

“I want to sing”

Sing Up National Children's Bureau
Looked After Children Programme Evaluation

Executive Summary

Pat Petrie and Abigail Knight

**Centre for Understanding Social Pedagogy
Institute of Education
University of London**



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SING UP NATIONAL CHILDREN'S BUREAU LOOKED AFTER CHILDREN PROGRAMME EVALUATION FINAL REPORT

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Acknowledgments

Evaluating the Sing Up National Children's Bureau (NCB) programme for looked after children has been interesting and often inspiring work. It has been good to talk to musicians, project leaders, staff in children and young people services, foster carers and many others who have supported children's creativity and enjoyment throughout the programme. It was especially good to talk to some of the children and young singing leaders and find out how they felt about singing and music. We are very grateful to all of them for sharing their experience and giving us their time. We also want to say a big thank you to Sing Up and NCB for the opportunity to do this work.

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Report on Sing Up/National Children's Bureau's (NCB) Looked After Children's Programme

Sing Up is the national singing programme which aims to ensure that all primary school-aged children are able to access high-quality singing activities, whether or not they attend mainstream school. The **Sing Up NCB** looked after children programme of work is part of Sing Up Beyond the Mainstream (BTM). Beyond the Mainstream is a thread which has woven throughout the entire programme since 2008 following a report by Rob Hunter and Phil Mullen (Sing Up Beyond the Mainstream Advisors), which explored singing provision for children who either don't access primary mainstream (children in SEN or PRU settings), and those who do access primary mainstream but may find attendance difficult (looked after children, children with SEN, gypsy traveller children etc). The report found that although there were pockets of excellent work, there was a need for more training and better resources for working with primary school-aged children in these groups.

In 2010 Sing Up BTM wanted to focus on **one** of the many target groups in its remit which is particularly socially disadvantaged (Morgan, 2011; McAuley and Davis, 2009; Cameron et al 2011; Forrester al, 2009), to maximise impact and make a real difference to policy and to our own measurable outcomes. It was early in 2010 that the partnership with the NCB began, and the focus of the Funded Programmes aspect of Sing Up Beyond the Mainstream became **looked after children**.

We felt our decision to focus on looked after children was timely in light of relevant policy, national developments in this area and, significantly, the need for a coherent and joined up approach nationally when looking at access to creativity through singing for this particularly disparate group of children.

Sing Up and the NCB have been working in partnership together for over 2 years now with one clear aim; **to promote the well being of looked after children through singing.**

A looked after child is one who is in the care of a local authority. In 2010, there were 64,000 looked after children in England. Most (40,400), especially those of primary school age, lived with foster carers (DFE, 2010).

Hallam, 2009 and Himonides et al, 2011 summarised the educational, emotional and other benefits derived from participating in music for children and young people in general. A Youth Music evidence review found that the same benefits applied to looked after children (Dillon, 2010:40).



Aims and objectives of the evaluation

The intention was to evaluate practice in terms of the principles of social pedagogy. Social pedagogy is sometimes described as education in the broadest sense. It works with the whole child as a thinking, feeling and physical person and respects children's equality with other children and with adults, as fellow human beings. Social pedagogy practice often centres on activities undertaken with others. Such activities include the creative. The principles and practice of social pedagogy have been provided at length in a number of publications (for example Petrie, 2010, Petrie, 2011, Cameron and Moss, forthcoming) and its relevance for creative activities with children has been outlined in Chambers, 2008, Petrie and Chambers, 2011. Of particular relevance is the development of the Artist Pedagogue Learning Framework, funded by Creativity, Culture and Education (Chambers and Petrie, 2009). The principles of social pedagogy sit well with the principles of vocal leadership, set out in the Young Leaders' How to Guide (Sing Up, The Sage Gateshead, undated).

