. He explained:

I think artistically, what these kinds of projects do—I’ve been doing this for a long time now—helps to raise the bar and helps them to feel that they’re part of something bigger; but also there’s an aspirational element to this, that they can be singing in a major project in a major venue alongside major, professional performers and be treated in a very professional way. So, it moves beyond just the normal community, maybe choir environment into what I call more aspirational work. I think that the project, at many levels, allows the singers, and the choirs and choristers and everybody

involved, that opportunity to feel that they can actually make some sort of contribution and feel valuable around the conversation of mental health. Singing in itself, we all know there's oodles of research on mental health.

Data from the focus group with the QMF team indicate that regional engagement was effective in a number of locations, and even in small projects, participants could be enthusiastic. One of the QMF team members highlighted the possibility of unintended benefits to arise in such situations:

The idea of accidental benefits I really like because what I saw in three different regional communities, very different unplanned outcomes, were fantastic. Like Barcaldine, we struggled to get many choir participants on board in the really small towns because we don't have local choir leadership without kind of going out there and practically building it, which would have been prohibitive. I think we had the Mayor and one other person in Hughenden and then three people who registered in Barcaldine, and then another three rocked up who hadn't necessarily practiced it. It was beautiful, it was like Barcaldine Council kind of went, "Oh yeah, we're going to set up the tables and don't worry if more people come; they know to grab more chairs, because everybody just brings their supper with them when they know there's a concert" Just the way it brought community together ... some of the older couples were getting up and dancing towards the end, which was so beautiful, and you realise that this is just bringing their mind back to happier times in their lives when they weren't facing as many challenges with drought and everything. And Hughenden, they set up a fundraiser for the local kindy, so they made hot meals that they served up for \$10, and they sold out, which was great Also, you know, the Mayor talking about how they'd been severely drought affected for seven years, and then half the shire's flooded and still facing challenges with that, and then the grasshoppers She gave a really moving speech about the state of mental health in the community, and she also was one of the two choir members ...

The QMF team also highlighted the influence of engagement with communities in advance of the *Help is on its Way* performance projects that took place in communities outside of Brisbane. One team member recounted:

Where we did go up and do workshops ... for me, the ones I attended in Chinchilla and Beaudesert ... that build-up towards the finale, those experiences I felt were just wonderful. It meant that when they all turned up in Chinchilla—people were driving from two hours away—they'd been to the rehearsal a month before and they rocked up and we all had lunch afterwards and everyone sat around and talked and there was this kind of real sense of camaraderie amongst all the people singing, even though they were like from little kids to you know There was one woman who was involved because she lost her son 18 months earlier and this was really cathartic for her, and part of her healing process. Another woman was struggling with cancer at the time; she had always been in choirs and she was determined to sing at this one; she was going to come down to Brisbane come hell or high water.

The team indicated that while it had not been the plan to take the project to Townsville, the opportunity arose to become involved. The description provided by one of the focus group participants highlighted the influence that choir leaders can have on enabling projects such as *Help is on its Way* to succeed, mirroring similar themes of importance described across this report:

They had a really strong choir leader who kind of established the choir and drove rehearsals and obviously using our arrangement. So that was happening in the community and we just put the two pieces together Yeah, we brought it together and they were like, "Oh, we want to [do] that, and stuff." It was actually a different way to approach it but you could still click it in.

The importance of the musical arrangement and choral leadership for enabling preparation across the broader group of participants was touched on at other points in the focus group as well, where it was noted that:

[A]s a success, the music and the song and the arrangement for the most part was really quite well received by the vocalists in terms of putting it together, particularly once you had an opportunity to rehearse with someone like Cath or Emma or Jonathon or the choirmasters who [participated in] the masterclasses and then took those learnings out back to their choirs. It all came together beautifully; the sound was lovely.

The interview with Jonathon also highlighted some examples of interstate engagement. In particular, he noted that projects such as those run by QMF in which he had been involved could be leveraged to enhance similar initiatives elsewhere—this connection is evident in a number of his choristers from Melbourne having made the journey to Brisbane to participate in *Help is on its Way*. Jonathon explained:

I even had several members of several of my choirs from Melbourne come up, about 30 of them. We run a whole lot of choir programs with projects here and I had about 30 out of about 300 decided to come up and make a weekend out of it, and come up and obviously enjoy the experience of that big project because I had talked it up so much over the last couple of years and just said, look, you know this is something really special. And the spin-off to that is that we also used the *You're the Voice* kind of tag, I suppose, for some of our work here [in Melbourne], and we're doing the same thing with the *Help is on its Way* project here in Melbourne, and specifically around building positive mental and physical well-being for men and boys through singing together.

