



Song Seeking: A study of a singing project within Direct Provision

Dr Ailbhe Kenny



The Song Seeking project was a cross-agency collaboration between Mary Immaculate College, Sing Ireland and the Irish Refugee Council. The project was funded by The Creative Ireland Programme through The National Creativity Fund 2018-19.

Project Partners

Clár Éire Ildánach
*Creative Ireland
Programme*
2017–2022



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Foreword

“Umuntu ngumuntu ngabantu” (a person is a person through other people)

When the Creative Ireland Programme was approached by Mary Immaculate College, the Irish Refugee Council and Sing Ireland to support the Song Seeking Project, we recognised the urgent need for this research to be undertaken. We also loved the collaborative nature of the idea. The National Creativity Fund exists to support innovative projects that might, previously, have fallen between the gaps.

The Song Seeking Project comes from a desire to provide access to musical and creative opportunities for people living in Direct Provision and to identify ways for people to connect and integrate through the collective power of music. These ambitions mirror the Creative Ireland Programme’s commitment to the vision that every person in Ireland should have the opportunity to realise their full creative potential.

The ‘Song Seeking’ project targets one of the most marginalised groups within Irish society – those seeking asylum. Over six months, researchers, musicians and community facilitators worked together with residents of six Direct Provision centres in Clare, Cork, Dublin, Kildare, Laois and Monaghan. At the centre of this research were the singers themselves – adults and children – all from different backgrounds but all enabled by music to find a common voice.

The Creative Ireland Programme hopes that this report will amplify these unheard voices and reveal their stories. We want this report to be a catalyst for change in the provision of creative opportunities for the more than 7,000 asylum seekers currently living in 72 centres around the country. The research reveals the participants gained a distinct sense of community and belonging through music making as a group, as well as improved mental health and quality of life as a result. The findings correspond with our own experiences of working on other cultural and creative projects. We will continue to work across government and civil society to promote



L-R: Dermot O'Callaghan (SI), Dr Ailbhe Kenny (MIC), Nick Henderson (IRC), Simon Taylor (NCH) and Tania Banotti (CI)

understanding of the connection between participating in creative activities and individual wellbeing.

I would encourage policy makers and those working in this field to immerse themselves in this wonderful project and seek to implement its recommendations.

I want to congratulate all involved including project lead Dr Ailbhe Kenny (Mary Immaculate College, Limerick), Dermot O'Callaghan (Sing Ireland), Nick Henderson (Irish Refugee Council), choral facilitators Mary Amond O'Brien, David Idioh, Maria Judge, Dónal Kearney and composer Dr Seán Doherty for their excellent work.

Special thanks must go to the project participants from Direct Provision Centres in Knockalisheen, Monaghan Town, Dublin (Hatch St), Emo, Clonakilty and Newbridge whose enthusiasm and generosity made the project the success that it is.

Tania Banotti

Director

Creative Ireland Programme

www.creativeireland.gov.ie



“The song-seeking project acted as a crucial medium in rekindling life and meaning”

(Male, 20, Nigeria)

Executive Summary

The Song Seeking project sought to enhance music participation for people within the asylum seeking system in Ireland and connect to broader singing communities. Through participatory research and practice methods, the Song Seeking project provided new, open, inclusive and relational musical spaces. This occurred through cross-cultural and intergenerational interaction both within and outside of Direct Provision centres. Akin to any group of singers, many diverse voices contributed to the overall 'sound' of the Song Seeking project. This report attests to the intersecting and layered nature of participation in the project as well as the many roles taken on within it. The report therefore explores singer and musician participation as well as the experiences of the choral facilitators and composer involved. Thus, a holistic analysis of the project is presented in order to offer conclusions and recommendations relevant to policy, practice and research interests.

The cross-agency collaboration between Mary Immaculate College (MIC), Sing Ireland (SI) and the Irish Refugee Council (IRC) represented a firm commitment to harness collective expertise, share resources, expand networks, connect with multiple stakeholders, reach new audiences, as well as ensure knowledge exchange across varied sectors. This partnership and the delivery of the Song Seeking Project was enabled through the Creative Ireland Programme, specifically through the National Creativity Fund 2018-19. In addition, several other supporting partners joined at varying phases of the project, namely, the National Concert Hall, local authority arts offices, local migrant support groups and agencies as well as singing groups and choirs from all around the country.

About Song Seeking

The Song Seeking project was distinctive in a number of ways:

- A team of 4 choral facilitators with the project lead, designed, developed and implemented a unique intergenerational group singing project in 6 Direct Provision centres. Professional development sessions, regular communication and a focus on reflective practice was key to ensuring a complementary sharing of skills and expertise, while all the time building leadership capacity to work in challenging contexts.

- The Song Seeking project team worked alongside contemporary composer, Dr Seán Doherty, to further influence the project in creative ways. Using a process-centered approach, the commissioned pieces emerged through Dr Doherty's experiences and interactions with the singers living in Direct Provision. Thus, the 'Song Seeking Songbook' is a direct legacy of the project.
- The hosting of 'SingIn' events at the Direct Provision centres connected 'inside' communities with 'outside' communities. These events invited choirs and singing groups from the local areas surrounding Direct Provision centres to share songs, perform for each other and socialise.
- The 'Big Sing' hosted by the National Concert Hall provided an opportunity to embrace and highlight diversity on a macro level through its status as a prominent cultural institution and by connecting the Song Seeking project with the general public.

The Research

A combination of research approaches including arts-based methods were employed to best capture the complexities of the project and many types of involvement within it. Furthermore, the methodological approach taken highlights the participatory role participants can play in research in order to ensure findings are informed from 'the bottom-up' and challenge the oft-existing power imbalances within research. Ethical clearance to carry out the research was granted from Mary Immaculate College.

The research methods and data collected, all of which are presented in this report, included:

- Observational fieldnotes of singing sessions (12),
- Observational fieldnotes of SingIns (5),
- Reflective logs from the choral facilitators and composer (5),
- Focus group interviews carried out with both adult and child singers (27),
- Audio, visual and audio-visual outputs, and
- Adult surveys at the SingIns (86).



Main Findings

Research was embedded in the Song Seeking project from the outset and throughout its development. The main findings from the research can be summarised as follows:

Access and Inclusion

The Song Seeking project expanded access to group singing and musical opportunities within DP centres. Providing this access aided a distinct sense of community, inclusion and belonging through singing within DP. Furthermore, singing at the National Concert Hall, as well as inputting into the Songbook resulted in feelings of immense pride and inclusion. Yet, this project, like so many others, ended. There is therefore an urgent need for mechanisms, resources and supports to sustain, develop and build on projects such as Song Seeking.

Quality of Life

The data revealed that Song Seeking improved the quality of life and the mental health of people living within DP. The project provided a means of creative expression and agency through co-creating and performing. Specifically, the project sessions were perceived as a way to release stress and tension, as a coping mechanism and a way to alleviate boredom. This was evident amongst both adults and children participating in the project.

Integration

The singing sessions within the DP centres created meaningful integration opportunities through shared music-making and performance across the diverse communities of people living there. Broadening out from this, the SingIn events were hugely successful in linking 'outside' communities with 'inside' DP communities in local areas. These events revealed a huge interest and enthusiasm from local communities who are seeking ways to connect and integrate with people living in DP.

Leadership

The project built leadership capacity amongst the partner organisations involved and also amongst the project team as a cohort of arts professionals working in challenging environments in creative ways. Beyond this, leadership also emerged organically from the residents within DP centres and where this occurred, participation levels were especially high.

Ways of Working

Responsive, relational and empathetic ways of working were deemed to be essential for working with people seeking asylum. The project team employed place-based and process-centred approaches to respond effectively to local needs and strengths. This involved promoting musical agency, being culturally responsive, attentively listening to the group, building relationships, and prioritising participant-led learning.

Partnership

Partnership was at the heart of the project at both macro and micro levels. The cross-agency involvement from both academic and non-academic partners ensured meaningful connections and actively harnessed collective expertise throughout. The project team also communicated regularly to provide collective support, advice and reflection on their experiences. Partnership was also a key feature of working 'on the ground' with local support groups, local arts offices, liaison organisations as well as key individuals within the DP centres.

"When you are secluded from a group of people, like being secluded from society, if you come into this group music workshop, I think it's kind of good to relax and go along with the flow. It improves our overall wellbeing".

(Male, 25, Nigeria)



Recommendations

Drawing on the research presented in this report, recommendations for policy, practice and research are presented here.

For Policy

- Provide **increased and sustained access** to arts opportunities for people living within asylum seeking accommodation. Cross-sectoral **national leadership** from both arts and migrant support stakeholders is required.
- Prioritise **local integration opportunities** through committed resourcing to connect accommodation settings with existing community arts organisations and groups.
- Link local agencies, community groups and organisations through targeted partnership funding streams to **harness existing expertise**, co-plan, co-deliver and avoid duplication of effort.
- Build inter-agency **platforms of exchange** between academic and non-academic partners to enhance communication across sectors and benefit from complementary areas of expertise.
- **Invest in research** from the outset and alongside the development of initiatives to lead action and change underpinned by data-driven knowledge.
- Build structures and supports for **professional development** and **reflective practice** for both leaders and practitioners within projects.
- Seek ways to promote and include **leadership opportunities** for project participants from the planning stages onwards within projects.

For Practice

- Promote **active engagement and agency** within activities to facilitate both personal and collective creativity within challenging living environments.
- Provide multiple opportunities for **social interaction** within projects to build a sense of community and enhance the quality of life for people living within marginalised communities.
- Engage in **empathetic, flexible and culturally responsive** ways of working that builds on the needs and strengths of the distinct group of people within projects.

- Seek out ways to **connect to local** arts and musical communities for creative, community-led, integration opportunities.
- **Sensitivity** to diverse religions, cultures and backgrounds is required. Stereotyping (of musical preferences, for example) should be avoided.
- Engage in **professional development opportunities** and reflective practice to build skills and leadership capacity to work in challenging contexts.

For Research

- Seek research approaches that **hear and amplify the voices** of those seeking asylum living through their unique experiences.
- Employ **participatory research approaches** to ensure findings are informed from the bottom-up and challenge the oft-existing power imbalances within research.
- Utilise **arts-based research approaches**, such as music-making, to allow for nuanced and expanded ways to capture data as well as allowing participants to creatively participate in research.
- Adhere to strict research **ethical guidelines**, particularly when engaging with people in vulnerable positions.



