



Sing for Life

A Singing and Wellbeing Programme for Adults with Intellectual and Physical Disabilities.

A report by Sing Ireland



Co-funded by the
European Union

Note to the Reader

This report outlines the context, development, and impact of Sing Ireland's Sing for Life programme, while also highlighting opportunities to grow and replicate the work in similar settings elsewhere.

It begins by briefly introducing SWAN and Sing Ireland - its mission, vision, and journey so far - and then places the Sing for Life programme within that wider context. From there, the report explores what Sing for Life is - its origins, objectives, and how it evolved on the ground.

You'll find details on the programme timeline, methodology, activities, and the locations involved. It also included reflections on group dynamics, the contributions of facilitators, and the role of performance and community events in the lives of participants.

Further on, the report addresses some of the challenges we encountered, the opportunities that emerged, and includes testimonials from those involved. It wraps up with key considerations for developing similar programmes, as well as concluding thoughts and relevant resources for anyone interested in this kind of work.

We hope this report gives a clear and useful picture of the Sing for Life programme, and encourages further thinking about the role of singing, creativity, belonging and wellbeing in challenging contexts and settings when working with adults with intellectual and physical disabilities.



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Introduction



SWAN (Singing With Additional Needs) is a European collaboration funded by the Creative Europe Programme. The project unites partners from various countries across Europe with the aim of promoting social inclusion through collective singing. It particularly supports individuals facing additional challenges, including disabilities, mental or physical health conditions, and other social or psychological barriers.

The project recognises how powerful singing can be in improving wellbeing, creating a sense of community, and fostering feelings of belonging. At its heart, SWAN is dedicated to making singing opportunities truly accessible for everyone, addressing the obstacles that often prevent many from taking part in cultural activities.

Led by Norsk Sangerforum in Norway, the initiative brings together partners from Ireland, Italy, the Netherlands, Germany, and Türkiye. SWAN's activities include developing digital resources for visually impaired singers, supporting mental health through inclusive music-making, creating choirs for people affected by cancer, and building a Europe-wide database highlighting excellent examples of inclusive singing projects.

Sing Ireland plays a leading role in the work focused on adults with additional needs and this includes those with intellectual and physical disabilities. Through our Sing for Life programme, we have researched, developed and tailored sessions to meet the needs of adults living with disabilities and we have worked to ensure they have the opportunity to engage creatively with singing and music. A key focus of the programme development is understanding their autonomy within the sessions.

The SWAN project brings significant benefits: enhancing mental and social wellbeing, reducing isolation, and creating opportunities for people from diverse backgrounds to connect and thrive together. We are honoured to be part of this vital European effort and deeply appreciate the support of the Creative Europe Programme.

For further details about SWAN and its partners, please visit: <https://singireland.ie/swan-project>



Sing Ireland is the national organisation that supports all forms of group singing in Ireland. We were previously operating as the Association of Irish Choirs / Cumann Náisiúnta na gCór, but 38 years as the Association of Irish Choirs, the organisation rebranded to Sing Ireland in 2019 to allow it to further strengthen its role in supporting the diverse sector of choirs and singing groups in Ireland. Sing Ireland represents over 229,000 people who regularly sing in groups in Ireland, from amateur youth choirs and singing groups in care homes to professional choirs and singing groups covering a wide range of musical genres and styles. Until 2018 when we became Sing Ireland. We engage with and inspire our singers, the wider group singing community and the general public to experience the life-enhancing impact of singing.

After 38 years of successfully promoting and developing the choral singing landscape, our organisation changed its name in 2019, to be more consistent towards pursuing our vision- enhancing lives through singing. This is a vision of a SINGing IRELAND - an Ireland where our collective voice resonates and enhances lives through singing.

Through group singing, the following values underpin our plan: belonging, collaboration and creativity. These are central across all areas of our work. Sing Ireland oversees the [Irish Youth Choirs](#) for ages 14-17 year olds and 18-28 year olds, we run the [International Choral Conducting Summer School](#), which is in its 44th year in 2025. In addition we facilitate programmes in the community ranging from an early years programme for 4-6 year olds right up to our offerings for the ageing voice. Accessibility for all is at the heart of our work and is particularly relevant in our [Song Seeking](#) and [Sing for Life](#) programming. The Sing for Life Programme has impacted our work and how we deliver across our programmes and has enabled us to explore our mission, vision and values in a non-traditional choral/ singing group format.



Sing for Life

About Sing for Life

A Programme of Connection, Creativity, and Inclusion

Developed with support from The Ireland Funds, and continued through the support of the SWAN programme in 2024 and 2025, Sing for Life began with a very clear mission: to create a meaningful and inclusive singing experience for young adults with intellectual disabilities and additional needs where they felt in control and respected in their own right as musicians, collaborators and participants.