Besides physical engagement, the interview held with the QMF team highlighted both strengths and challenges associated with online engagement aspects of the project. One notable strength related to the live streaming of a masterclass, while a notable challenge related to issues with live streaming the project on the day. One interview participant explained:

The data were going up [online] but it were feeding back onto devices at too high a rate, or there was too much information being fed through. So it was going very cleanly to Facebook and then not feeding cleanly down, and in the moment, it couldn't be fixed. There is a solution to that but it involves popping a third party in that process. So it wasn't us, but it just

meant that on the night, people watching the show, some people watching the show, depending on the quality of their streaming device, were experiencing issues with the sound, which is not good when it's a musical show, but for the masterclass it was fantastic.

For Jonathon, an important challenge for engagement related to the sustainability of positive outcomes from the project:

The challenge is, I suppose, how do you keep that momentum going after the project if in fact that is your role to do that, or if the job is done in the lead-up, in the six months and then many months lead-up to it through the rehearsals, through the preparation, through the project ... I'm interested to see what the follow-up on that is. From my particular case, with *Men Aloud*, all the men want to keep that choir project going. So there's 24 or 25 men involved; at least one or two have said, "Thank you very much; I came into it because it was a really interesting project for a short period of time, and I'm really a solo singer so I'm going back to my karaoke or whatever." But there are a lot of other men in the massed choir as well ... For the future, what is the legacy of projects like this? But not only *Help is on its Way* but all the other big projects that they do around the country, and how do you engage people more locally in a meaningful way to continue doing that work and support them ongoing to do that, I suppose is the million-dollar question.

Organisation and production

Interview participants agreed that having the right people involved in the project could strengthen or weaken the outcome. In particular, the involvement of Jonathon Welch was highlighted as a strength. During the interview with the QMF team, one participant asked: "Can I just add one more success factor?... Jonathon Welch and his personality, and how he works with choirs." It was noted that Jonathon's experience and expertise meant that other choral directors in the project respected his involvement. As one interviewee explained:

Because he's really a very experienced musician, and like all of the choral masters across choirs too all want to learn from him and are keen for professional development with him within their own work, and a lot of them are professionals as well, but they do respect him, which is great to have that.

Jonathon provided some general insights into his philosophy when working in health and well-being-oriented choral projects. When asked about his approach to enabling positive mental health outcomes in these projects Jonathon explained that his basic philosophy involved:

[Bringing the] best of myself to the table so that I can, in turn, help other people be the best of themselves, and that is without having any conversation around what the person's special needs are, or what they're background is, or what they're mental health might be, because I really believe that, if we can just be as people together, coming together and singing, in this particular case with *Help is on its Way*, that's what you saw.

For Jonathon, an important distinguishing feature of the health and well-being-oriented choral work he engages in is that he does not proceed from an explicitly therapeutic standpoint. He explains:

I'm not a music therapist, and all the people that work with me, we're not there to specifically try and fix a problem through music or music therapy, but there are, obviously, great therapeutic outcomes of people coming together and singing who are like-minded, but also who are dealing with similar kind of life issues ... We don't talk about it with Choir of Hard Knocks, I never have, and in fact it's been quite interesting; I've had, on occasions, some music therapists wanting to come in ... But in that conversation with them, saying okay, how are we going to run the program ... I can remember a specific conversation when one arts therapist said, "Well, I'm going to first of all tell them why they're here and what they're going to get out of the project and how we're going to help them kind of fix their problems." I said, "Just hold it right there. No you're not." I said, "My thought has always been first and foremost that I want people to come together as human beings to sing or to create art, and that they're treated as people and as human beings without any special or particular needs." I think that's one of the things that's been my attitude to this work all the way along.

Jonathon did note, however, that he appreciated the explicit messaging around the mental health focus of the *Help is on its Way initiative*, and the way in which this was balanced with the idea that people are just there for the intrinsic benefits of singing as well. For the QMF team, a notable strength of Jonathon's engagement was his understanding of the project that allowed him to "deliver professionally inside the context of this project around mental health, community choirs He can bring all of these streams and messages together." This strength also highlighted a challenge for the QMF team which related to a disconnect between some of the featured musicians, as the public-facing musical personalities of the project, and the underlying message of the *Help is on its Way* project.

A further dimension to the project discussed by the QMF team related to the BHP partnership. The team explained that a large part of this success was BHP's satisfaction with employee engagement. Although the mental health focus of the initiative wasn't explicitly addressed with the BHP participants, a survey conducted later produced positive results relating to the participants' mental health and well-being. One focus group participant explained that the project

[R]eally resonated with their people and their sites and the mines, and they actually got their employees to engage ... We just wanted to try this because it's such a good idea, and the engagement was amazing, and it was really, really hard to pick the top, the winning group—all incredible entries; there were nine all up, which is a lot when you consider it was the first time ... It was amazing, and it's like the organisation, they're really excited about it and, the miners, they're all waiting for the next one ... That feeling of camaraderie ... making music together and singing in such a brilliant way. It's just something, it's such an endorphin-rich thing ... They all had to write some words ... it was like, 'We didn't know each other; we all came together to put this together and now we know what people do, other people do in our site, and we're not siloed off.' You know, these kinds of accidental benefits that happened.