"I enjoyed because it just brought out all the memories when I used to sing in a group back home, I used to feel great"

(Female, 32, Malawi)

Song Seeking in Visuals

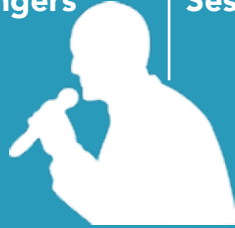


Project Sessions

6
DP centres



100
Singers



60 Singing
Sessions



6
Composer
Sessions

4 Choral
Facilitators

20
Countries
Represented

Events

5
SingIns



200
Singers

Participants aged
from **1** week old...
...to **82** years old

'The Big Sing',
National
Concert
Hall



Research Methods

12
Observations
of Singing
Sessions

5
Observations
of SingIns

5
Reflective
logs



27
interviews

86
surveys



In Their Own Words

"Singing makes me feel happy and free" (Male, 30, Zimbabwe)

"The song-seeking project acted as a crucial medium in rekindling life and meaning to what was the hope-short marrow of the asylum seekers who took part, the event at the end acting as the cement, as it brought about integration - non-Irish and Irish coming together for a goal, a mutual feeling. Simply magnificent!" (Male, 20, Nigeria)

"I sing, because it makes me less scared.... it feels calm." (girl, 11)

"When you are secluded from a group of people, like being secluded from society, if you come into this group music workshop, I think it's kind of good to relax and go along with the flow. It improves our overall wellbeing." (Male, 25, Nigeria)

"The most important part about music for me – it heals." (Female, 20, Zimbabwe).

"It makes me feel not alone." (boy, 10).

Introduction





Ode

The streets are empty
But a crowd has gathered in the air.
Trombones and cellos on the balconies
a song gradually taking hold.
The music invents a square
where all of us slowly appear,
a plainclothes orchestra surprising ourselves
like the flashmob we watched together:
first the lone double bass like a statue coming alive
then the bassoon and violins
the rushing brass like firemen looking for a fire,
the shoppers dropping their bags and pumping the ode.
The man in the T-shirt turns to us, his hands in the air.
We're the city now and the square,
Leaping from our strange disguises
to sing to each other across the darkness.

- Peter Sirr

Introduction

Poet Peter Sirr captures so evocatively here the power of music to bring people together; to invent a square. Written during the COVID-19 pandemic, he illuminates in these words how people seek solace and community through music and song, often when feeling at their most vulnerable and lonely.

The 'Song Seeking' project did not take place during the pandemic, yet this poem resonates deeply with the core idea of creating 'musical squares' through collective music making and singing 'across the darkness'.

'Song Seeking' was a group singing project within Direct Provision centres in Ireland that began in October 2018. Funded through the Creative Ireland Programme, the project involved a cross-agency collaboration between Mary Immaculate

College, Sing Ireland and the Irish Refugee Council. Across six Direct Provision (DP) centres in Clare, Cork, Dublin, Kildare, Laois and Monaghan, the project involved intergenerational group singing workshops with expert choral facilitators. Significantly, there were moments of planned integration through shared singing experiences with broader communities through ‘SingIn’ days, as well as a final large-scale ‘Big Sing’ event at the National Concert Hall in June 2019. As part of the project, there is also a new choral resource songbook written by Dr Seán Doherty (published alongside this report) inspired by participatory workshops with the DP residents.

Research throughout the process and from multiple perspectives was integral to ‘Song Seeking’ as there are many stories to tell within such a project. There were the choral facilitators who were working with the DP residents over 6 months, there was a composer who made music with the DP residents to inform a new commission, and of course central to this were the singers themselves – adults, children and young people – all living in temporary, communal ‘limbo’, finding commonality across nationalities, cultures, and religions through music. This report hopes to amplify these many voices, their songs and their stories, and in particular those voices too often silenced within our communities.

To date, contemporary debates and research on asylum seeking have predominantly focussed on areas such as safety, law, accommodation and food. As a consequence, cultural and creative needs have been largely ignored. This research report therefore addresses this knowledge gap to contribute lived experiences and understandings of musical participation as potential spaces for belonging, integration and creativity within asylum seeker accommodation and the surrounding communities.

People seek
solace and
community
through music and
song, often when
feeling at their
most vulnerable
and lonely.

Seeking

A man with long, wavy brown hair, seen from behind, is seated on a black piano bench. He is wearing a dark, pinstriped suit jacket and is playing a black grand piano. His right hand is visible on the keys. An open book of sheet music sits on the piano's music stand. The scene is set on a stage with a dark background. In the upper right corner, two bright purple stage lights are visible. In the lower right, a portion of a blue jacket is seen. The floor is a polished, reflective surface. In the background, a drum set is partially visible.

"It gave us a chance to
have a connection with
other people, to have
a stage".

(Male, 22, Ethiopia)



Seeking

1.1 The Context

Continuing worldwide forced migration has brought about many challenges including the controversial nature of asylum seeker accommodation. Direct provision (DP) was set up in Ireland in the year 2000 as a state system of housing those seeking international protection while in the asylum seeking process. The DP system is overseen by the International Protection Accommodation Service (IPAS), a body of the Department of Justice and Equality.

The majority of the centres are privately owned and run. The system was originally conceived as a short-term solution to provide food, board and basic necessities for no longer than six months. While efforts have been made to reduce the time spent in DP centres in recent years, it is still averaging at 3 years. Currently there are 7,700 people seeking asylum who are living within 84 DP and emergency accommodation centres (38 of these are DP centres). One third of these people are children. The problems with the current system are well-documented and multiple advocacy and media campaigns attest to this. Long processing times leading to lengthy and sometimes indefinite delays; inappropriate and substandard accommodation; insufficient services and supports; social isolation; enforced poverty; limited access to education and training; and lack of privacy are the most significant issues reported on (IRC, 2019; McMahon, 2015). The COVID-19 pandemic has led to even greater concerns about the vulnerability of, and lack of control for, those living within the asylum seeking system in Ireland (IRC, 2020).

These shared temporary accommodation settings create distinctive and challenging contexts where music is experienced. Recent research has shown that music is happening informally within DP centres, particularly listening to music, dancing to music and singing songs (Kenny, 2018, 2021). However, there are at present, limited supports and structures in place for building musical communities within DP centres. Furthermore, contextual and systemic difficulties abound such as gaining access, suitable rehearsal spaces, high turnover of residents, and mental health issues. It is evidenced by research in the field, that there are multiple benefits to collective musical participation and group singing in facilitating positive emotional, social, physical, mental health and creative outcomes (Bailey



**"It was lovely meeting
with many people,
hearing different
voices"**

(Female, 27, Albania)

& Davidson, 2005; Bell, 2004; Bithell, 2014; Hallam, 2010; Kenny, 2016; Moss, Lynch & O'Donoghue, 2017; Perkins, Ascenso, Atkins, Fancourt & Williamon, 2016; Welch, 2014). In addition to specific studies reporting on the benefits amongst refugee and asylum seeker communities (Marsh, 2015; Weston & Lenette, 2016), Parker (2010) writes of choirs as a means of 'social bonding', while Phelan refers to 'sung belonging' (2017), both highlighting the highly collaborative and familial elements of group singing. The importance of providing 'spaces' for participatory forms of cultural expression and thus, opening up opportunities for creating a sense of community within challenging contexts such as DP centres, therefore cannot be underestimated.

1.2 The Project

The central aim of 'Song Seeking' was to enhance musical participation within asylum seeker accommodation settings and so in this Irish context, within DP. Across 6 DP centres, 60 intergenerational group singing sessions took place over 6 months. As well as connecting across the 'inside' DP community, connections were made to local singers, groups and choirs in the 'outside' community through shared 'SingIn' days at the DP centres. The final 'Big Sing' at the National Concert Hall provided an opportunity to embrace and highlight diversity on a macro level through its status as a prominent cultural institution and by connecting the project to the general public. Thus, the new and diverse audiences

involved in the project were multiple and so the project offered various levels and means of connection and inclusion at different stages of development. Four choral facilitators were recruited through an open call and employed to work on the project. In addition, a contemporary composer worked across all DP centres involved to create a new songbook inspired by residents' inputs.

Partners

The Creative Ireland Programme (funder)
Mary Immaculate College
Sing Ireland
Irish Refugee Council

Support Staff

Ailbhe Curran (MIC)
Caroline Reid (IRC)
Gráinne O'Hogan (SI)
Lily Lacey (SI)

Project Activities

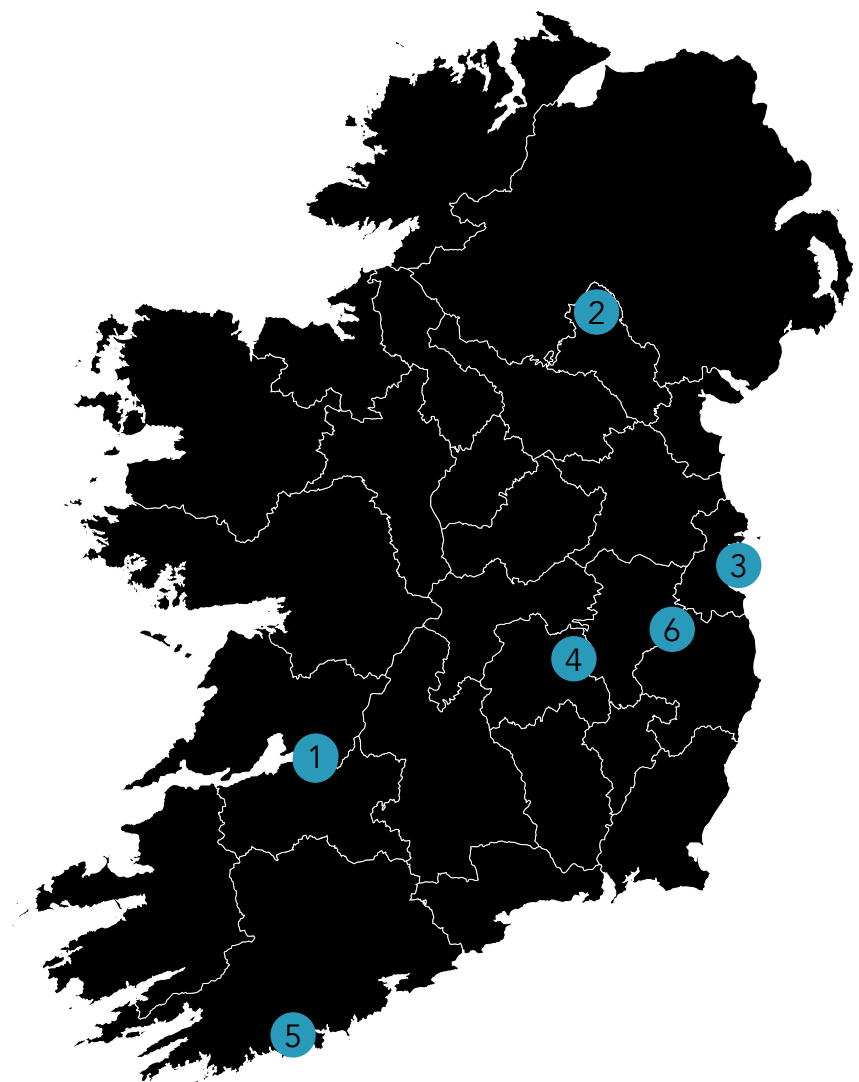
Singing Sessions
SingIns
Composer Workshops & Commission
'The Big Sing'
Research Report