Since its inception, the programme has been developed through a close collaboration between Sing Ireland and [St Michael's House](#). Through this work, our teams have built a strong working relationship built on honesty, regular communications and an acknowledgement of our shared vision to create something meaningful and welcoming for those who would participate. As well as St Michael's House, the programme includes participants from other local organisations who support adults with intellectual and physical disabilities across Ireland. These include: [The Irish Wheelchair Association](#), [WALK](#) and [Cheeverstown](#). Together, we have developed a vibrant group of participants aged between 21 and 35. Each weekly session offers more than just music - it's a place to belong, to express, and to be seen.



Sing for Life Sessions

Why Autonomy Matters

One of the most powerful aspects of Sing for Life is the emphasis on participant autonomy. Choosing the songs, leading warm-ups in weekly sessions and at performances and shaping the direction of the sessions, gives participants a sense of agency, that is often missing in other areas of life.

Many of the participants, who are often non-verbal or part of the Down Syndrome community, rarely get the opportunity to take centre stage - literally or figuratively. In Sing for Life, they are not the audience. They are the performers, the decision-makers, the leaders. That shift has had a significant impact on confidence and self-worth.

We've seen participants who, after initial hesitation, now look forward to each session, carefully planning their outfits, taking pride in their hygiene, and arriving with enthusiasm. Families have told us this is the highlight of their loved one's week. Some have even shared remarkable stories - like one participant who found comfort during surgery by listening to the songs she'd been singing with us.



Methodology & Approach

Programme Methodology & Facilitator Approach

At the core of Sing for Life is a deeply person-centred methodology. Each session is 90 minutes long, with time built in for a social break, and follows a familiar and consistent structure. Sessions begin with physical and vocal warm-ups, supporting the participants' need for repetition to aid memory and confidence development. a Breathing, body movement, and rhythm exercises are central, encouraging ease and confidence before singing begins.

Led by musicians who are confident, experienced and willing to adapt where needed, the approach is rooted in respect, trust, and shared enjoyment. Our facilitators work responsively - listening to participants, observing energy levels, and adapting content to meet the needs of the group on the day. They are not simply teaching music; they are co-creating a space of shared ownership and creativity.

Crucially, song choices come from the participants themselves. The repertoire - ranging from ABBA and Aslan to The Pretenders and Katy Perry - reflects their tastes and preferences. This autonomy allows the group to explore what music means to them, in their own way. Songs are taught using movement and Lámh (an Irish sign language system), which supports communication for several participants and makes the sessions more expressive and inclusive.



‘When I sing it reminds me of my dad. He had a choir and when I sing I am like him and I remember him.’

Patricia, participant in the Sing for Life Programme

To be a successful singing facilitator on the Sing for Life programme, the facilitator is required to go far beyond just musical ability. As a result, this is a programme where the facilitator recruitment is key to the success and positive outcomes of the programme. It requires a mix of musical, interpersonal, and adaptive skills, as well as a deep sense of empathy and respect for the participants.

The key areas we have identified that are necessary for success in facilitating a Sing for Life session are:

1. Empathy and Emotional Intelligence

- The facilitators need to genuinely care about each participant as an individual.
- A strong ability to read the room, respond to energy levels, moods, and unspoken needs.
- Compassion, patience, and the ability to build trust enhance the responses from the participants.

2. Flexibility and Responsiveness

- No two sessions are the same. You have to be able to adapt on the spot—to change tempo, song choice, or structure depending on how people are feeling.
- Being comfortable with things not going to plan is key.
- Building time in for reflection and a willingness to constantly learn and adapt to the outcomes of each session.

3. Respect for Autonomy

- A strong commitment to listening to the participants and centring their voices in decision-making.
- The ability to put aside your musical preferences or preconceptions so that the sessions can be focused on the preferences of the participants.

4. Musical Competence and Creativity

- The facilitator is required to have an in-depth understanding of music, the ability to simplify and arrange songs, change keys, slow tempos, and break down lyrics where needed.
- Being able to teach songs by ear and incorporate movement or visual cues like Lámh handsigns supports the learning throughout the sessions.

5. Communication and Non-Verbal Interaction

- Clear, warm communication is vital, especially with participants who are non-verbal or use alternative forms of communication like Lámh.
- Knowing how to engage through gesture, expression, rhythm, and movement enables the facilitators to reach and include every participant.

6. Group Facilitation Skills

- Confidence in leading a group and creating a safe, inclusive, and consistent space.
- The experience to understand the importance of being able to move from a position of leadership in the session to that of facilitator for peer-to-peer interactions is vital.

7. Commitment to Inclusion and Accessibility

- A willingness to continually learn and reflect on your own practice—what worked, what didn't, and how to do better next time.
- You must believe in the right of every person to access meaningful artistic experiences.