It was never, "This is a project about improving your mental health." It was involved in *Help is on its Way*, for people who, I guess, followed that through ... It was almost like a subset; there was a project, because it was the same concept with the choirs and everything but to a smaller degree and a different diversity ... And we surveyed them afterwards and asked about their sense of connection and all that sort of stuff ... those survey results were positive.

Finally, the QMF team echoed concerns from the survey data relating to venue choice. One team member felt that the mass-rehearsal venue (Somerville House) actually provided for the strongest sonic experience of the project:

We had a mass rehearsal a week before the project in Brisbane, and I felt that that was a really special experience for most of the people that were there. We had 670 or 680 people and they sang together for two hours ... acoustically I felt like it was a much stronger sound that we were making. The choir felt connected, whereas the final project, we were let down with it acoustically.

Focus Groups with Participating Choirs: Cheap Trill, Freedom Train, and With One Voice

Focus groups held with three participating choirs Cheap Trill (CT), Freedom Train (FT), and With One Voice (WOV) provided additional insights into the experiences of choristers, and also highlighted participants' general experiences of choral participation in greater detail than was possible in the survey.

Benefits of Choral Participation

Consistent with survey responses, focus groups affirmed the potential for choral participation to enhance social connectedness, noting for example that it enhanced "sense of community" and "sense of belonging" (FT). Members of the different groups variously recounted:

I'd sing in the shower, sing in the car, sing when I was sitting at the computer sometimes, told to shut up when the TV [is on]. But choir's been good for me; it's given me an out for that. It's given me a lot of good sort of training from Cath ... it gives me an opportunity to be here and with people. To me, I've got a very busy life, so it's like a social life for me, like a night off. (WOV)

I can't go shopping now, without meeting someone from choir. I spent 22 years living in Holland Park, and I met somebody I knew at the shops maybe twice the whole time, and my husband's like, "You met someone from choir, didn't you?" (FT)

And that's what I said about sense of belonging... like a family or something that goes beyond just the group that go together to do something. It's deeper than that and because of the music and because of the energy and because it's guides and the whole choir, it's just this energy [is] so good, I can't explain it. (CT)

Participants also affirmed the notion that social acceptance was a powerful benefit of their choral participation. For example, one participant gave a brief summary of his experience joining and continuing to be a part of WOV:

I didn't know about the choir. My sister was in the choir and she come over to my place and said, "Oh, I just joined the choir" and I said, "Oh yeah." Because I'm a taxi driver and I just go home and just sit behind the TV and, you know,

didn't go out at all I said, "Okay, I'll come along if you come and pick me up." So the next day she was coming She dragged me along here And I was overwhelmed because I was shy I was so overwhelmed how people accepted me, because being my—a lot of people know about my past and I've been through a lot of, you know I was amazed I've been here for two years. I've been singing on the streets in the mall, and I've been backing up Johnny Farnham, you know, in *You're the Voice* and whatever, and I was amazed.... I enjoy Jay and Cath, you know, because of their acceptance ... with the *Help is on its Way*, there were so many different people that I met and everyone got together and everyone came as one. (WOV)

I think the choir that we are with I think what you've said is all in a safe space. Yes. Out there in the big wide world so much. We perform as we do in our day-to-day lives, just doing the best we can. And it's not necessarily in a place where people feel safe. They just do what they can to keep going. Whereas when we sing together with Cheap Trill, it's a real feeling of safety and acceptance for all. (CT)

Multiple participants noted that invitations from others such as family and friends were what led them to participate in choirs initially. FT provided another example:

John, who was here before, I knew him in water aerobics, and he used to say, "Kay, come to choir." I said, "Too busy, I'm teaching. Sorry, can't do it." He said, "Just come," and another lady was in the pool I didn't know, Eddie ... she said, "I don't know you. Can I come too?" I said, "If you're not an axe murderer, I'll pick you up,".

Many participants also noted other ways in which participating in choirs had aided their own health and well-being journeys. In particular, the notion that choral participation can be an effective means of diverting one's focus echoed sentiments in the survey data. Participants in one group (FT), for example, commented:

I would say the same about that. I was grieving at the time, when I started, and it was just brilliant. Kept my sanity. It's fun. I always feel good when I get home. I always sleep well when I get home.