Direct Provision Centres

- ① Knockalisheen
- ② Monaghan Town
- ③ Dublin (Hatch St)
- ④ Emo
- ⑤ Clonakilty
- ⑥ Newbridge

Team

Dr Ailbhe Kenny (MIC, project lead)
Dermot O'Callaghan (SI)
Nick Henderson (IRC)
Mary Amond O'Brien (choral facilitator)
David Idioh (choral facilitator)
Maria Judge (choral facilitator)
Dónal Kearney (choral facilitator)
Dr Seán Doherty (composer)



The project was highly participatory through both research and practice approaches. Furthermore, an active partnership linking an academic partner with non-academic partners, allowed for multiple areas of expertise to be harnessed and capitalised on to inform the project's development at varying stages. The choral facilitation team and composer also worked closely with the project leader to shape the content, structure and pedagogical approaches employed as well as facilitate regular reflection and feedback for the project's duration. Finally, the participation of the singers themselves was essential for the project to come to fruition and this participation shaped the diverse and distinctive 'communities of musical practice' (Kenny, 2016) that emerged throughout 'Song Seeking'. Thus, the types and levels of project participation can be described as follows:

Design and delivery: The project leader, choral facilitation team and composer, through two professional development workshops and regular communication, designed and delivered the singing sessions for the DP centres and 'The Big Sing'. Collective creative strengths, knowledge and skills were shared to benefit the whole team.

Singing Sessions: 60 group singing sessions took place across the 6 DP centres. Creative activities coupled with the repertoire chosen allowed for multiple opportunities and 'ways in' for DP residents across the age-span to comfortably access the musical spaces created.

'SingIn' events: Local community choirs/singing groups were hosted by the singers within 5 DP centres. These gatherings involved shared singing activities and songs led by the choral facilitators. These events extended the reach of the project to connect to communities surrounding DP centres.

'Big Sing' event: All of those involved in the 'Song Seeking' project, across the 6 DP centres, joined community choirs, singers, musicians and the general public for a 'Big Sing' in the National Concert Hall in June 2019.

Choral commission: The composer drew inspiration from collective creative inputs through the 6 composer workshops delivered to all DP centres involved. The 'Song Seeking Songbook' is a direct output of this.

Research methods: The research methods used to capture data involved the use of arts-based methods, observational fieldnotes, interviews and reflective logs. Thus, the participants creatively participated in the research itself.

Funded by the Creative Ireland Programme, the project was cognisant of espousing an essential value within the CI programme; that ‘the arts belong to everyone’ (CI programme, p.14). The ‘Song Seeking’ project targeted one of the most marginalised groups within Irish society – those seeking asylum. There is a significant gap in provision and access to the arts within DP centres as well as a repeated call for greater integration opportunities with local communities surrounding the centres. This project has strongly evidenced that singing and making music can offer one means to address these concerns in rich, meaningful and creative ways.

1.3 The Research

How people participate musically and potentially form ‘communities of musical practice’ (Kenny, 2016) within DP centres was of particular interest to this project. The project sought to explore key questions about how group singing can create a sense of belonging, as well as facilitate communication, connectivity and creative expression amongst particularly marginalised and diverse communities. In addition, the research sought to explore how such a project could reach beyond the centres; both locally and nationally. Overarching themes guiding the research included participation, identity, learning, community and inclusion. Mixed methods were employed over 9 months (November 2018 – July 2019), where the data gathered was qualitative dominant. Methods involved observational fieldnotes of singing sessions (12) and SingIns (5) at the DP centres, reflective logs kept by the choral facilitators and composer (5), focus group interviews carried out with both adult and child singers (27), musical outputs (audio and audio-visual recordings), and adult surveys at the SingIns (86). Ethical clearance to carry out the research was granted from Mary Immaculate College.

Research Methods

Observations
Reflective logs
Focus Group Interviews
Musical outputs
Surveys

Research Themes

Participation
Identity
Learning
Community
Inclusion

Data analysis was carried out on all of the data collected to illuminate significant issues and relate these to the research themes of the project. The process was both inductive and deductive allowing for emerging categories as well as a thematic analysis to occur within this holistic analytical approach. Importantly, the research element of this project happened from the outset and alongside its development, demonstrating best practice in this regard. As well as this, a draft of the report was sent to several participants and the project partners for member checking, comments and feedback before publication.

There is a dearth of research from actual practice in this field to inform future directions and aid our current understandings of cultural and creative needs within asylum seeking systems. The research findings then presented in this report aim to:

- Inform policy, practice and research directions to ensure inclusion, relevance and access for arts and cultural participation in challenging contexts.
- Gain insight and understanding into the impact of group singing for marginalised individuals and communities.
- Examine the role of singing experiences in relation to wellbeing, creative learning, identity, social cohesion and cultural citizenship.
- Understand singer and leader needs and issues to sustain the development of musical participation in challenging contexts.
- Inform efforts to build leadership capacity to address cultural diversity issues within educational systems as well as community arts projects.
- Lead action and change within asylum-seeking systems to build future creative programmes from data-driven knowledge.
- Inform research-led teaching on third-level courses which reflect the emerging complexity of the cultural landscapes we live within.
- Facilitate knowledge transfer within and out of Ireland in this field of research, policy and practice.

"A lot of things are going on here, like mentally. Music, it gives you strength".
(Male, 30, Nigeria)

"It makes me feel not alone."

(boy, 10).

Singing



"The most important
part about music for
me - it heals."

(Female, 20, Zimbabwe).





Singing

2.1 The Singing Sessions

60 singing sessions took place over the course of the project across 6 Direct Provision centres from January to June 2019. 10 sessions in each centre were led by a choral facilitator and each singing group developed in distinctive ways. Thus, 6 unique 'communities of musical practice' (Kenny, 2016) formed during the project. Multiple themes and issues emerged from the data gathered which provide 'ground-up' insights from these communities. The choral facilitators are anonymised here by number (CF1, 2, 3, 4) and the singers are anonymised through alias names.

Participation

Due to the fluid and temporary nature of the Direct Provision system (see section 1.1), it was difficult to maintain the same group of singers for all 10 sessions in each centre. In this context, it emerged that in each centre there was a core group of singers who came regularly with many more singers peripheral to that group - who came and went depending on the circumstances of the day or evening. Overall, approximately 100 singers living in Direct Provision engaged with the project, representing 20 different countries: Afghanistan, Albania, Angola, Bangladesh, Benin, Brazil, Cameroon, DR Congo, Ethiopia, Georgia, Ghana, Iraq, Malawi, Nigeria, Pakistan, Swaziland, The Gambia, Venezuela, Yemen, Zimbabwe. As well as this, many of the children involved were born in Ireland.

The extract below is taken from fieldnotes at a singing session in the Direct Provision centre in Emo, county Laois. It describes a typical singing session there, capturing the intergenerational, cross-cultural and collaborative nature of the group, contextual constraints, leadership from within, types of singing activities, improvisation, choral facilitation, group and solo singing opportunities, as well as the atmosphere created through shared music making.

The communal room is full of women and young children. One child is playing on Mary's keyboard and another is walking up a slide backwards. Several others are engaged in running, catching, pushing and the general business of play. They are aged between two and seven years. Most of the women have small babies in slings or in their arms.

There is a clear leader in the group, Anna, who welcomes me first, shakes my hand and introduces me to the other women. She also announces it is too cold in this room (it is!) and that we should go upstairs.

Mary wonders if it might be too small but Anna assures her it will be fine. We all climb the stairs to a small but warmer room. All the women start gathering up the chairs and assembling them into a circle. Slowly, others start arriving.

Mary begins by playing on the keyboard without verbal announcement and people join in singing a warm up as they settle in their seats. As the room is small, there is not a seat for everyone and several hang by the door, popping their heads in to sing or just observe. Some men have now joined. Mary continues in this way through three songs and praises them for remembering the tunes from last time.

One song involves a partner song with 'Swing Low, Sweet Chariot'. During this the African participants continue with this song only, and begin singing in harmony, going through all the verses.

The atmosphere changes in the room, becomes solemn and passionate. One lady adds a descant improvisation. All of the children recognise the seriousness and sit transfixed, joining in on the chorus. Several singers close their eyes. Mary takes a background role, adding keyboard chords softly in the background.

Other songs are sung, all the babies are enjoying it, waving arms, with a particular one-month-old baby babbling to the singing. Everyone smiles broadly at her. For the last half hour, Mary invites people to share their 'own' songs. One lady with some encouragement

(continues)

takes out her phone and gets up a tune from Georgia. She plays it softly in the background and sings over it. She has a powerful voice and commands everyone's attention. She has very little English and afterwards her friend translates to us that it is a popular love song in Georgia.

Two more women share songs, one from Zimbabwe and the other from Nigeria. One child then shares 'Mary Had a Little Lamb'. All listen to each in turn in between toddlers playing, babies feeding and some people coming and going. As Mary packs up to leave, there are several adults and children who do not leave.

They remain talking and in between the chats, they hum, sing and clap; lingering on in the space.

(Emo, fieldnotes, 10/3/19)

As is evident in the fieldnotes, there is a distinct immersion in communal singing at this singing session which facilitated a sense of belonging and created a temporary community that the singers were happy to prolong even after the choral facilitator had left.

The project was set up to be intergenerational, specifically targeting Direct Provision centres that housed families. Half of the singing groups remained intergenerational for the project duration. The other half made up one singing group of children only, one with adults only, and in another centre the choral facilitator decided to split the singing sessions into children and adult-only groups on the same visit. In this way, the project developed in ways to respond to local need and interest. This required significant flexibility on the part of the facilitators. From a gender perspective, where the sessions were intergenerational, the participation from the adults was female dominant. This could be explained by women taking on traditional carer roles, as well as many single-mothers who came with their children to the sessions. It is also possible that there were cultural reasons for the low take-up by men within intergenerational sessions. Adult-only sessions were more popular amongst men.