This role isn't about being a performer -it's about being a connector, a listener, and a creative guide. If someone comes into this work with an open mind, strong musical instincts, and a deep respect for the people they're working with, they can make a huge difference.



Lámh Hand Signs and Alternative Communication Methods

Lámh is a manual sign system developed in Ireland for individuals with intellectual disabilities and communication needs. It's a type of "key word" signing, where key words in a sentence are signed alongside spoken words. Lámh is adapted from Irish Sign Language (ISL) and natural gestures, and it has been developed to be consistent across the country. It is used in schools, community settings and in social care work as a means of communications, particularly for those who are non-verbal or have difficulty with spoken words.

Lámh provides a visual method of communication that can help individuals understand and participate in conversations, express their needs, and be understood. Lámh it has proven to reduce frustration, encourage eye contact, and support speech development, [according to the Access and Inclusion Model](#).

in the Sing for Life Sessions, Lámh has been a huge part of creating a truly inclusive space for the participants. It allows those who are non verbal to be part of the sessions - they move and sign along with the song and lyrics. It provides a means of connection, outside speech and vocalised sounds, for the facilitators and participants.

We have provided training in Lámh to a number of our facilitators, and the expertise of the social care workers in this signing, also supports and benefits the session delivery.



Peer Engagement

Learning and Growth for All

Sing for Life is as much a learning experience for the facilitators as it is for the participants. Initially, we faced challenges, such as selecting repertoire that didn't quite meet the participants' expectations. This prompted honest feedback, and we adapted quickly - choosing music that reflects who they are, not what others assume they want. One of the key learnings, was that for these participants, despite the limitations that they might face in some areas, they wanted to be seen as our facilitators' peers. They wanted to be acknowledged as adults and to participate in music and singing that appealed to them.

The facilitators have developed their skills in working with neurodiverse groups, learning how to make music accessible without compromising artistic integrity. They've discovered how to slow tempos, change keys, simplify lyrics, and adjust arrangements to meet each singer where they are.

An important element of the programme design for us in Sing Ireland, was to incorporate early career facilitators from our network. Sing Ireland oversee the Irish Youth Choirs, and at the beginning of the programme, we saw an opportunity to build connection and understanding in our Irish Youth Choir singers, many of whom are within a similar age bracket to the Sing for Life participants. We wanted our IYC singers to learn to adapt and collaborate with participants of all needs, and to build their understanding of the impact group singing can have, in formats that expand on the more traditional boundaries and musical requirements of 'classical' choral singing. We have engaged several IYC singers as co-facilitators for this programme. Their involvement not only strengthens the peer dynamic in sessions, but also deepens their own empathy and skills at a significant and informative point in their career development. For many, this experience has broadened their understanding of inclusion, accessibility, and the value of musical engagement for everyone, no matter what their abilities or needs.

Singing Group Settings

Singing Groups in Galway

Participants: 31 participants ranging in age from 17 to 32 years old.

We have worked in two settings across county Galway, in collaboration with the Irish Wheelchair Association and Abalta School. The focus of the programme is to connect young people together to sing and their sessions have been attended by a group from a secondary school in the locality, which includes members of our Irish Youth Choir in the music class. The participants include 6 who are non-verbal and this group is 70% male participants. For several of the participants, they are in wheelchairs and including their care workers in the delivery has been a key requirement, to enable them to practice and return to the songs independently outside the settings. .

Singing Groups in Limerick and Clare

Participants: 29 participants ranging in age from 14-21 years old.

In Counties Clare and Limerick, we have worked with the national organisations mentioned previously, and our contacts through Sing Ireland Choirs in this region, to engage with 29 young people. The participants involved have both physical and intellectual disabilities and our work is focused on using singing to connect them to their peers. Including the staff teams and their families in events has been a key element of the work. The group has an even gender balance.

Singing Groups in Dublin

Participants: 37 participants ranging in age from 21 - 32 years old.

In this group we bring participants from three organisations together in a community centre setting that is situated between the three centres. The participants are 65% female and 35% male. There are 3 participants who are non verbal and they are all mobile. Movements and dancing are a large part of the singing sessions in this setting, and it's an area that is often led and designed by the participants.

Celebration and Recognition

Celebrating with Family and Friends

To date, performance opportunities have been an integral part of the sessions and something that the group work towards throughout the year. Early in the programme development, we dedicated the first half of a session to talk with the participants about doing having a concert or a performance. For one participant, Mikey, he was the most vocal and enthusiastic contributor, and he told us that he has always been in the audience at events, watching his siblings do things, but that he has never been the star, the person they watch. Providing an opportunity for him and his peers to have the chance to be the focus of the attention for their family and friends became something that we wanted to achieve for the programme.