I think it just takes your mind off everything, and you can focus. The focus, complete focus, and everything else goes out of your mind. That's really good for you.

"It's been a real therapy journey for me, the choir, and very much around my mental health."

Various aspects of each choir's own culture were identified as being influential on the experiences of the participants. It was especially clear that for each of the choirs the ethos of the choir had an influence on the choir members' experiences and positive feelings about their choirs. Each focus group emphasised the inclusive nature of their choirs, which extended not only to participants, but also to kinds of repertoire selected for performance.

We're a choir of a lot of diversity; people coming from many different backgrounds, but there's no judgment; nobody goes, "Oh, well I won't speak to you because I'm better than you." There's none of that; there's

no clickiness; there's just this real openness to meeting new people and being present with whoever they are, accepting whoever they are; and I'm very proud of that.

That has made me, you know, coming the first time, it's acceptance, you know. Out in the world, you know, you're accepted like, you know; and with the group, it's great. (WOV)

It's very inclusive, for health, where it's great health, or mediocre health, or not great health, and that's helped me immensely. It forced me to come back out of, to be more mobile, and to connect socially again, because I thought I don't think I ever can, and I could. I did, and I was brave enough to come back, and I made it back. (FT)

Focus group participants also emphasised the importance of their choir directors and conductors, and the ways in which these individuals were able to shape the ethos and experience of the choir. Some participants explained, for example:

I think that the whole idea of Cath [the choir leader] will invite people to sing. If they want to, they will; if they don't, then they don't. There's nobody, who she says, "So and so is such a good singer. We'll have them do that." There's none of that. The whole idea is that you empower everybody, and I think that really works, and that's one of the strengths of the choirs that we have, is that she will say, "Right." Sometimes she'll say to somebody, "Get up, and conduct," you know? How scary is that? (FT)

That's why people stay. They come and they see how this group is. Yeah, this is the conductor, and she connects with everybody. That's a big plus. Wouldn't be here otherwise. (WOV)

Participating in Help is on its Way

The choir participants were effusive about the positivity of their experiences participating in *Help is on its Way*:

I was absolutely on board, as soon as I heard that they were doing that sort of a project, because I knew that it was a coming together of choirs, where we would share our experiences with each other, and it would be all about togetherness. Not any dominating, and competitiveness. (FT)

The *Help is on its Way* experience was marvellous in every aspect, too. We spent a lot of time doing things that we might not have done. (WOV)

It just felt like flying, you know. (WOV)

For some participants, their involvement in *Help is on its Way* directly challenged personal mental health issues. One focus group conversation in particular highlighted this:

Respondent 1:

It's taught me not to be scared ... because of my anxiety, I would not go into halls, I would not go to concerts, I would not go anywhere where there was loud noises; I'd just freak ... that's a massive step for me, and what the singing has done is it's actually brought me out of my shell, because I'm actually very, very shy, but once you get to know, I pretty much don't shut

up. But when you first meet me, I'm actually very, very shy, so it has taught me to come out of my shell and just let it go.

Respondent 2:

And after you, you came into the hall at the Great Hall there at QPAC over at the Convention Centre, and you came in and you sat down and you were very calm and I'm very proud of you. Very calm. (WOV)

For some participants, participating in *Help is on its Way* not only enabled them to meet new people and make new connections, but it also enabled them to revisit old acquaintances. Members of WOV in particular highlighted positive experiences at Beaudesert:

Two experiences. Down at Beaudesert, a fellow I worked with very closely from our team at the ambulance training school come up. I hadn't seen him for four years; he's up at Landsborough and he's in the choir. And the ambulance fellow that's left the service come up; I haven't seen him for 20 years, and he was in another choir. So I ... saw a couple of old mates.

What I got from it, especially the Beaudesert one, was, you'd sit near a choir that you've never known, and they would be talking and you'd start to interact; and it struck me how funny everybody was. They were just in such good spirits. So there was a lot of great humour flying around the place, and it was a kind of a humour that you were familiar with somehow.

When we were wondering round in the Grand Hall there at the Convention Centre, we were the lost souls from this choir. We went down and sat in four different seats and then the altos from a particular group said, come and sit with us; and they all shuffled up.