"I sing, because it makes me less scared....

it feels calm."

(girl, 11)

"Singing makes me feel happy and free"

(Male, 30, Zimbabwe)

"I like the music here because I like to learn new things"

(boy, 8).



The ages of the singing session participants ranged widely from babies a couple of months old up to adults in their 50s. Of particular note though was a lack of engagement from teenagers in the centres.

One facilitator explained, "In order to keep the kids engaged and focused during the workshop, I felt the need to keep the workshop high-energy but low level (musically)...to keep everyone together and unified during the session, the kids level seems to dominate... I would want to attend a course/class that is tailored to my level" (CF 4, 20/2/19).

Group and Solo Singing

In all the observational data, the singing sessions promoted social interaction through group singing activities and through the physical set up of the space. For example, the atmosphere created by the facilitators was relaxed and informal. Chairs were always placed in a circle or semi-circle. Musical warm-ups and games were used at the start of all sessions to help achieve group cohesion, encourage participation and ensure the singers felt comfortable in the space. This was not always easy to accomplish due to particular centre circumstances such as inappropriate or shared rooms (for example, in one centre the room designated for the singing sessions was also a small shop area), changing of rooms frequently, heating difficulties, occupied rooms (hairdressing/barbering occurred frequently in the same room in one centre), playground furniture, snooker tables and/or televisions in the same space etc.

Where the sessions were large (20-30 people), the singing sessions were intergenerational and focussed on group singing activities. The choice of repertoire was an important aspect of these sessions. The facilitators across the centres chose songs that focussed on call and response, canon, 2/3-part singing, chanting, scat, as well as songs with actions and/or movement. In this way, the content was tailored to suit a broad range of ages and abilities,

the focus being on musical participation and fun. Further to this, often the adult singers broke into harmony during the singing spontaneously and without prompt. As one facilitator remarked, "it was second nature to them" (CF2, 14/1/19).



The facilitators also left frequent opportunities within these sessions for group and individual choices of repertoire. For instance, popular songs

were regularly sung at the sessions as well as gospel songs (particularly from groups of singers that also attend church services). In many of the centres the adult singers expressed a distinct desire to learn songs in the Irish language. A choral facilitator noted, "I taught them the word 'Fáilte' and they were just great. It developed naturally from here into me doing Sue Furlong's 'Fáilte Isteach', sections of it, using scat syllables and then put words on it" (CF2 7/1/19). This song, 'Fáilte Isteach' ended up being one of the performance pieces for the 'Big Sing' months later. Furthermore, the children in the singing sessions often brought with them songs they learned at school to share. Interestingly, the songs shared were both in the English and Irish language, with no obvious preference given to either language, the below fieldnotes give some insight into this.

Two girls stand up and sing a part of the Irish folk song 'Raglan Road' which they said they learned in school, one girl then sings 'Ireland's Call' and the other children join in. One boy stands up and sings part of the pop song 'Shotgun'. The facilitator starts to accompany them on guitar, following their lead. One of the boys who was sitting out then starts to sing (there is some initial laughter but then it quietens as he closes his eyes), "It's been a long day without you my friend and I'll tell you all about it when I see you again" from the song 'See you Again'. Two girls follow up with the 'Hócaí Pocaí' in Irish.

(Monaghan, fieldnotes, 12/3/19)

As seen above, the facilitator takes a participant-led approach here, opening up the space for musical agency and supporting in subtle ways (through guitar accompaniment and encouragement). It is particularly interesting to note the varied nature of genre and musical styles sung here, the children weaving both school-taught and self-taught songs together with ease and fluidity, seemingly as the mood takes them. The effortless transition in language from English to Irish through song is also notable considering neither language is spoken as the first language amongst their families at the centres.

The smaller adult-only singing sessions at two of the centres developed organically to focus on song-writing and musical skill development. The project did not set out to involve song-writing, rather this development came about because of a small turn-out in particular

centres and so the facilitators capitalised on individual creative interests in these cases, as seen in the below example from a choral facilitator's reflections.

Julie got up from where she was sitting and went to the keyboard – she started playing some chord sequences that repeated and began to sing. It was lovely to see how she came into her own, getting lost in the music and the words. I discovered when she was finished that this was a piece she had written herself titled 'As long as you Leave' and she had included her own language alongside the English lyrics. When I discovered the chord sequence I asked her if she would like me to continue to play and she would sing, so we did this. Addo left the room for a few minutes and then returned with a ukulele – I gave him the four chords and we all played and Julie sang. Nadir then turned the poof he was sitting on upside down and used it as a drum. (CF2, 7/1/19)

As revealed in these notes, the content of the session came from within the group with the facilitator guiding and supporting as needed and/or wanted. This facilitator also wrote of the opportunity small group sessions provided to build close relationships with the singers, to learn about them, share stories and build up collaborative creative work together. Furthermore, it allowed instrumental skills to be developed and harnessed within these smaller groups, going beyond the





"I was feeling down
today, then I came to
this event and I feel
much better"

(Male, 41, Pakistan)

original singing focus of the project. For example, in one of the small adult groups, a guitar player wrote and performed original pieces as part of the project and in another centre this also happened for a pianist. Both ended up performing these pieces for the 'Big Sing' event.

When numbers were small in some sessions the facilitators also used the time to work with individuals on musical skills such as breathing techniques, lyric writing and chord playing/accompaniment. For instance, one facilitator noted:

I asked Safina what she would like to do and she told me she wanted to improve her singing voice. She does a lot of singing in her church choir. I got her singing one of her hymns and did some technical work with her. Her voice really opened up and sounded fantastic by the end. (CF4, 3/4/19)

In this way, the facilitators worked with the needs of particular individuals and groups as they presented themselves within the singing sessions. Where there were small numbers, the time was used to build skills and relationships, and so was deemed as successful as the larger group singing experiences.

Structures and Supports

As with any music project, 'Song Seeking' was carried out within a certain social, political, cultural and economic context and more specifically within a system of Direct Provision. This system is highly contentious within Irish society and so the project was subject to its many institutionalised structures and consequences of such. For instance, people were often 'moved' from centres, and the choral facilitators were surprised to find an enthusiastic singer missing at a next session without notice. This did not just effect the facilitators of course, but the other singers too, as noted in a journal here:

The girls are all a bit down today. Two of the children are moving to Portlaoise today. The others are happy for them but will miss them and maybe are a bit envious. The girls are best friends. One child (12 years) told me that she's been there for 8 years and was in Ballyhaunis before that. Her sister was born in Clon 8 years ago and they have a younger sister also. We sang some of our favourites. (CF3, 25/5/19)

The effects of large numbers of people living communally impacted the project in various ways. For example, in one centre a chicken pox outbreak meant the project had to stop for a couple of months and so participation fell when it lost momentum. In another, a committed singer was struck over the head with a mug during a mealtime, and so did not show for several weeks due to an embarrassment of visible stitches on his head. It was also explained by one of the singers that within the centres, “some people keep to themselves, others take part in activities”. Very often the singers spoke of personal trauma that they and others were dealing with all the time and how this affected levels of participation week to week. It emerged that some used the musical opportunity as a form of coping and resilience, while others were unable to participate at all.

Support for the project within the DP centres proved to be both an enabler and barrier to its development. Firstly, while management within the centres were welcoming to the project initially, there was often little support session to session. This was evident in ways such as a lack of flyers up on notice boards, poor communication about residents being away on trips, as well as issues with room allocation for example. In some centres, local support groups or liaison organisations proved invaluable to connect choral facilitators to key individuals within the centres, as well as offer advice and support to promote participation.

**“When someone
sings, you want to go
sing with them”**
(Male, 22, Yemen).

Furthermore, these local stakeholders were key to organising the SingIn events (see section 2.2). However, the evidence from the data highlighted that even more important to this level of support was where leaders emerged from amongst the singers themselves. Where this occurred, the level of participation amongst residents was high. The reasons attributed to this was that these key individuals were very active from ‘the inside’ in promoting the singing sessions. This involved setting up WhatsApp groups to provide notifications of sessions, maintaining regular contact with the choral facilitator, assigning other leaders to organise when they were absent, ensuring the room was set up for the sessions, as well as distributing flyers (when management failed to do so).

The centres that has this level of ‘inside’ leadership for the project had very high levels of engagement and satisfaction from both singers and choral facilitators alike.



"I got to meet new people and join them in expressing a love of music"

(Male, 20, Nigeria)

2.2 The SingIns

The aim of the SingIn events was to link 'inside communities' living within Direct Provision centres to 'outside communities' living in the surrounding areas. In this way, the project sought integration opportunities beyond the Direct Provision system; recognising the inherently social aspects of group singing (Ahlquist, 2006; Bithell, 2014; Kenny, 2016; Parker, 2020; Phelan, 2017). In addition, the SingIn events were set up (where possible) to have the singers within Direct Provision act as 'hosts' to other singing communities, inviting people from local areas to sing together. Symbolically, this was an important part of the project in order to disrupt the idea of a 'host country' as well as broaden awareness of all people living in local communities.

In total, 5 SingIn events were held during the months of April and May 2019. It involved approximately 200 singers and the age profile was recorded as ranging from a one-week old baby up to 82 years of age. Interest from local choirs and singing groups was significant, so much so that numbers had to be limited in order to fit into allocated spaces. It was clear

that there is a great appetite for musical integration opportunities such as these within Irish society. The events typically involved action songs and shared songs that could be learned quickly, as well as the different singing groups performing for each other. The boxes below record singing groups involved (individuals outside of these groups also joined) as well as Local Authority support received for these events.

SingIn Guests

Aspiro Youth Choir
Limerick Gospel Choir
Melotonics
Newbridge Chamber Choir
Portlaoise Contemporary Choir
U3A

Local Authority support

Dublin City Arts Office
Laois Arts Office
Limerick Arts Office
Kildare Arts Office
Monaghan Arts Office

One centre did not host a SingIn event which highlighted starkly the macro context of the Direct Provision system that the project was nestled within. Following quite public protests at the centre, various social events were restricted; the SingIn event was one of those impeded from proceeding. This also meant that there was no enthusiasm amongst the singers to host it outside the centre either with energies focussed on broader political issues and tensions following the protests.

Data was collected from adults who attended the 5 SingIns through surveys. 86 surveys were completed - 66 from the 'outside singers' and 20 from the 'inside singers'. Findings are presented here from both the 'inside singers' (those living within Direct Provision centres) and 'outside singers' (those living in surrounding areas).

