

Scottish Opera choir, bringing the transformative power of the arts to NHS Lothian staff

The story so far

In December 2023, NHS Lothian Charity gave NHS Lothian staff the opportunity to join the Scottish Opera Community Choir, under the direction of Theatre and Opera Director Roxana Haines. The choir would take part in 4 performances of the opera, Oedipus Rex, during the Edinburgh International Festival in August 2024. Staff would showcase their talent alongside Scottish Opera's soloists, professional chorus, and The Orchestra of Scottish Opera, conducted by Music Director Stuart Stratford.

Over 200 staff responded to the call out from various roles across NHS Lothian. The high volume of interest indicates the popularity of singing for wellbeing. However, significant numbers of people did not progress beyond noting interest, mainly due to the significant time commitment required (up to 2 rehearsals per week). Of the 50 moving through to rehearsals, the majority of staff had some experience of singing in a choir but 10% had no experience.



This collaboration with Scottish Opera is part of an ongoing partnership with our Tonic Arts programme, providing unique opportunities for patients and staff to engage in the arts. The in-kind contribution for project was approx. £47,500.

Why a choir for staff?

The benefits of singing and of singing collectively in a choir are well researched and documented. It is also well documented that NHS staff experience high levels of stress and burnout. This report focusses on how singing in the choir impacted the staff members personal and professional lives.

The findings are based on feedback from staff who took part in the choir and friends, family and colleagues who were in the audience. They illustrate how the project supports NHS Lothian Charity to meet its priority objective of 'Improved staff wellbeing and professional development.



Staff choir members



This has been transformative for me. It's helped me to recognise how stressed I was, get some much needed balance back into my life...it's made me realise that I can challenge myself and achieve in work and at home."

Choir member

Impact – Staff experienced increased connections

100%

of staff in the choir reported an improvement in their levels of feeling connected with others (91% rated this a BIG improvement)

One of the most special parts of the experience was connecting with colleagues from all over NHS Lothian. Pulling together as a team to create something special for our community, but also in informal networking."

Choir member

It reduced feelings of isolation and loneliness and reminded me that I have the resilience and strength to manage and enjoy new things in the future."

Choir member

74%

of audience members agreed that the person they knew participating in the choir had seemed more connected to others

My mum isn't the best at making new friends but when she was in the choir she got to meet lots of new people, make new friends and it made her more social."

Family member in the audience



Staff relaxing and connecting during a rehearsal break

The impact on Iain's professional life – making personal and professional connections

NHS Lothian has a very large staff team and it can be hard to communicate across such large numbers. This is one example of the professional connections made during the choir which will have significant benefit for patients.

Iain, a Project Manager, works across multiple sites so can find it difficult to connect professionally with staff members, promote his work and generate new work streams. As a result of meeting staff at the choir he is collaborating with staff on two new projects. He shares an example: "I was walking down the corridor in the RIE after the choir project finished and bumped into a choir member, who is a Chaplain. We started chatting and ended up going to the Sanctuary, the Spiritual Care space at the RIE, to discuss the existing art works on display which she felt were not suitable. We are now collaborating to install a small bespoke art collection which is trauma informed and appropriate for the patients, families and staff using the space. She is so pleased that patients and their families will benefit from the new art works and the hospital environment will be improved. Without this connection these important improvements might not have happened."

Networking with choir members has had an effect on my work as they are spreading the word about the projects I can support with which will ultimately benefit patients and their families."



Iain

Impact – Staff have increased confidence

100%

of staff in the choir reported an improvement in their levels of confidence (83 % rated this as a BIG improvement)



It has given me a new found confidence that has made me see how I could further enrich my life and have it less centred around work."

Choir member



Performing at the Edinburgh International Festival was a huge personal achievement for me and a life changing experience! It has made me feel more confident."

Choir member



I have noticed that they have become more confident in themselves. It has been a very positive experience for them."