The focus group participants were also collectively supportive of the *Help is on its Way* cause, and were enthusiastic about the mental health focus of the project. In part, this is likely related to the fact that a number of focus group participants cited relationships between their own mental health struggles and choral participation (as described previously), or their relationships to others suffering from mental illness. One participant recounted, for example:

I've always been—we talked about this before—an empath and sometimes being an empath can make you suffer a lot I've always had this thing of wanting to help to make a difference in the world somehow I've contributed to something that's so serious and that's happening in the farms because of droughts and all kinds of problems. And now we have the fires. And I think the more we can do, and this is an easy way to do sort of singing to make a positive impact. And to me, I felt, oh my God, it was such a good thing to be part of it. So, very positive and I feel like I've done something to contribute ... a little bit of that well-being and promote [it] there, that there's something they can do. (CT)

This observation is also true of the survey participants. One participant recounted a personal conversation relating to the song *Help is on its Way* itself, and what this meant to Glenn Shorrock:

Glenn Shorrock himself, there was a conversation in the circle I was in about how he got himself out of that sort of hole by that song; and he wrote the song about his own depression. The issue with suicide, that's when people

lose options, and you could hear in the song that he'd found the options that he'd lost because people need help to find those options quite often; they don't see any other option but ending their life. The song, when you listen to it, is really clear about his own journey and how much trouble he was in and how he got out of it. He was in big trouble, really big trouble when he wrote that song. But it was just good to hear him talk about that so comfortably, having been through it. (WOV)

Improvements

The focus group participants provided some feedback about their experiences of the organisation of the project and possible improvements to the project. Many participants appeared to be satisfied with the organisation of the project, although some did raise concerns, and others offered suggestions for possible improvements. Members of the WOV noted that travel to Beaudesert in particular was challenging due to the traffic they encountered during the times that they needed to travel. One participant noted, however, that carpooling helped to make this more enjoyable and social. Some participants also noted that information about the availability of food, drink and other refreshments could be made more available. One participant noted that:

Beaudesert was right on [dinner]... I think people had missed a meal because we were so late getting there, but with the rehearsals, we were in the hospital ... we knew about the canteen, luckily, but some people didn't; they got over there and didn't have any lunch or something. So walking the other direction, they went out another door and didn't come past the canteen like we did. Yeah, so just little notes about refreshments would help.

One of the choir leaders noted that the amount of time allotted to rehearsals with various groups around the state could have been extended to facilitate a deeper focus on the underlying focus of *Help is on its Way*:

It was great and I loved it [rehearsals in regional areas], but I had an hour with these people to teach them this song and I actually think it would have been beneficial to have like an hour discussion. So actually opening up I would have loved to have been part of something like that, and then having a sing It's so important to go out to those regional centres where it [mental health] is such a real problem.

This choir leader also commented on the sustainability of the project and the difficulty of delivering meaningful outcomes. Citing previous experiences, they explained:

So it does have to be an ongoing thing, and it's all very well and good to kind of plop yourself in a regional centre for two hours and go, mental health and singing is great. See you later. That was really hard So in 2018 I was part of the QMF legacy projects I went to towns in the Isaac Shire and helped I was there quite regularly to just help them build community choirs I'd have meetings with the choir directors and [focused on] "How can we keep this going?" That felt really good At least there was that ongoing support potentially.

Some participants agreed that the preparatory activities were particularly useful:

We did the concert, and it was a different concert to the big one. I think that, having that involvement in the lead up, was really great for us. Most of us agree that, that little step on the way to the Brisbane concert, was really important. (FT)

Others provided positive feedback about adjustments that had been made to the rehearsal process:

The difference this time ... with *You're the Voice* the rehearsals got tedious, but this time they didn't. There was a lot of down time in the rehearsals for *You're the Voice*, particularly at St Laurence's College, but this one, that was all tidied up. It was a lot better It was only an hour, I think. It was very quick.

Some participants felt that opportunities to engage with the major artists involved in the project were valuable. One participant, recalling *You're the Voice* in 2017, noted that "Glenn Wheatley whisked him [John Farnham] away before he had time to talk to anybody; shepherded him off somewhere obscure, and that's the last we saw of him, after all that work." By contrast, another participant explained that "Kate Ceberano was available on that day, because she came to the rehearsal in the morning and then she was available to talk to people, and I think people enjoyed that opportunity. I think [this year] Glenn Shorrock was a bit more available."



Section 4: Conclusions

Mapping the Theory of Change Onto the Findings

To conclude, this section maps the initial Theory of Change developed to help guide the *Help is on its Way* evaluation onto the aforementioned survey, interview, and focus group insights. Specifically, it reflects on the overall learnings from the data to address five key themes: values, goals, success, situation, and assumptions.

Values

The main values nominated by the QMF team as underpinning the *Help is on its Way* project were:

- The importance of changing lives through music
- The importance of driving social change
- The value of starting a conversation
- Inclusivity and accessibility
- Participatory
- Authenticity
- Building community
- Caring
- Integrity in our process
- Ethics and responsibility to participants
- Meaningful regional and online engagement
- The music!