'Inside Singers'

The social aspect of singing together was extended through a tea/snack break halfway through the gatherings. This aided the inside singers to be 'hosts', not just through the physical act of inviting people into their living spaces, but also by offering food and drink. All of the singers noted the opportunity afforded to them to meet new people through the SingIn event, for example:

"It was lovely meeting with many people, hearing different voices"
(Female, 27, Albania)

"I got the opportunity to meet new people and talk to them" (Male, 32,
Ghana)

The singers noted the SingIns as distinctly musical and enjoyed the shared love of singing amongst all singers at the events, as evidenced here:

"I got to meet new people and join them in expressing a love of music"
(Male, 20, Nigeria)

"Music gives me joy, it makes me smile" (Female, 39, Nigeria)

This group singing experience as a joyous one was also to be observed at all SingIn events. As revealed in a fieldnote extract below, through song, the groups were enabled to mix with a shared sense of purpose that was fun and crossed age, race, class, gender, religion and culture. There was much laughter and energy throughout, with songs from Ireland and further afield shared equally in an open manner:

After the break Dónal does some more warm-ups with the group before moving onto other songs, one of the older women from the visiting choir is laughing with a female teenager from the DP centre as they both mix-up the actions for the warm-up. The children from the DP centre sing a song they had practised in the workshop for the others and teach the actions and words to all in the room. Everyone then sings 'You are my Sunshine' together and a woman from the DP centre with a baby who had been sitting outside the circle stands up, moves to the circle and sings it with the others while rocking her baby. Three young girls from the DP centre finish the session by standing in the centre of the circle and sing a Xhosa song and a part of 'Raglan Road'. Everyone helps each other to clear up the chairs and the refreshments at the end. A woman from the visiting choir and a woman from the DP centre clean up a spill on the floor together. (Monaghan, fieldnotes, 21/5/19)

The 'inside singers' overwhelmingly noted the link between the SingIn events and their emotional wellbeing. This was something that was particular to the findings for the singers living within the Direct Provision system. They recorded:

"I was feeling down today, then I came to this event and I feel much better" (Male, 41, Pakistan)

"Singing makes me stop thinking too much" (Female, 20, Malawi)

"It gives a chance to alleviate the boredom of here" (Male, 20, Nigeria)

"Singing makes me feel happy and free" (Male, 30, Zimbabwe)

For some, the event also evoked positive memories of 'back home' as they recalled previous group singing experiences. One lady related:

"I enjoyed because it just brought out all the memories when I used to sing in a group back home, I used to feel great" (Female, 32, Malawi)

'Outside Singers'

There was huge interest from local choirs, singing groups and individual singers at the SingIn events. Further to this, Local Authority Arts Offices helped to identify groups to invite as well as provided some financial support. This ensured local 'buy in' as well as making important connections to other types of support for DP centres in local communities alongside 'Song Seeking'.

For an overwhelming majority of the 'outside singers', the event marked their first time visiting a DP centre and so this was described as 'eye-opening' for many. The events therefore did raise awareness of Direct Provision within Irish society but more importantly, facilitated people to make new connections, as seen in some of the quotations here:

"It was a new experience and I enjoyed meeting the new Irish" (Female, 79, Irish)

"Participative, integrative, breaking barriers, broadening horizons, seeing the DP Centre. Meaning!" (Female, 41, Irish)

“Met a beautiful group of people, a privilege to be part of such an amazing evening” (Female, 40, Irish)

In a similar fashion to the ‘inside singers’, it was also noted the distinctive musical element to the SingIn events. Again, a shared passion for music and particularly singing was what drew people together, with particular emphasis being made about music as a form of language itself. Singing then was seen to be a way to find commonality amongst the singers and clearly alleviated apprehensions about potential language barriers, as revealed here:

“Fab initiative for me and my children. Keep bringing people together to share the language of music” (Female, 45, Irish)

“It was wonderful to get with a group where the common language is music and singing” (Female, 49, Irish)

Many of the singers noted the fun and relaxed atmosphere created at the events, and indeed this was also very apparent in the observations. They also noted the warm open manner in which they were welcomed into the centres to sing. However, words such as ‘emotional’ and ‘inspiring’ were also to be found in the surveys, revealing the actual context they were singing within to not be far from their minds. When asked if they would like to attend more workshops like this, the overwhelming response was ‘yes’. Suggestions for ways to make it better were invariably answered with ‘invite more people’ and ‘advertise’. The workshop set up, structure and content were highly praised by the visiting singers in the surveys. It was clear more events such as these would be warmly welcomed.

2.3 The Composer sessions

Dr Seán Doherty was commissioned as part of the Song Seeking project to deliver composition workshops with the singers involved and subsequently write a new choral commission informed through this work. The new work resulted in the 'Song Seeking Songbook' (published alongside this report), an openly accessible choral resource for facilitators and singing groups. This section draws from a reflective log kept by Seán as well as recorded professional development workshops to provide snapshots of his journey on this project. Insights into the process of developing the new work, as well as the product of the Songbook itself, are presented here.

The Process

The composer visited all 6 Direct Provision centres involved to deliver a workshop session in each. As noted in earlier sections, each centre and singing group was different and so no session was ever a repeat of another. Rather, the composer had to respond to the needs and particularities of each group and place. This place-based and process-centred approach represented a new departure for Seán, as he noted in his log:

"This will be a major departure from my normal 'output-centred' way of working. This project will necessarily focus on the 'process'" (29/11/ 2018)

In this way, the commission's output – the 'Song Seeking Songbook' – was heavily influenced by Seán actually visiting the DP centres, interacting and working with the singers there. He further explained after all visits were complete:

"Normally what I do as a composer is that the phone rings, there's a commission, I discuss with the conductor or performing group what they want, what they hope to achieve from it. I go away for a few months and then I give the commission as a finished product. Maybe there's a few errata but it's a finished product. I go to the premiere, take a bow, that's it, job done. This is the diametric opposite of that." (9/5/19)

In a similar vein to the choral facilitators, Seán drew upon the interests and skills of each group he encountered to guide the content of the sessions. In some centres this meant

allowing individuals to play and/or sing through musical pieces which were then worked through with further improvisation and musical skills-based development. In other centres, with larger numbers, the focus was on communal singing, movement and improvisation. For example, the action song 'Throw, Catch' has some words in Xhosa and it was found that many singers responded very well to this piece, as reported here:

"I did this in a few of the Direct Provision centres, and this kind of shows everything that I've looked at it, it kind of confirmed for me what is successful and what's not successful in a piece....They loved that, 'Jikeleza' means 'turn around'. We were doing the actions and everything and it made complete sense. Simple English with a macaronic text, predictable harmonies, chord of G, chord of C, chord of G, chord of D, repeated rhythms, short regular phrases, four bar phrases with repeats, and then interesting rhythms, and it can be performed in canon...it's fun as well."
(9/5/19)

From the extract above, it is clear that the composer drew upon 'what worked' in the sessions to develop the new commissioned work. Not only was he focussed on the musically successful characteristics to inform his pieces, but also to how the singers reacted physically, emotionally and socially. This attention to how people had an embodied response to singing and music was notable within Seán's log, as seen in the example below:

"The women began to sing, dance and improvise themselves and they got me to bang out an ostinato rhythm on a chair. The babes in arms were passed from one women to another as they danced and sang and harmonised and improvised. An amazing experience...They really responded well to this with dancing, laughing and having a great time. The children were singing long after it ended." (24/2/19)

It was not just the singers who responded in this way, with Seán himself also relating how working in the centres was an 'affecting experience'. He noted in his log how people's shared stories, as well as the stark context of the centres themselves, were difficult emotionally but also heightened his self-awareness of privilege. He writes:

"A boy who had been singing beside me...called me down to his height and asked, completely earnestly and quietly so that many wouldn't hear, 'are you rich?' and that broke my heart into pieces." (24/2/19)

The Product

The Direct Provision context directly influenced the content of the commissioned songbook but also the approach taken to writing the new work. From the outset, there was an explicit aim of avoiding cultural appropriation. Seán explains:

"There is a neo-colonial attitude which I want to distance myself from and ideally problematise and dismantle in my music...having text solely in English and/or Irish would display an agenda that is hostile to the vibrant cultures of the asylum seekers." (29/11/ 2018)

Language therefore required much consideration for the final Song Seeking Songbook. Seán relates:

"I settled on having a macaronic text and this is the balance that I was trying to use in each of the pieces. Words have to be poetic, not completely deadeningly literal, but again, not too abstract as to be unintelligible. They had to have definite concrete meaning, they had to be fun as well as... These people have come through a very traumatic experience. I don't want to trigger anything, that would be unethical to do, all the pieces have to be light, fun, uplifting. It has to be uplifting but not frivolous and not trauma-related. I want the lyrics to be thought-provoking but not sober. So it's a very fine balance." (9/5/19)

After much deliberation about language, it was decided that the Song Seeking Songbook would have a macaronic text – that is a text which combines two languages. One of the choral facilitators during a composer session spoke about the Ubuntu philosophy. With its roots in humanism, the word ubuntu is part of the Zulu proverb "Umuntu ngumuntu ngabantu", which translates as "a person is a person through other people". In simple terms, it is a concept of common humanity or oneness. Seán felt this immediately resonated with the

Irish concept of Meitheal (an Irish term for a team/gang which stems from a tradition of the co-operative labour system in rural farming communities). Inspired by this, the Songbook combines English words with Ubuntu inspired texts from several African languages and traditions. Seán relates:

“There’s no choir of a single person. You have to come together and blend voices going from individual to group singing so everyone depends on each other.” (9/5/19)

The last piece written in the Songbook, ‘Broken Heart’, has no text. This piece was composed by one of the participants on the Song Seeking Project on guitar. Seán then arranged it for inclusion in the Songbook and explains:

“I couldn’t approach this traumatic subject with text. I thought it better to leave untexted and let the music speak for itself. And again, I don’t want words of another person’s trauma coming from my mouth.” (9/5/19)

The main musical principles threaded throughout the Songbook are:

1. teaching and learning by ear,
2. flexible scoring (to allow for creative approaches),
3. low difficulty level (aiding a sense of achievement quickly) and
4. ample room for self-expression and improvisation.