Colleague in the audience



Staff before first dress rehearsal at the museum

of audience members agreed that the person they knew participating in the choir had seemed more confident

74%

The impact on Madi's professional life – bringing confidence into the workplace

While many of NHS Lothian's staff are very experienced, there is always opportunity for development and to learn new things. This is one example of how the confidence gained from taking part in the choir supported practice in the workplace.

Madi, an Organisational Development Consultant, shares an example of how taking part in the choir and the performance increased her confidence at work: "I have recently been facilitating a leadership programme for NHS staff in Scotland with NES (National Education Scotland). While I am an experienced facilitator, I did for some reason feel a little dip in confidence going into this project. I am always nervous when delivering training sessions online via Teams and the theory was new to me and quite difficult to learn. My mood was affected and I was worried I wouldn't do my best. During one of the first meetings with the other facilitators I was asked to share a recent challenging situation, it made me reflect on the fact that I had just sang and danced in an opera in front of an audience and if I could do that I have the confidence in myself to do this!! The course went great and I was pleased I had this experience to remind me what I am able to do."



Part of the choir process is to perform, it reminded me that I do this in my every day work and that gave me a confidence boost in work and in my life outside of work."



Madi

Impact – Staff have improved wellbeing

96%

of staff in the choir reported an improvement in their mental wellbeing (83% rated this as a BIG improvement)

98%

of staff in the choir reported an improvement in their physical wellbeing (66% rated this as a BIG improvement)

Attending the choir after a hectic day/week at work was so great for un-winding and de-stressing. I always felt lighter, more motivated and nourished after a rehearsal."

Choir member

Singing is very different from my 'day job' and I find it relaxing, yet energising."

Choir member

After a serious respiratory illness, I have regained my confidence in my breath and my voice. I was worried that I had lost it forever."

Choir member

After a couple of weeks I realised I was really enjoying the rehearsals and sleeping better after the rehearsals."

Choir member



Staff rehearsing for the performance



Staff rehearsing for the performance

The impact on choir members' professional lives – keeping the wellbeing feeling at work

While it is evident taking part in the choir did considerably improve staff's health wellbeing, some staff shared how this then had a ripple effect on them when they were working.

One staff member who has quite a stressful, patient-facing role, shared: "During the rehearsals, I noticed I became more relaxed and developed greater resilience to work stresses. I had more energy from having a fun activity in the middle of the week. I've had more innovative ideas at work in the last couple of months. It's been good to be able to draw on this experience professionally."

Case study – Kerryanne, how the choir supported me personally and professionally

When Kerryanne’s mum took suddenly unwell, she found herself quickly having to become her mum’s carer, moving out her flat and into her old family home. Kerryanne shared: “Life has had it’s ups and downs in the last few years, COVID was extremely difficult, I became very isolated. Then when I became mum’s carer, life turned upside down. I just wasn’t getting a break and I saw the community choir advertised and my partner said if you don’t join this then I will for you!! I had always been musical as a child and at school, singing and playing various instruments, it was my first passion. Over time, this interest strayed away from me and this was a regret of mine.”

Kerryanne joined the choir and quickly it became a life-line for her, with the people in the choir providing a huge amount of support and friendship in rehearsals and in the WhatsApp group that was set up for the choir members. She explained: “The people in the choir just ‘got me’, they just knew the right things to say and to cheer me up. It became my safe haven and I could just be me again for a while. The choir kept me grounded and was the one time I wasn’t emotional about what else was going on in my life. Even my daughter noticed I was smiling more and had more of a positive outlook.”

The choir has given Kerryanne the kick start and motivation she needed, she shared: “I hope to join another choir and keep the routine up and I have taken an interest in the Charity’s Tonic Arts programme.” Kerryanne’s mum’s condition has improved so her caring role has eased slightly but having gone through this experience she offers this advice to other NHS Lothian staff who are in a caring role: “Please think about yourself. To be the best carer you need to be the best you can and that means taking a break and having enjoyment in your life again. For me, I was just lucky the choir and the choir members came along when I needed it the most.”