At the broad level, these values were collectively reflected in the data quite strongly, in the sense that participants seemed generally to share these values. Although some critiques were present in the data, it appears that these values translated into the experiences of many participants. The main strengths seemed to be a genuine appreciation amongst the participants for the cause, and the sense that they were lending their voices in support of something bigger than themselves. In particular, a small number of participants seem to have had quite powerful experiences in participating in the project. Some challenges were evident, and these generally related to the delivery of the project itself, rather than any kind of disjunct in values. Although regional

engagement was referred to less in the survey data, post-project interviews with the QMF team painted a strong picture of this aspect of the project. Online engagement was also perceived as highly effective for the masterclasses that were held as part of the project, although there were some difficulties with the streaming of the project on the day.

Goals

The main goals that the program sought to achieve were:

- To make people happy
- To demonstrate the value of music and art
- To build a sense of community
- To strengthen a sense of community
- To create a (temporary) sense of belonging and togetherness
- To consider how artistic programming can scaffold the social change agenda
- To provide appropriate preparation for the works
- For people to realise they're not alone
- To create a safe space for open conversations
- To encourage active participation where the arts can mitigate the negative aspects of this topic

The goals outlined here appear to have been generally achieved for many participants. Most participants enjoyed their experiences, and many felt connected and empowered, as well as invested in the mental health focus of the project. It was very clear from the data that a sense of social connectedness was achieved for many participants. Experiences of prior preparation were somewhat varied in the data, and some participants appeared to experience challenges. The main difficulties related to preparation include the difficulty of preparing as an individual (although participants noted the effectiveness of practice tracks), as well as rehearsal difficulties for some choirs.

Other main challenges appear to have been logistical, in that participants' frustrations were generally focused on organisational issues. In particular, choice of venue, access to materials, changes to the music itself, and the layout of the choir and sound on the day seemed to be the main sources of frustration for participants. It seems likely that those who participated as members of well-organised choirs were likely to have more seamless engagement with the project, although this was not without exception. In some cases, the internal cultures of choirs seem to have influenced the ways in which their members perceived and engaged with the project. While most cited positive experiences, some differences in musical taste and disposition towards interacting with other groups may have had a less positive influence on the experience for some. Both positive and negative effects of participating in the project for choirs were cited, and this is one feature that could receive more explicit attention in future iterations of the project.

Success

Success, as defined by the QMF team in the Program Logic, included:

1. We receive positive anecdotal feedback that this has benefited people's lives
Amongst the survey responses a number of participants reported the positive influence the project had on their lives.
2. We achieve a breadth and depth of engagement (including men and boys)
It is unclear from the data exactly how successful this goal was; however, given that slightly more than 83% of participants in the survey identified as female it would seem reasonable to suggest that breadth of engagement continues to be a focus of the project in subsequent iterations.
3. We engage a number of first-time singers who want to then continue and do more

The number of first-time singers involved in the project is unclear from the available data; however, it is apparent that many participants had previously sung—this is evident in that almost 90% of research participants have choral experience.

4. We make participants feel good and have positive experiences
Although some participants reported negative experiences, respondents on the whole reported positive experiences of the project, and a small number recounted very powerful experiences of participation. Most negative experiences seem to be associated with organisational aspects of the project, which are somewhat unsurprising given the scale and complexity of this project.
5. We haven't alienated people in the regions, and have given them a meaningful engagement

Although travel and associated costs were certainly regarded as a challenge by respondents, many participants who travelled to participate had positive experiences, and some had particularly powerful experiences.

Situation

Reasons for doing the project (responding to the situation) included:

- To let people know it's okay to have a conversation about mental health (particularly in the regions)
- To leverage the accessibility of singing—it's a medium all can participate in
- To give people access to participatory programs who might not otherwise have the opportunity
- Because previous choristers from last time wanted to continue

The data suggest that respondents felt more empowered to spread information about and seek information and help relating to mental health after having participated in the project. Since most research participants were already members of choirs prior to participating in the project it is difficult to be sure as to how easily non-singers or those with little singing experience would be able to participate. Some responses indicated that preparing as an individual could be challenging, and while it is unclear as to the collective singing experience of these respondents, the provision of guided recordings seems to be a useful way of responding to this issue. It was clear that previous participation in the *You're*

the Voice project influenced many participants' decisions to participate in *Help is on its Way*. It is currently unclear as to the degree to which people who would not normally have access to participatory programs were provided with this opportunity. Future research could address this in greater detail.

Assumptions

The QMF team's assumptions underlying the *Help is on its Way* program were:

- We're doing the right thing
- People will feel good
- This is a cost-effective way to achieve mental health aims
- People want to actually sing, and feel good

It was clear that participants agreed with the intentions of the project. Although some participants voiced frustrations, these generally related to operational details rather than to the spirit of the project. Most people felt good about participating. To comment on the effectiveness of the project relative to cost is beyond the scope of this data gathering; however, it is evident that mental health aims were explicitly addressed and acknowledged by the participants. Many participants indicated a personal love of singing and choral participation, and noting that this provided them with happiness and a sense of social inclusion, and promoted social cohesion more broadly in their singing communities. The literature suggests that these positive factors strongly underpin the social determinants of health, and play a role in promoting positive mental well-being (Fancourt & Finn, 2019).