In order to facilitate these principles, as well as including shared musical features common across many cultures, the composer employed the following musical techniques in the compositions:

- | | | |
|-----------------------------|---------------------------|---------------------------|
| • Short, regular phrases | • Cheironomy (use of | • Flexible scoring |
| • Predictable harmonies | hand gestures to direct) | through use of invertible |
| • Call and response | • Use of pentatonic scale | counterpoint |
| • Layering | • Repeated rhythms | • Open to performing in |
| • Lining out (leader sings, | • Limited vocal range | canon/part-singing |
| everyone sings it back) | | |



The principles and techniques employed also speak to the function of the pieces to be learning vehicles for singers and singing leaders. Each piece can be adapted to increase or decrease the musical challenges and skills required. Hence, the pedagogical focus of the Songbook was very much intentional:

“So it’s not a case of taking your score, going off learning it, coming back and performing it. All the pieces were written to include this learning element to it...There’s a pedagogical aim for this project as well so that there is a melody, yes, but then the melody can be done in call and response, echo form and then move on to independent part singing through the use of canon, and then after that, it can be just independent part-singing, but I want that pedagogical process to be able to be applied to each one of the pieces.” (9/5/19)

The Big Sing facilitated an opportunity to learn and perform the pieces ‘on the day’, thus this experience for the choral facilitators, singers and composer aided a refinement of the Songbook to completion.

2.4 The Big Sing

On the 9th June 2019, 6 singing groups, representing 6 Direct Provision centres, shared a celebration of their journey on the Song Seeking Project in the National Concert Hall. The Singers came with their choral facilitators and were joined on the day by community choirs and singers from all over Ireland as well as guest performers, Citadel and the Rathfarnham Ukulele Group. There were 411 in the audience with an extra 70 performing from the stage bringing to a total of 481 people who participated on the day.

The Big Sing event was organised in such a way as to encourage musical participation for all in a non-threatening manner. For instance, the emphasis was not on performances per se but rather on shared singing, much of which was learned on the day. Thus, the event was organised in two parts. The morning sessions were closed to the singing groups and choral facilitators to rehearse with professional accompaniment, as well as to workshop four of the composer's commissioned pieces. This time also allowed both the choral facilitators and singing groups to become accustomed to singing from a big stage. The afternoon was then open to the public and the musical programme is laid out in the table below. The event was emceed by Taby Ruigu and Philip McKinley.

As seen from the musical programme, the event encouraged singing from both performers and audience alike, with each choral facilitator leading this from the stage. The newly composed pieces were also presented as 'work in progress', workshopped on stage and again, allowing both performers and singers to join together in the learning and singing. As well as this, individual opportunities were given to both solo singers and instrumentalists from the DP centres who wished to share in this way. Three of the pieces were composed by the participants themselves, worked on within the singing sessions, and then performed on the National Concert Hall stage. This was a significant feature of the event. Furthermore, the programme ensured a diversity of content in languages presented but also in musical genre, ranging from traditional to contemporary popular music choices. The programme was a collaborative endeavour, put together by the choral facilitators and singers depending on their strengths and preferences. The event attracted media attention from RTÉ News, as well as an article in the Sunday Business Post (see appendix for all media links).

Big Sing Programme

Title	Composer/Arranger	Performers	Conductor
Fáilte Isteach	Sue Furlong	Everyone!	Mary Amond O'Brien
Siyahamba	Andries Van Tonder	Knockalisheen Singers & Limerick Gospel Choir	David Idioh
Jailer	Asa	Teddy Davinchy (Knockalisheen)	
Masakhane!	Seán Doherty	Everyone!	David Idioh
As Long as you Leave	Trish Caroline	Newbridge and Emo Singers	Mary Amond O'Brien
Broken Heart	Fadi Mohammed	Guitar: Fadi Mohammed Singer: Trish Caroline (Newbridge)	
Motho ke motho ka	Seán Doherty	Everyone!	Mary Amond O'Brien
Senzeni Na	Trad.	Newbridge and Emo Singers	Mary Amond O'Brien
Deep Down In My Soul	Trad. arr. Gitika Partington	Newbridge and Emo Singers	Mary Amond O'Brien
Skye Boat Song	Arr. Kevin Stannard	Clonakilty Singers	Maria Judge
Khuluma istintu	Seán Doherty	Everyone!	Maria Judge
Guest performance by Citadel			
Guantanamo	Trad. melody with original lyrics composed by the singers of St Patrick's	St Patrick's Singers	Dónal Kearney
Journey	Cherinet Ayele Dalebo	Piano: Cherinet Ayele Dalebo (Hatch Hall)	
Kali kokh	Seán Doherty	Everyone!	Dónal Kearney
The Lion Sleeps Tonight	Lyrics & Revised Music by G.D. Weiss, H Peretti, & L. Creatore. Arr. Jeff Funk	Everyone!	Mary Amond O'Brien

Hearing





"I sing, whenever I'm bored, I sing, and then it makes me feel a little better. It makes me feel good".

(girl, 13)

Hearing

3.1 Hearing the Singers

Individual and focus group interviews were carried out at each DP centre during the project. In total, 27 people participated in these interviews – 13 adults and 14 children. Every effort was made to include a good representative spread of nationalities, age and gender at interview. Furthermore, testimonials were sought post-performance at the National Concert Hall and these are also presented in this section.

To preserve anonymity, the interview data does not include names or the DP centre they reside in but instead relates information on the singers' gender, age and nationality. A decision was taken not to include the children's nationality. This is due to the fact that many of the children were actually born in Ireland but as well as this, even where this was not the case, the children often were explicit about holding multiple identities – identifying both as Irish alongside other nationalities related to their parents or carers.

Musical Engagement

In each centre, there was no existing facilitated musical activities outside of the project. Past activities were mentioned such as a recorder class, community music workshops and some instrumental tuition but these invariably appeared to be short-term and it was unclear as to why or when they ceased. Outside of the Song Seeking project, some of the adults spoke of informal singing experiences at events and parties at the centres, while others spoke of playing instruments and/or singing alone in their rooms. One woman interviewed sang with a band outside of the DP centre. The children mentioned school music occasionally at interview, noting school choir involvement, assembly singing, Music Generation projects and in-class singing. Some children also had instrumental experience from school in the form of tin whistles, guitars and ukuleles. One girl mentioned a concertina she played at school.

When asked about music 'from home', it transpired that both the adults and children alike engaged with nationally and culturally specific music as a means to ignite memories but also to maintain a connection to a certain identity, as noted here:

"My traditional music, it humbles me...it kind of reminds me of who I am, where you are coming from, who I am...my culture." (Female, 29, Zimbabwe)

"We listen to certain songs that remind you of a certain time, childhood." (Female, 40, Nigeria)

"When you listen to music from your country... it's got its own message, you know? Which relates to you. If they play a song from home, I can relate to it because I understand it better than others." (Male, 30, Zimbabwe)

"I listen so I don't forget my culture and what it used to be like there." (boy, 11)

As well as these particular musical connections, the adults also revealed an eclectic mix of musical tastes, including jazz, gospel, pop, hip-hop, classical, R&B, rock, country western, afrobeat, as well as traditional music from where they came from. The children were more limited in their musical genre preferences citing popular artists such as Taylor Swift, Katy Perry, George Ezra and Ariana Grande as frequent favourites.

However, the children did also reference 'church songs' or gospel songs related to their worship activities as well as traditional music being listened to with their families. The main means of accessing music to listen to was through phones, tablets and the radio, with YouTube cited consistently as the main platform to access music. Occasionally an adult interviewed mentioned Spotify.

Singing with the Project

Repeatedly, those interviewed reflected on the sense of community and togetherness the Song Seeking project enabled. Apart from the dining halls, there appeared to be few opportunities at the centres for residents to come together in structured ways, with a particular focus. Some of the issues in this regard are revealed here:

"I like people coming together and like the kids playing. Sometimes we joke, then we're serious, and we sing. I love everything about it." (Male, 30, Nigeria)

"When someone sings, you want to go sing with them." (Male, 22, Yemen)

"Bringing people together and getting them to do what they love doing, which is singing...it is nice for the people." (Male, 25, Nigeria)

Many of the adults spoke about the singing sessions being a new experience for them, or that they had not sung with a group since childhood. The children too spoke of it as a new experience, but in contrast to the adults, they spoke about the 'newness' in terms of learning, stating, for example:

"I like to learn songs, new songs that I don't know. And I want to know all country songs." (girl, 10)

"I like the music here because I like to learn new things." (boy, 8)

The fact that the project existed within Direct Provision centres was never far from the minds of the adults interviewed and they spoke frequently about how important Song Seeking was for them in this very distinct context. As well as facilitating feelings of belonging amongst a group, the importance of singing with others was also noted as individually beneficial to cope with the realities of living in a Direct Provision centre, as commented on here:

"When you are secluded from a group of people, like being secluded from society, if you come into this group music workshop, I think it's kind of good to relax and go along with the flow. It improves our overall wellbeing." (Male, 25, Nigeria)

"A lot of things are going on here, like mentally. Music, it gives you strength." (Male, 30, Nigeria)



"It's good. Mentally, I think it's good. Sometimes, like when you live in this space, sometimes you see a situation where there are bad things in people's life or you see maybe somebody got a letter....the next thing you do, you try to look for something that will occupy your mind. Like for me, most times, I just go back to my music." (Female, 41, Nigeria)

Frequently the adults interviewed discussed the singing sessions as a means to, 'keep them busy' and alleviate the boredom of living within Direct Provision. As well as this, they constantly linked singing with the project with improving their mental health and wellbeing, as some of these comments reveal:

"It cools down my brain, it makes me happy." (Female, 29, Zimbabwe)

"Music; it's like medicine." (Male, 30, Nigeria)

"The most important part about music for me - it heals."
(Female, 20, Zimbabwe)

"It frees your mind." (Male, 30, Zimbabwe)

Interestingly, this link to singing and overall wellbeing was not distinct to the adults. The children too spoke of the power of singing and music to enhance their mood, build resilience and act as a coping mechanism within their lives. Some examples here illustrate this:

"I sing, whenever I'm bored, I sing, and then it makes me feel a little better. It makes me feel good." (girl, 13)

"I sing, because it makes me less scared....it feels calm." (girl, 11)

"It inspires, music makes me feel good." (girl, 8)

"It makes me feel not alone." (boy, 10).

With regard to suggestions for future music projects, some mentioned encouraging people to bring their own style of music into workshops more and asking participants to lead repertoire choices. There were conflicting views about the intergenerational aspect of the project. Some were satisfied with this and enjoyed it. Furthermore, it provided access to music workshops for many women who could not otherwise go due to care commitments. However, there were others who had a preference for splitting the workshops into adult-only and child-only groups. All interviewed were especially pleased with the SingIns and would welcome more opportunities to connect with local communities in this way.