The evaluation was conducted in such a way as to coordinate with the Sing Up evaluation framework in order to contribute evidence on the delivery of singing activities to looked after children in regard to:

- ◆ Children's engagement and enjoyment,
- ◆ The practice of singing leaders
- ◆ Workforce development
- ◆ Partnerships with local authorities and others
- ◆ Project sustainability and legacy
- ◆ The principles of social pedagogy

The evaluation is based on data obtained from the following:

- ◆ Observation of at least one singing session at each project. Project leaders were requested to nominate a session which was most representative of their work for this purpose.



- ◆ Attendance at 10 project meetings, including a steering group, a meeting for foster carers, staff reflective meetings and a staff training session.
- ◆ Attendance at one performance and at a training day for all project leaders and their local authority partners.
- ◆ 102 face-to-face and telephone interviews, plus other conversations with a wide range of people including project leaders, singing leaders, local authority partners, foster carers, children and young people. In the case of children and young people, there were informal conversations and occasionally exercises to elicit their views such as the use of a 'graffiti wall'. In selecting children to consult, much depended on local circumstances, such as if there was time to do this within a singing session.
- ◆ Perusal of 130 pieces of reflective writing from singing leaders and young leaders.
- ◆ Informal discussions with leaders and partners at the Sing Up NCB Gathering in Birmingham in April 2010 and February 2011, and the Sing Up National Gathering held in Gateshead in November 2010.

Visits and interviews were carried out informally and the researchers were sometimes able to participate in sessions. Interview schedules were devised but, because the projects were disparate, these were used mainly as topic guides, covering: children and carers' involvement in the project; the part played by young leaders; what had gone well; workforce development; legacy and sustainability, and any challenges. The musical intentions of the project and singing leaders were also discussed as were aspects relating to the principles of social pedagogy.

The data were analysed qualitatively with the intention of identifying the main learning points arising from each project, including those appertaining to working in a social pedagogic framework. On this basis, a case study of some 8-10 pages was prepared for each project. These were shared with the relevant project leader for comments. A summary describing each project was also shared and agreed with the leaders. Learning points from the case studies overall were then collated.

Ethical Considerations

The work was conducted in accordance with the British Psychological Society's ethical research principles and the proposal was accepted by the Institute of Education's ethics committee. The Association of Directors of Children's Services indicated that approval of their research group was unnecessary because for all projects local authority children's services were named partners.

Information leaflets and consent forms were produced, for adults and children, and participants assured of their right to refuse or withdraw consent at any time and that issues relating to confidentiality would be maintained. The researchers complied and will comply with the Data Protection Act. They had enhanced CRB checks.

The report is based on 7 case studies with examples anonymised where appropriate – that is where it is thought that material is sensitive and that confidentiality should be maintained. Where projects have been named, permission has been obtained from the project concerned.



Sing Up/NCB looked after children projects

- ◆ Sound It Out (Dudley),
- ◆ Myrtle Theatre Company (Bristol),
- ◆ Pie Factory (Kent),
- ◆ SoundLINCS (Lincolnshire),
- ◆ Forest of Dean Music Makers (Gloucestershire) and Music Pool (Herefordshire)
- ◆ CoMusica (North East)
- ◆ Surrey Children and Young People's Services (CYPS), with Rhythmix (Surrey)

All the Sing Up NCB projects except one, were led by well established, locally-based music organisations, or in one case a theatre company. There was one project where the lead partner was the local authority. Mostly, these organisations had already worked with looked after children, but not necessarily children of primary school age.

The context for the projects were wide ranging in their geographical location and the size and types of areas covered.

Partnerships

Partnerships were established with local authority departments, such as children's services, including social work teams, residential units, foster care teams and fostering support groups, as a condition for inclusion in the programme. This was because previous experience had identified that close working partnerships were necessary to ensure the success of projects for:

- ◆ Access to potential participants
- ◆ Assistance in fulfilling necessary procedures for their participation
- ◆ Advice about working with looked after children and their carers
- ◆ Assistance with the project's legacy and the sustainability of the work

Factors constraining partnerships

The establishment and consolidation of partnerships was sometimes hampered by a number of constraining factors, including some at national level. For example, some participants reported that the demoralisation of social work staff, because of a perceived increase in focus on child protection and 'safeguarding' procedures, led to less enthusiasm for non-statutory work. Others thought that the current financial problems faced by local authorities made for diminished interest in creative activities.