Mapping the Program Logic Onto the Findings

The Program Logic developed to help guide the *Help is on its Way* evaluation (Appendix 2) identified both inputs and outputs that were intended to help achieve outcomes for the project. Intended outcomes were specified in terms of immediate, intermediate, and long-term outcomes. For reasons of scope, this research was best positioned to comment on the immediate outcomes that were sought from the project. Further data gathering would be necessary to shed light on intermediate and long-term outcomes. The immediate outcomes identified were:

- Participants feel energised from singing
- Participants feel an increased sense of connectivity
- Participants feel a sense of community and belonging
- Participants experience a reduced sense of social isolation
- Participants meet other community members
- Conversations are started amongst participants and the audience
- Participants and the audience know where they can seek help
- QMF refines its programming and project management processes

Within this group, the data analysis indicates that the experiential goals were met for most research participants: Participants certainly felt energised and connected to others. Although it is less clear to what extent the majority of participants felt a reduced sense of social isolation, responses from some participants indicated that this would likely be the case for them, and numerous

participants agreed that choral participation could effectively address mental health issues by enhancing social connectedness and reducing isolation. The responses appear to indicate that, during the project and lead-up rehearsals, some participants engaged with others they had not met before, while others were more insular. It is currently unclear as to the extent to which conversations began between participants and the audience, or to what extent these groups knew where to seek help. Participants did generally agree, however, that they were more likely to engage in information-and help-seeking-and-spreading behaviours after having participated in the project. A limitation here was that the survey did not extend to the audience, and this is something that could be addressed in future research.

Although it is less possible to comment on the intermediate and long-term goals at this stage, some broad observations are worth noting. Some participants indicated that their experiences of the project had led to changes after the fact: for example, one respondent indicated that she had begun looking into starting a local choir in a rural area after having had a powerful experience participating in the project. Although it is difficult to know what the long-term benefits for the research participants will be, both the research literature on singing and well-being as well as the research participants themselves appear to be in broad agreement that singing is good for well-being, and this would indicate that the *Help is on its Way* project is well placed to effect long-term benefits for participants, particularly where they continue to engage in singing activities.

Summary findings and recommendations

In summary:

- Projects such as *Help is on its Way* can provide an effective means of promoting a range of social and well-being outcomes (including a sense of community connectedness and social inclusion), and a powerful focal point for raising broader community awareness around pressing social issues (such as mental health). 98% of the participants indicated that they believed participating in a project such as a massed choir could help reduce social isolation, and 73% indicated that the effect would be substantial.
- The mass performance opportunity provided by this project can give participants a distinctive and unique singing experience that yields significant social, emotional, spiritual and physical benefits for those involved. 76% of the *Help is on its Way* participants reported a positive emotional experience in the choir rehearsals and performance.
- The participation of existing choirs within the project provides a highly effective model of engagement, as choir leaders play a key role in assisting to sustain links with participants. 95% of the participants indicated that they would be likely to participate in a QMF project or project like *Help is on its Way* again.
- QMF is an organisation with significant expertise and skills in running such complex, and socially-engaged projects. In particular, the quality and commitment of the QMF team, choir facilitators, and the multi-dimensional program of preparatory activities were key success factors in the delivery of this project. 92% of participants agreed that this project helped them feel part of the community, and 93% of participants said it helped them feel a sense of belonging.

- QMF recognises that tackling major social challenges through participatory music projects (such as mental health in 2019 and domestic violence in 2017) requires partnership with subject matter experts. Working with Black Dog Institute (both in terms of program planning and this research evaluation) assisted to ensure suitable mental health expertise was integrated into the overall project design and materials, so that appropriate community messaging could be conveyed. This is significant because 93% of participants said they would have conversations about the *Help is on its Way* project with people they knew.

Future, planning could take into account the following points:

- Sustaining connections with participants and choirs from outside of the Brisbane area may help to achieve the goal of increasing participation in community choirs across the State.
- Individual participation did appear to be a challenge for some, and this could be addressed at the point of participant registration to connect this group with the wider community.
- Musical ambassadors could be selected on the basis of more explicit alignment with future project themes. Likewise, further critical engagement around how the artistic program aligns with the social agenda being addressed would be beneficial.
- The current model of the Flying Tour as a component of the project could be reviewed in order to promote more sustained engagement with the regions.
- A review of performance venues (particularly in light of the acoustic considerations for a massed choir) could be explored for future iterations of the project.
- Future iterations of research evaluations could also be strengthened by a longer research engagement (from the commencement of project planning), and by including the perspectives of audience members and others who may have been involved in support of the choir participants (for example, family members).