"I got the opportunity
to meet new people
and talk to them"

(Male, 32, Ghana)



Singing on Stage

There was huge excitement at the Big Sing in the NCH and the singers felt enormous pride in being invited to perform there. The significance of such a marginalised community of people performing in a national centre of excellence was well recognised by the singers. The opportunity to leave the DP centres, with travel provided, to explore a new part of the country, was also welcomed. Furthermore, the event acted as a vehicle for people living in DP centres across the country to communicate, connect and network with each other. They repeatedly referenced the friendly and welcoming atmosphere at the event. The media attention on the day was also a source of great delight and pride. Following the event, short testimonials were sought to ascertain the significance of the performance event for individuals. A selection of those testimonials are presented here:

“It was amazing coming to the national concert hall. Enjoyed the trip to and fro. It was a great outing and a relaxing day for me. I was glad to see the inclusion and participation. There was a vibrant atmosphere with friendly people. The performance was very important as it was like an achievement.” (Female, 35, Swaziland)



“Getting to practice and perform with persons I had never met prior to the day - folks from other DP Centres - was spectacular. We harmonised and even held discussions during lunch and other parts of the programme. I got interviewed by a reporter and then RTÉ broadcast it. Epic. Music is life and soul for me. Having to share the stage with others who shared the same spirit was a beautiful episode. I believe - for so I have come to experience - that the song-seeking project acted as a crucial medium in rekindling life and meaning to what was the hope-short marrow of the asylum seekers who took part, the event at the end acting as the cement, as it brought about integration - non-Irish and Irish coming together for a goal, a mutual feeling. Simply magnificent!” (Male, 20, Nigeria)

“The concert was a good experience for me and I liked that we all worked as a team. Watching young kids performing was breathtaking, if possible I would like to do it again next year.” (Female, 32, Zimbabwe)

"Music gives me joy, it
makes me smile"

(Female, 39, Nigeria)



"I was really excited. I played my own composition and I have never played this composition before. The people found the composition fabulous and that gave me a confidence, hope and strength. It was very important to us as we are asylum seekers. It gave us a chance to show our talents. It gave us a chance to have a connection with other people, to have a stage." (Male, 22, Ethiopia)

"Everything was good, the people they were all friendly. They welcomed us with a good smile, I really had fun and my son too." (Female, 32, Nigeria)

"It was my first time to stand on stage and to sing with different people. I would like to do it again." (Female, 20, Malawi)

3.2 Hearing the Facilitators

Each of the four choral facilitators maintained a reflective log throughout the project in order to capture their thoughts and learnings over a sustained period. As well as this, the conversations during the professional development workshops at MIC were recorded and transcribed to document group discussions and draw out key issues from these gatherings. Both the individual and group data are presented in this section. To ensure anonymity, the choral facilitators are identified by number only (CF1, CF2, CF3, CF4).

New Ways of Working

The four choral facilitators involved in the Song Seeking project were professionally well established and had a wealth of varied choral leadership experience to draw from. However, working in the context of asylum seeker accommodation settings was new to them. There was some apprehension therefore at the start of the project but more significantly, the facilitators described it in terms of an 'exciting opportunity', 'a blank canvas' and a 'new direction'.

From the data gathered, as well as informal conversations with the facilitators, it became clear that the most important approach to the project was a flexible one. Such aspects of starting singing sessions on time, having a clear sequence of development, pre-prepared repertoire and sustaining the same group were difficult to maintain in a Direct Provision context. Therefore, the facilitators were continuously adjusting expectations and negotiating their regular facilitation practices in response to the situation in front of them. Choral facilitator 2 and 4 explained:

I had to let go of my expectations and allow things to happen organically and in their own time....trusting my gut and trusting them to guide me too! (CF2, 10/6/19)

In hindsight, I didn't need to be so structured with the timings and the structure of the sessions...It wasn't really important that the sessions started on time. What was important that there was something musical happening for the residents. (CF4, 30/4/19)

All of the facilitators noted in their logs the need for responsive facilitation in their sessions – where they played to the singers' interests and strengths to encourage participation and

meaningful engagement. This was often dependent on the age range and size of the group but typically involved singers choosing repertoire, playing instruments alongside or instead of singing, using more musical games than songs, and/or sessions taking a song writing focus. The log extracts from one facilitator provide an example here:

At some point, one of the young kids was restless and playing around with his friend and causing a little distraction. So I asked him to choose a song he would like to do. He chose a song 'Shotgun', the other boys liked the choice and wanted to do it too. So we listened to it on YouTube together and agreed that next time we would meet and practice it well. We then listened to a song suggested by another teenage girl from 'The Greatest Showman'. It was easy for everyone because we all knew it, so we decided to sing along with the YouTube version and I played the keyboard with them. (CF1, 9/2/19)

We had new people from the Centre join us...a young man in his early 30s who was playing at the snooker table....he came up to us and he said he was a drummer and he would play the drum with us, not sing. I said he was more than welcome to. (CF1, 16/2/19)





While the facilitators adopted flexible and responsive ways of working (as seen above) to suit the context and singers, this was not always an easy process for them. In particular, the reflective logs reveal some struggles the facilitators had with managing expectations, children's behaviour, punctuality, poor attendance and intergenerational groups. Over the time-period then, the facilitators were negotiating new ways of working on their own practice that was actively involving the singers in the process. This often challenged their previous experiences and knowledge of learning relationships and choral facilitation.

One choral facilitator spoke of the transformative effect the project had on her practice and its influence on her other choral work. She provided a concrete example of this intersectional learning where she was able to connect with a South African song she was rehearsing with a different choir. Due to discussions with the singers in the DP centres, she was able to share a meaningful narrative about the song to another group of singers. She explains:

It made me realise that narrative is crucial to the interpretation – I could have easily avoided saying anything and it would have been easier for me to do this and get through rehearsal quickly but I am so glad I didn't – I'm also glad I didn't drop it from the programme as now the song means something greater than the mere notes and rhythms on the page. (CF2, 20/3/19)

This same facilitator also felt the project made her a more 'mindful facilitator, singer and teacher', noting:

The importance of meaningful music/singing experiences in everyday life...this project has really brought this more to the fore for me. (CF2, 20/3/19)

Relationships and Empathy

Working in DP centres deeply affected the facilitators. It is well documented that there are significantly high levels of mental health issues within DP centres including depression, post-traumatic stress disorder and anxiety (Bredin, Duffy, & Crumlish, 2016). Invariably as the facilitators built relationships with regular participants throughout the singing sessions,



stories and life experiences were shared, which sometimes were traumatic. Opening up such dialogic spaces with the project was ethically complex, but also demonstrated a very responsive mode of facilitation on the part of the choral facilitators as discussed previously. Particularly where the numbers attending were low, singing and talking went hand in hand. This was a testament to the safe spaces created in the singing sessions but also the hugely important social aspect of group singing. This was at times difficult for the facilitators emotionally of course, but the building of intercultural awareness and empathy was very strongly evident in the logs over time, as shown below:

I couldn't get X's story out of my head all the way home in the car...these are amazing people...While there was not much singing tonight, the time talking was very rewarding in many ways. It brought out the power of music to help cope when life is difficult.

(CF2, 20/1/19)

The girls are all a bit down. Two of the children are moving to Portlaoise today. The others are happy for them but will miss them and maybe are a bit envious. The girls are best friends. (CF3, 25/5/19)

(continues)

I probably will never be able to comprehend the experience of a person living in DP - I can develop skills and attitudes that respect those individuals; as well as anyone in a position of vulnerability. (CF4,10/11/18)

There were significant findings in relation to the development of relationships over time between the singers and facilitators. This was true for both the adults and children involved. One group demonstrated this feeling of community through coming up with their own name, 'The Musical Group of Trouble Makers in Wonderland' while others very overtly demonstrated it in physical ways, for example:

When X saw me, he ran towards me saying my name, it was so lovely to get this greeting. His mother told me later that he ran up to her to tell her I was there and to hurry up feeding his baby sister. (CF2, 10/3/19)

A mother of two girls in the group was in tears afterwards - said that she was very pleased to find a space to sing...as she misses that experience from home. (CF1, 11/5/19)

With regard to empathetic and culturally responsive ways of working through the building of relationships, one facilitator demonstrated this well after hearing about a cyclone in parts of the world where many of her group of singers came from:

I heard about Cyclone Idai on the radio today – it has devastated areas in South Africa, Zimbabwe, Mozambique and Malawi, place names that immediately brought to mind some of the singers. It made me realise that unless we have a connection to these places or know people from those countries that it is so easy for us to just let it in one ear and out the other. I sent a text to both groups telling them I was thinking of them and their fellow residents. (CF2, 20/3/19)

Similarly, another facilitator wrote reflectively of how affecting the SingIn was in this regard:

We sang a South-African song 'Siyamba'. It was magical because as the local city choir started singing some of the residents could recognise and identify with the words of the song and sang along. A teenager said she knew the meaning of the song, she explained to

(continues)

us. It was very exciting to hear the harmonious sound from everyone, I played the djembe (African Drum) and we all sang along. (CF1, 11/5/19)

These extracts demonstrate again the importance of connecting with the group of people the facilitators were working with – it was clear that the facilitators were repeatedly making meaning from the project that went beyond singing.

Staging Song Seeking

The project focus was on the process of group singing - either within the DP centres or with local singers through the SingIn events. This was made explicit in the project aims, the professional development workshops, as well the vast majority of project time devoted to actual singing sessions. Yet, there was much debate surrounding the Big Sing event amongst the facilitators. Through individual and group discussions, it became apparent that the facilitators were quite nervous and anxious about any 'public performance' for their groups. This was in the main out of concern for their singers but also a result of previously held views, experiences and knowledge about the National Concert Hall as a music venue. Much work was done therefore to alleviate these fears and re-focus collectively what the Big Sing would look and sound like. Therefore, the Big Sing was characterised as a shared celebration, where inclusive, participatory singing on the day was prioritised (as discussed in section 2.4).