Twice a year, at Christmas and in summer, we host celebratory events where participants perform for their families, friends and communities. These events are joyful and proud moments - not just for the singers, but for the families and staff who witness the growth, the connection, and the enthusiasm that has become evident through the programme. The participants lead their own performances and they choose the repertoire. They demonstrate warm-ups, sing their chosen songs, and celebrate each other. To date, these have been occasions filled with emotion and pride for everyone involved. They offer a significant reversal of traditional roles: participants become the hosts, the leaders, the creators.



Outcomes and Future Vision

The impact of Sing for Life has been profound. Participants are more confident, more socially engaged, and more expressive. Families have noticed positive changes in mood and self-care. Staff members from our partner organisations have spoken about how much they look forward to the sessions, both as a source of joy and as a respite from more formal support work.

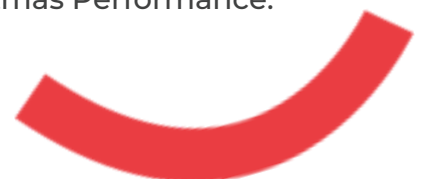
From an organisational perspective, this programme has reshaped how Sing Ireland thinks about accessibility. It has informed our training, broadened our facilitator network, and inspired us to make all our programmes more inclusive. We are now exploring partnerships with other organisations, such as the Irish Wheelchair Association, to expand Sing for Life into new communities. We have built a model we can learn from and replicate. In 2024/2025, we have developed our work in this area into primary schools in our Youth Sing programme. In this way, we are supporting our facilitators to work together and learn from each other in how they approach working with those with disabilities.

We believe that this programme has the ability to influence positive societal change for those living with intellectual and physical disabilities. It provides an opportunity for connect, creativity and learning beyond the 'necessary life skills' that are often prioritised for this community. Our future goals include:

- Expand to new areas of the country
- Develop and strengthen relationships with other organisations working with these communities.
- Provide training and development programmes that enable more musicians to consider this work and the rewards that this skill area provides.



A proud audience of family and friends watching the 2024 Sing for Life Christmas Performance.



Testimonials

'For people with intellectual disabilities, its harder to know how do you talk, what do you say. People have different communication skills and singing is the connection. People can use words, they can dance, they can use sounds, and its grown far, far bigger than we thought it could be. It is their favourite time in the week, its our favourite time, the staff's favourite day of the week.....they don't miss it. We have thought people its okay to choose, and they choose to come to singing.'

Helen Kelly, Social Care Worker, St. Michael's House.



'I am a singer and musician myself in my own time, I have been in bands all my life. I was never confident or sure how I could bring my love for it into my work as a social care worker in St Michael's house. Working with Sing Ireland has helped me develop my confidence and to use music and singing as something I can work on with our members throughout the week. These sessions have helped us figure out how they can be involved and be creative with music, singing and movement.'

James, Social Care Worker with St. Michael's House.

‘I love singing with Ross and Caitriona. Now I want to sing every day. I love singing.’

Karl, participant in the Sing for Life sessions.



‘In these sessions, Sing Ireland, and me as facilitator, get to make a difference. We come together and we sing and do warm ups and dancing and movement. Getting to facilitate this group has given me the opportunity to enhance my skills and knowledge of developing a welcoming space for participants of all abilities.’

Ross Scanlon, Sing for Life facilitator.

Participant Reflections

How did the singing session make you feel? (September 2023)

- Happy
- Excited
- Nervous and silly
- Like dancing
- Tired and funny- I didn't know I could sing
- I like it
- I don't know



How did the singing session make you feel? (May 2025)

- Like I am free
- Happy and warm
- Like I am a star
- Friendly
- I love singing
- I want to sing every day
- I had fun
- Happy I am here with you



Conclusion

When we reflect on the journey of Sing for Life to date, it's clear that this programme has not just impacted the participants—it's changed our organisation and how we work. It's challenged how we think about success, how we define musical outcomes, and most importantly, how we centre the voice of the participant in everything we do.

One of the biggest lessons has been around autonomy. When we hand over control—when we let participants choose the songs, help shape the performances, and express themselves in their own way—we see a completely different kind of engagement. It becomes personal, meaningful, and genuinely joyful. They're not being "included"—they're leading.

We've also learned to look at musical progress differently. It's not always about pitch or rhythm or harmony. Sometimes it's about showing up consistently. Sometimes it's a smile during a song, a shared look between friends, a willingness to move or try something new. Those are outcomes too, and they matter just as much. Another key learning has been around how we support our facilitators. We've had to think more deeply about training—how we prepare musicians to work with mixed-ability groups and how we encourage them to approach each session with empathy, openness, and adaptability. This is something we'll continue to build into all our work.

Finally, Sing for Life has reminded us why singing matters. It connects people. It builds community. And it gives people who are often overlooked, a chance to be centre stage—not for therapy or care, but for celebration and connection to both their friends and peers but also to their families and wider community. This programme has helped us reimagine what inclusive music-making can look like.





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