At a local level, some project leaders believed that it was more difficult to make links with some local authority services than with others – but there seemed to be little consistency, between projects, as to which services these were.

There were several examples where the strength of the partnership was based more on the commitment of interested individuals than on strong organisational links. The need to embed the commitment in organisational structures, so important for the sustainability of the work, was recognised. Where this had not happened there was a negative impact, demonstrated in those few cases where a change in personnel made it difficult for the project to recruit children.

In one case, there were marked differences between the local authority partner and the project as to the rigour with which procedures should be followed and the form which singing sessions should take. These followed changes among the local authority staff involved initially. This also points to the necessity for partners to discuss and agree such matters in advance, in order to maintain good working relationships.

Venues

Some projects held sessions in a variety of venues across their area for different groups of children. Others used the same venue throughout. Venues included schools, the children's foster homes, arts centres, a theatre youth centre, an outdoor residential education centre, community centres, residential units and stately homes and their grounds. In one case, the venue was chosen so that looked after children and foster families should experience interesting and beautiful public spaces. For others using 'interesting venues', this was an incidental benefit.

Problems reported about different venues

Some problems were expressed about locating sessions in schools. In one case, reportedly, school staff tended to view the singing sessions as a 'piece of school provision' and did not easily accept that the project was for looked after children only. Accordingly, they were not proactive in recruiting them.

Other leaders believed that the school was not a 'neutral venue'. It was not a level playing field where looked after children could attend activities designed specifically for them, without being identified as looked after by others, with the risk of stigmatisation.

In towns, difficulties in accessing a venue by car during the rush hour was a problem and even a deterrent to participation for some foster carers.

Engagement, enjoyment and satisfaction

In line with the rest of the Sing Up programme's activity, the work with looked after children was focused on children aged 5 to 11 or 12 years, of primary age. Young singing leaders, of secondary school age, were also recruited to many of the projects.

Recruitment was usually, although not wholly, based on identifying children who wished to take part or at least agreed to give singing a try. There were very few examples found of children who did not enjoy taking part in the projects, and where this occurred it was reportedly because they had not wished to attend, in the first place.

Growing confidence in music and singing

We had many reports of how children gained confidence in singing and enjoyed being introduced to new instruments, having opportunities to compose music, write lyrics, and perform in front of an audience.

The 'wow' factor - being surprised, delighted and impressed by the music and the abilities of the musicians (professional and singing/music leaders), was a new experience for some children and young people.

With very few exceptions, the children and young people who gave feedback about the sessions they had taken part in were full of praise for them. Some discovered they had musical talents, and it was hoped by those involved in the project, that this discovery would have long term effects. It was reported that many of the children continued to sing at home and some were subsequently taking up other opportunities for making music.



Social and emotional benefits

In addition to the musical experience, other benefits in taking part in projects included making friends, an increase in confidence and self-esteem, and social and personal skills such as learning to co-operate (see, also Dillon, Himonides et al 2011).

Young leaders

All the projects planned to develop the role of young leaders, who were themselves looked after young people of secondary school age. Often the young leaders had been involved in the projects' earlier work, so the projects were building on established relationships. Project leaders hoped that being a young leader on the Sing Up NCB project would help to consolidate a young person's earlier experience and support them to take it further.

Some of the projects held training sessions especially for the young leaders, for one project this included a residential weekend. As well as covering musical activities, such as warm ups and songs, more general subjects were raised. Training included discussions about reflective practice, expectations of the project, awareness of boundaries, and opportunities to contribute to the development of the project. One project included young leaders in all planning and reflections sessions, which covered a wide range of issues both as and before they arose. It was believed that such experiences maintained the commitment of two of the three young leaders (the third had left for health reasons).