The impact on Kerryanne’s professional life – engaging with support in the workplace

Through informal chats during the rehearsal breaks choir members shared information between themselves, Kerryanne explained: “I was thrust into caring so I didn’t know what support was available and what I was entitled to. One of the choir members told me that as a NHS Lothian staff member I could access a Carers Passport. I then set up a discussion with my line manager about my caring role and how I could be supported to work and care. This has made such a positive difference to my working life and feeling my needs are being heard and actioned upon. As a result of support from my line manager and the confidence I have gained from being part of the choir, I am heading back to work in the office for a few days a week which I haven’t felt able to after COVID. This will help me connect with my team and reduce feelings of isolation that I sometimes feel when working from home.”



Kerryanne

Many of the things I have learnt about myself at the choir will help me cope better during the stressful times at work.”

More information about the NHS Lothian Carers Passport – [NHS Lothian Carers Intranet page](#)

The performance – Impact on staff

100%

of the staff members involved in the performance reported that they felt proud of themselves for taking part and performing

I am proud to have seen this project through, to have conquered my doubts and fears about my abilities and give it my best. It was one of the experiences of my life."

Choir member

I felt an intense pride at knowing someone in the choir and the ripple effect of joy was long lasting and palpable. It was a moment to cherish and celebrate and a memory that will last a lifetime...I get a little bit of a dopamine hit even now remembering it."

Family member in audience

74%

of the staff members involved in the performance reported that they felt proud to be performing as a NHS staff member

Cultural events like this can be so crucial in reflecting the important part that the NHS plays in our society."

Choir member



The performance. Photo by James Glossop



The performance. Photo by James Glossop



The performance: Photo by James Glossop

The reviews

The rehearsals culminated in the production of 'Oedipus Rex' during the Edinburgh International Festival in August. The show was a unique promenade performance, staged in the iconic setting of the main hall of the National Museum of Scotland with an 800 strong sell-out audience per night. By moving around the audience, the chorus created an immersive experience, drawing them into the dramatic world of the opera.

The performance was a highlight of the Edinburgh International Festival receiving four and five star reviews, and the community chorus' involvement added a unique and personal touch. One press highlights included '...the promenading community chorus, featuring local NHS workers, may have been the crowning glory of this bold Scottish Opera staging.' (The Guardian. [Read the full story](#)).

Friends, family members and colleagues in the audience on average rated the performance an amazing 5/5.

Legacy

Attending the choir and taking part in the performances had a lasting impact on the choir members.

50% of choir members reported they plan to start another activity/hobby for themselves, one staff member said: "I've gained a new appreciation of the technical aspects of singing... I'm contemplating picking up one of my musical instruments that I've not played for many years."

87% of choir members reported they would like to take part in more live performances in the future, one staff member told us: "I have found my niche, something I enjoy doing for myself and it makes me happy. I will do all I can to keep that moving forward."

100% of choir members reported they plan to attend other opera performance(s) in the future, one staff member shared: "I would like to watch more opera. I previously thought it was not for me but after doing this I can see that it is for everyone!"



The performance: Photo by James Glossop

Next steps and recommendations

100% of choir members reported they would like to continue to be involved in singing in a choir, 91% would like to continue with this specific choir group. Inspired by this successful project NHS Lothian Tonic Arts and Scottish Opera are in discussion to continue to develop the partnership in 2025, with the following recommendations:

- The choir rehearsals required a significant time commitment from staff, NHS Lothian Charity Tonic Arts programme team will aim to reduce this for further choir projects to make it more accessible
- Increase the size of future choirs so more staff can benefit, and widely promote the opportunity to all staff groups and sites
- Encourage choir members to bring a buddy to reduce the stigma about opera/choirs not being for everyone
- Introduce 'pay what you can' to off-set some of the costs, allowing the arts programme to support even more staff



As someone who is used to giving everything of themselves it was brilliant to have something that was for me. This replenishment of my identity and soul has been life affirming and think will enable me to be more effective and balanced in the rest of my life – work and personal."

Choir member

To find out more about our Tonic Arts programme or to get involved, go to [NHS Lothian Charity: Tonic Arts website](https://www.nhs.uk/lothian-charity/tonic-arts).

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