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Appendix 1: Notes from Theory of Change Workshop with QMF staff and Professor Bartleet (4/4/19)

QMF's Ideas				
VALUES	GOALS	SUCCESS	SITUATION	ASSUMPTIONS
<i>What values underpin this program?</i>	<i>What are we seeking to achieve by doing this program?</i>	<i>How do we define success in this program?</i>	<i>Why are we doing this program? What needs is it addressing?</i>	<i>What assumptions are we making with this program?</i>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The importance of changing lives through music • The importance of driving social change • The value of starting a conversation • Inclusivity and accessibility • Participatory • Authenticity • Building community • Caring • Integrity in our process • Ethics and responsibility to participants • Meaningful regional and online engagement • The music! 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • To make people happy • To demonstrate the value of music and art • To build a sense of community • To strengthen a sense of community • To create a (temporary) sense of belonging and togetherness • To consider how artistic programming can scaffold the social change agenda • To provide appropriate preparation for the works • For people to realise they're not alone • To create a safe space for open conversations • To encourage active participation where the arts can "mitigate" the negative aspects of this topic 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • We receive positive anecdotal feedback that this has benefited people's lives • We achieve a breadth and depth of engagement (including men and boys) • We engage a number of first-time singers who want to then continue and do more • We make participants feel good and have positive experiences • We haven't alienated people in the regions and have given them a meaningful engagement 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • To let people know it's okay to have a conversation about mental health (particularly in the regions) • To leverage the accessibility of singing—it's a medium all can participate in • To give people access to participatory programs who might not otherwise have the opportunity • Because previous choristers from last time wanted to continue 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • We're doing the right thing • People will feel good • This is a cost-effective way to achieve mental health aims • People want to actually sing, and feel good

QMF's Intended Outcomes				
INPUTS	OUTPUTS	IMMEDIATE OUTCOMES	INTERMEDIATE OUTCOMES	LONG-TERM OUTCOMES
<i>What resources are necessary for this program?</i>	<i>What specific activities make up this program?</i>	<i>What do we want to happen immediately?</i>	<i>What do we want to happen in the mid-term?</i>	<i>What do we want to happen in the long-term?</i>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The choirs • The artists • The song • The production team • The production itself • Lots of \$\$ support • Marketing, recruitment and promotion to participants • Touring program to ensure geographic reach (9 people) • The research team 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • All choirs rehearsing the same arrangement of one song (from Nov 2018 onwards) • Artists singing their own songs and working in the regions • Livestream / view on demand • BHP competition in 10 mines • Pre-concert workshop in regional locations • Massed choir rehearsal • Masterclass (PD) for Choir Directors (livestreamed) • The big project in July 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • People feel energised • People feel they have been part of something • People feel empowered • People know who they can talk to for help • People feel an increased sense of connectivity between participants who have shared the journey • People have met like-minded people in their community 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Increased participation in choirs • Increased participation in community-based activities in general (protective factors) • Mental Health partners notice engagement of people due to the project • Increased awareness about mental illness and mental health • QMF organisational capacity for delivering social change programs 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Increased help seeking behaviours • De-stigmatisation • Improved rates of community participation from people with mental illness but also people with chronic health issues, etc • The messages from the project ripple out to those who weren't involved (from those who were involved)

Appendix 2: Program Logic to inform research evaluation

OUTCOMES	LONG TERM	Improved mental health and well-being through singing		A reduction in stigma and discrimination		Improved rates of community participation from people with mental illness and / or chronic health issues		An effective approach to festival programming around complex social issues	
	INTERMEDIATE	Increased participation in community choirs in QLD		Increased participation in communities activities (i.e. protective factors)		Increase in help seeking behaviours & engagement with QMF's Mental Health partners		QMF organisational capacity for effectively delivering social change programs	
	IMMEDIATE	Participants feel energised from singing	Participants feel an increased sense of connectivity	Participants feel a sense of community & belonging	Participants experience a reduced sense of social isolation	Participants meet other community members	Conversations are started amongst participants + audience members	Participants + audience know where they can seek help	QMF refines its programming and project management processes

ACTIVITIES	OUTPUTS	Choir rehearsals of the song	The big project in July	Mass rehearsals + PD for Choir Directors	Artists singing their songs + working in the regions	Pre-concert workshops in regional locations	Livestream / view on demand	BHP competition in 10 mines
	INPUTS	The Choirs	The Artists	The Song	Touring Program	The Production Team	Community Engagement Team	Financial Support

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For additional information

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