Adult leaders also made sure that the young people had the opportunity to lead different musical activities with the children.

The importance of their relationship with the adult leaders was commented on by some of the young leaders, as was the security of being part of the leadership team, but not having a major responsibility. (Also see workforce development and accreditation, below).

Projects especially for looked after children

The looked after children who participated in the projects were almost all living with foster carers, rather than in residential children's homes. This is typical for looked after children of primary school age, because fostering is the preferred form of care, especially for this younger group. It was very unlikely, therefore, that they had ever been brought together with other looked after children, before taking part in the project.

The question of whether it was ideal to deliver separate singing sessions for looked after children was raised by one of the singing leaders who identified the danger of stigmatising children by bringing them together. Several of the looked after children and young people told us that they particularly enjoyed attending a project that was specifically for children like themselves: they felt more comfortable meeting other people who understood their circumstances and shared some of their experiences. They also had the opportunity to realise that their situation was not unique.

A foster carer commented that attending a project for looked after children meant that the child's sometimes challenging behaviour was accepted more readily than in a mainstream project.

Looked after disabled children

There were several examples of how looked after disabled children and young people, including some with severe and complex needs, had benefited from their involvement in a Sing Up NCB project. Sometimes these were conducted in children's foster homes or in residential homes. Singing leaders and carers described the benefits derived from participation beyond introducing them to music and the opportunity to engage with sounds and instruments. They reported that the sessions gave children the opportunity to make choices and decisions for themselves, apparently lacking in other areas of their lives. In a residential home, it was reported that care staff learned about what could be achieved with the young people and that this opened up possibilities for their own practice.

All projects worked hard at establishing links with foster care social work teams and the foster carers themselves



Foster carers: supporting children's engagement

Foster carers played a vital role in supporting the children's engagement in the projects. Their involvement was seen as crucial by all the projects in both recruiting children and encouraging and maintaining children's participation. To this end, all the projects worked hard early on in the programme at establishing links with foster care social work teams and thence with foster carers themselves.

Communicating directly and honestly with foster carers was seen as underpinning singing leaders' work with the children. It was a means of learning more about the children and obtaining feedback about how children had felt about singing.

Some leaders thought that having foster carers present helped the child feel safe and engage more.

Foster carers' role in the delivery of the sessions varied considerably. The attendance and musical participation of the foster carers was integral in two projects. Foster carers commented that this was an opportunity for both child and carer to get to know each other better, and that the foster carer's being in an unfamiliar role, that of a learner, helped in this.

In other places, although some foster carers attended the sessions, they participated only to intervene in children's behavioural difficulties. Sometimes singing leaders felt frustrated that the foster carers did not do more to check children's behaviour, but there was some evidence in at least one project where the carers were not comfortable in this role.

While one project addressed transport problems by means of travel warrants, supplied by the local authority arts service, and others provided cabs, many projects relied on the good will of foster carers to transport the children to sessions. Carers had to fit this in to their busy lives. In rural areas the distances involved and in towns rush hour traffic made taking children backwards and forwards difficult. These were disincentives for carers' supporting children's participation.

Leadership and learning: knowledge

Workforce development

Workforce development was approached and understood differently by different projects. Some stressed the value of incidental and less formal opportunities, such as Sing Up NCB Gatherings, with their presentations and workshops. Others spoke of learning conversations with partners about the disadvantage suffered by looked after children, as important background for their practice.

For one partnership, training and reflecting on practice took place around events, such as immediately after singing sessions, rather than as separate occasions. In the same project, a managerial style that focused on listening to staff as a core principle was used to further the music leaders' professional and personal development.