The facilitators all noted in their logs the democratic processes engaged in to decide on repertoire for the Big Sing. This allowed for group singing, individual performances, newly written songs, instrumental pieces and spoken word opportunities on the day. Furthermore, the facilitators all recognised the symbolic importance of the singers on the National Concert Hall main stage. In particular, their reflections highlighted the politically activist nature of the event, something that some of them were unsure about before the event took place. The extracts below are revealing in this regard:

I was really impressed by the way their mothers prepared the girls for their performance. They spoke to them of pride in themselves, their appearance, their nationality and singing out with confidence....I was surprised also by the way they responded to the photographer- they posed like supermodels so clearly this was something they had

(continues)

practiced or behaviour they had seen and were copying. They had always refused to be photographed at the centre. One of their Mums said that it was because of shame - they didn't want to be associated/identified with the DP centre. (CF3, 9/5/19)

The Senzeni Na was absolutely fantastic in performance. I was glad that this group mentioned some of the struggles of living in Direct Provision...Senzeni Na was extremely powerful and I cried onstage during this performance. (CF4, 9/6/19)

Akin to the flexible ways of working required in the singing sessions, the Big Sing was no different. There were singers who showed up on the day who had missed many singing sessions and in some cases, it was their first time to engage with the project. There were also attendance issues with some groups due to church commitments (the Big Sing was on a Sunday). This required the choral facilitators to react quickly on the day and make adjustments to plans, as one facilitator explains here:

When we arrived and X saw the hall, I think he saw that some of the other residents were preparing to perform. X called me over to ask me a discrete question. He asked my permission to perform one of his own pieces. I said that we would try it out with the band and that I'd help him. When we ran it with the band, it went very well. So I took him off to the piano in the conductors' room. We ran through the piece a few times... I left him there and he spent over an hour practising the piano. When he performed, it was superb and many considered his piece a highlight of the event. (CF4, 9/6/19)

Huge energy and commitment to make the event meaningful was evident in the facilitators' reflections. They subsequently all wrote of the pride they felt on the day of the Big Sing, seen in some examples here:

It flowed very well from start to finish. I was very proud of my groups...All of the singers from both groups looked lovely, a huge effort had gone into making sure they looked their best for the national stage! (CF2, 10/6/19)

The overall vibe was very positive and certainly was a celebration. (CF4, 9/6/19)



Conclusion and Recommendations





Conclusion

“If someone sings to you, they clearly mean you no harm; they make themselves vulnerable, “bare their soul” and offer sympathy, empathy and a kind of care and love. Then there is the power of music to bring social cohesion – by consent – from chaos, and both to synchronize and to entrain.” (Osborne, 2009, p. 343)

The Song Seeking Project grew out of a need to provide access to musical and creative opportunities for people living in direct provision (DP) as well as seek ways for people to connect and integrate through the collective power of music. The research findings presented in this report attest to the successful accomplishment of these aims. The ‘Song Seeking Songbook’ alongside this report also provides a tangible legacy for the project. Making music with others has repeatedly been shown to be an effective way to build ‘communities of musical practice’ and a sense of belonging (Kenny, 2016; Marsh 2015; Parker, 2020; Phelan, 2017); this is especially important for people who are marginalised within asylum seeking systems. This connects powerfully with the concept of ubuntu, which inspired the ‘Song Seeking Songbook’, where relationships and community connections define our sense of humanity. This report has demonstrated that both the social and musical aspects of the project were inseparable. Music brought people together, but equally music was made through people coming together. One cannot happen without the other.

A plethora of international, national and local policies are increasingly striving for greater inclusion and diversity across arts initiatives. At a national level, for instance, the Creative Ireland Programme states that “the arts belong to everyone” and aims to enable creativity in “every community” (DAHRRGA, 2017, p.14). The Arts Council too in their strategic plans are explicitly seeking ways in which partnerships can “create increased opportunities and equitable supports for long-term engagement in the arts by individuals and groups experiencing disadvantage and marginalisation” (ACI, 2019, p.13). The Song Seeking project provides a model of how such policy aims can become a reality through targeted support for one of the most marginalised groups within Irish society. There is a huge gap in provision and access to the arts within DP centres. While examples of good practice are to be found, geographical coverage is patchy, joined-up thinking is lacking, initiatives are typically short-



term and underfunded, and further to this, built-up expertise and knowledge is often not capitalised on to inform future developments. Strategic leadership and sustained support through organisations such as The Creative Ireland Programme and the Arts Council are therefore urgently required to ensure cross-sectoral partnership can enable projects like Song Seeking to become embedded long-term within asylum seeking accommodation settings. This by necessity requires investment in partnership approaches involving local authorities, arts/cultural organisations as well as migrant support organisations and groups. The impetus exists and now strategic action is called for.

The main issues and overarching conclusions drawn from the research are presented as themes here:

Access and Inclusion

It has been found that within DP, 'access to life-enhancing cultural, social and integration opportunities remains wholly insufficient' and 'reliant on an adhoc collection of statutory and voluntary initiatives, and temporary funds' (Nic Carthaigh, 2019, p.47). It is clear from



this report that there is enormous value in providing access to structured, facilitated musical opportunities to people living within DP. In addition, singing on the National Concert Hall stage, as well as inputting into a commissioned Songbook, resulted in feelings of immense pride and inclusion that are difficult to achieve while seeking asylum. Yet, this project, like so many others, ended. There is therefore an urgent need for mechanisms, resources and supports to sustain, develop and build on projects such as Song Seeking.

Quality of Life

The research findings reveal the participants gained a distinct sense of community and belonging through music making as a group, as well as improved mental health and quality of life as a result. Repeatedly, the singers spoke of the singing sessions as a means to release stress and tension, as a coping mechanism and a way to alleviate boredom. Strikingly, this was the case for both the adults and children involved. It was evidenced that the project provided a means of creative expression and agency through co-creating and performing whether through singing, song writing or instrumental playing.

Integration

Undoubtedly, one of the most successful aspects of the Song Seeking project were the SingIns. These local events linked 'outside' communities with 'inside' DP communities through song.

Significantly, these events were hosted by the singers living in Direct Provision. The SingIns provide a rich example of facilitated integration using the arts and creativity as an important conduit to building shared feelings of community and togetherness in a short space of time. Furthermore, it revealed a huge interest and enthusiasm from local communities who are seeking ways to connect with people living in DP who are also living within (or on the margins of) their cities, towns and villages. It is clear that further opportunities to build on these events and create more sustained ways of engaging musically in collective ways such as this would be welcome.

Ways of Working

The place-based and process-centred approaches taken to working in such challenging contexts as DP are important to highlight. The whole project team had to be very flexible throughout in order to respond effectively to local needs and strengths. Promoting musical agency, being culturally responsive, attentively listening to the group, building relationships, and participant-led learning all emerged as essential to engage meaningfully with the project participants – whether adults or children. In practice, this often translated as singing repertoire chosen by the group, providing space for songwriting and individual skills development, encouraging movement, allowing ample opportunities for harmonisation and improvisation, relaxing attitudes towards punctuality and attendance, and at times giving over singing session time to simply talk and share experiences. In sum, responsive and empathetic ways of working.

Partnership

The involvement and input from both academic and non-academic partners was essential to the Song Seeking project and ensured meaningful connections between relevant sectors, stakeholders, projects and organisations. The partnership actively drew expertise from all involved with regular and open communication being a key enabler for this. Such a partnership promotes inter-agency and data-driven learning from projects to inform future research, policy and practice developments in this growing field. Partnership was also a key feature of working ‘on the ground’. Local support groups or liaison organisations proved particularly invaluable to the choral facilitators to connect with key individuals within the DP centres they were working within.

Leadership

The project built leadership capacity amongst the partner organisations involved and also amongst the project team as a cohort of arts professionals working in challenging environments in creative ways. Furthermore, when leadership emerged from residents within the DP centres, participation levels were especially high. This finding points to the necessity to seek such leadership at the outset of initiatives and the need to include such leaders in the planning as well as the development stages of projects.

It is hoped that the learning from the research report will prove useful for policymakers, arts facilitators, educators, academics and community workers across Ireland and beyond as they continue to develop artistic and creative ways to engage meaningfully with those seeking protection in our societies. The distinct outcomes and outputs of the project are summarised here:

Project Outcomes

- Expanded access to group singing and musical opportunities within DP centres.
- Provided a means of creative expression and musical agency through co-creating and performing.
- Built leadership and capacity amongst the project team and a cohort of arts professionals to work in challenging environments in creative ways.
- Created meaningful integration opportunities through shared music-making and performance across diverse local and national communities.
- Gained insight and understanding into the benefits of creative experiences within the asylum seeking system in relation to integration, quality of life, and community building.
- Provided bottom-up perspectives and new knowledge to inform policy, research and practice.
- Contributed new work for choral and singing communities into the future through the commission.
- Facilitated new platforms of exchange between academic and non-academic partners to enhance dialogical communication across sectors.

Project Outputs



60 Singing Sessions
6 DP centres



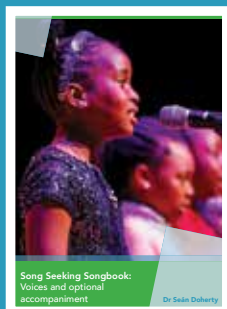
5 SingIns



6 Composer Sessions



'The Big Sing', NCH



Song Seeking Songbook

Research Report



Recommendations

Drawing on the research presented in this report, recommendations for policy, practice and research are presented here.

For Policy

- Provide **increased and sustained access** to arts opportunities for people living within asylum seeking accommodation. Cross-sectoral **national leadership** from both arts and migrant support stakeholders is required.
- Prioritise **local integration opportunities** through committed resourcing to connect accommodation settings with existing community arts organisations and groups.
- Link local agencies, community groups and organisations through targeted partnership funding streams to **harness existing expertise**, co-plan, co-deliver and avoid duplication of effort.
- Build inter-agency **platforms of exchange** between academic and non-academic partners to enhance communication across sectors and benefit from complementary areas of expertise.
- **Invest in research** from the outset and alongside the development of initiatives to lead action and change underpinned by data-driven knowledge.
- Build structures and supports for **professional development** and **reflective practice** for both leaders and practitioners within projects.
- Seek ways to promote and include **leadership opportunities** for project participants from the planning stages onwards within projects.

For Practice

- Promote **active engagement and agency** within activities to facilitate both personal and collective creativity within challenging living environments.
- Provide multiple opportunities for **social interaction** within projects to build a sense of community and enhance the quality of life for people living within marginalised communities.
- Engage in **empathetic, flexible and culturally responsive** ways of working that builds on the needs and strengths of the distinct group of people within projects.

- Seek out ways to **connect to local** arts and musical communities for creative, community-led, integration opportunities.
- **Sensitivity** to diverse religions, cultures and backgrounds is required. Stereotyping (of musical preferences, for example) should be avoided.
- Engage in **professional development opportunities** and reflective practice to build skills and leadership capacity to work in challenging contexts.

For Research

- Seek research approaches that **hear and amplify the voices** of those seeking asylum living through their unique experiences.
- Employ **participatory research approaches** to ensure findings are informed from the bottom-up and challenge the oft-existing power imbalances within research.
- Utilise **arts-based research approaches**, such as music-making, to allow for nuanced and expanded ways to capture data as well as allowing participants to creatively participate in research.
- Adhere to strict research **ethical guidelines**, particularly when engaging with people in vulnerable positions.





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