Other projects stressed the importance/ value of more formal training opportunities for the musicians, support workers, children's services staff, carers, arts organisations and young leaders. They brought in outside specialists, such as an Independent Reviewing Officer, a child psychologist, music education specialists, a foster carer, singing leaders, educationalists and other children services personnel. Mostly these sessions were delivered before the project commenced on topics such as:

- ◆ Developing core musical and vocal confidence
- ◆ Song writing
- ◆ Vocal health
- ◆ Working with looked after children
- ◆ Local authority context issues
- ◆ Social pedagogy
- ◆ Project reflections
- ◆ Recruitment and sustainability issues
- ◆ Evaluation
- ◆ Developing good partnerships

There was some evidence of training being by projects offered to a wide range of partners including: social workers, CAMHS workers, foster carers, specialist nurses, music service, virtual school designated teachers and youth justice workers.

Various training opportunities were also made available to young leaders and included, in one case, weekend residential training courses, covering outdoor team building activities as well as music sessions. These were reported to 'offer high impact and intense learning for young people' and to overcome transport and timing difficulties.

Accreditation

Opportunities for children and young leaders to take part in accreditation such as Arts Awards were offered by most of the projects but awards had not been achieved by the end of 2010, although some were in prospect.

Project leaders suggested that there was not always sufficient time during sessions to fully support all those (often with high support needs), who expressed an interest. A reported challenge for many of the young people was that there was little encouragement and practical help to sustain the requirements of the awards, outside the project sessions themselves.

One singing leader, responsible for supporting young leaders taking part in the project, remarked that they were, in practice, given less support for participation than younger children. For example, foster carers might think they did not need reminding about attending sessions, or they were expected to find their own way to the venues where the sessions were held, in spite of transport difficulties. Nevertheless, it was hoped that at least some of the young leaders would achieve their Bronze level Arts Award in 2011 and some had already completed work experience.

Leadership: learning and knowledge generated by project and singing leaders

The singing leaders based their practice on their existing knowledge but as a result of taking part in the project there were many reports that they had developed their understanding of working with looked after children, both musically and in terms of social pedagogy.

An important lesson emerging from the projects was that the musical and creative capabilities of looked after children **should not be underestimated**. Given the right conditions, they were capable of enjoying and participating in a wide variety of singing, voice work and other, sometimes sophisticated, music making activities. Applying the principles of social pedagogy was seen as supporting this participation.

It was widely understood that sessions were best undertaken not as singing classes but as pleasant places for adults and children to form warm relationships – places for a variety of musical and other creative and social activities, with singing at the centre.

As community musicians, many leaders turned to a wide variety of musical experiences, according to what children seemed to enjoy. Sessions included singing, song writing, recording, lyric writing, drumming,



rapping and being introduced to musical instruments, such as the guitar, the ukulele, keyboard, and percussion instruments (sometimes made by the children themselves). Some of these were identified as being particularly attractive for those boys for whom singing was not immediately attractive.

The singing leaders often aimed to find a balance between meeting children 'in their comfort zone' and broadening their horizons. The sessions progressed from using simple games and rounds, to part songs, and song writing. They also introduced repertoire from different countries.

One project produced a 22 minute opera, with libretto and music generated by the children and some of their foster carers. The composer wrote the score on the basis of work done with the children. When they had written the words for a song, they would come round the keyboard and discuss how they thought it should go: fast, slow, happy, sad, up, down...? He demonstrated different options and they made a choice. They sometimes 'painted the music', to show what they wanted. Some of the children suggested musical settings for different lines.

Singing leaders commented on how difficult the music would be for many secondary school children, but that the younger children had risen to the occasion, learned the words and music and sung confidently.

Performance and Awards Events

Performance was seen as a special opportunity for showcasing and valuing the children's work and some of the projects had already put on a performance, as part of their activities. Others planned to do so. Many produced CDs as part of their activities. Nevertheless the intention was always that the children should enjoy creativity and have fun, rather than produce a polished performance.

Social pedagogy and practice

The principles of social pedagogy (see page 4) were intended to provide a framework for the projects against which the projects could, in part, be evaluated. This evaluation discusses some of the learning that developed from the projects in this context, with particular reference to: working with the whole child; valuing children's contributions; providing a sociable and creative space; preparation and reflection, and working with what is sometimes referred to as 'challenging behaviour'.



**“
It has all been
very successful.
The priority is not
to let it go.
”**

Working with the whole child

Working with children holistically rather than seeing singing as distinct from the rest of the child's experiences was seen by almost all of the leaders as essential for good practice. For example, in after school sessions singing leaders would encourage children to talk about their day or share news, rather than begin singing immediately.

Valuing children's contributions

The principles of social pedagogy hold that children's contributions should be received in a positive way, otherwise children will not risk making further attempts and, more importantly, they may feel the rejection as personal. There were many examples of how singing leaders valued children's contributions by encouraging them, thanking them and accepting what they had to offer. A rare example of where this did not happen was at a song-writing session, when the children were invited to contribute rhyming words for the end of lines, but then 'put down' when rhymes did not appear to make sense.

A sociable and creative space

Social pedagogues often speak of people sharing the same living space when they are engaged in activities together. In the living space, everyone is seen as of equal worth, there may be people with different functions but there is no feeling that some are more valuable than others. This principle was reflected in much of the practice which we observed, with everyone, children and adults, sharing ideas and singing together.

The integration of both social and creative activities was observed or reported in several projects. While singing took pride of place, in different projects children danced, painted, took photographs, made scrapbooks, wrote journals, had snacks and went on picnics and outings. These were seen as opportunities for building relationships and helping children to feel relaxed.

Preparation and reflection

Social pedagogy practice stresses purposeful reflection: acknowledging the part of feelings, building on success and planning to obviate any problems that have arisen. At the beginning and throughout the Sing Up NCB programme, the project leaders, singing leaders and young leaders were encouraged to reflect on their practice. Almost all project leaders kept reflective journals to chart their thoughts, feelings and plans about the work. Many commented on the value of both prior preparation and reflection on how the session had gone. They thought that this practice had been useful for young leaders also and a help towards team building.

Working with challenging behaviour

The instability and rejection experienced by many looked after children may lead to behaviour seen as unacceptable. Managing children's behaviour was one of the main challenges identified by singing leaders. A singing leader who had considerable experience of working with looked after children, told us that many children attending workshops commonly experienced being sent out of class or excluded from school. They therefore decided they would find ways of containing participants, rather than rejecting them yet again.

The experience of many of the project leaders suggested that it was more profitable to think not of 'managing unacceptable behaviour' but of understanding the child and managing the social context so that the child felt secure, with less need to behave in ways that were unacceptable to others. Having other activities on offer, for when children needed a break from singing was one example.

In one project children were told specifically that if they did not want to join in an activity they did not need to do so. There was a named person whom they could sit next to if they wanted some time out. Sometimes, all that children needed was encouragement and support to help them to persevere.

However leaders reported that unacceptable behaviour should not be ignored. The ethos of a project should be communicated, through discussion and example to all adults and children participating. In one case ground rules were presented to the children in a 'fun' way, with one example acted out before a session. ('We laugh with people, not at them. We have fun' and 'You don't have to do anything you don't want to')

The role of people brought in as support workers was in some cases given careful consideration. It was believed that they should not be treated merely as 'trouble shooters', but fully included in discussing the ethos of the project and how children were to be valued and made welcome. In these projects all those present were seen as part of the team, sharing in the project's ethos and providing positive role models. Elsewhere this practice was less developed.

Leadership and learning: impacts for the organisations involved

An aim of the evaluation was to understand the impact that the projects could have for the organisations themselves, and externally for their partners and others. There was evidence of some learning for both parties. There was also an impact for staff involved at an individual level.

In all the projects there was both workforce development and incidental learning about the lives and situations of looked after children. This was sometimes seen as 'a steep learning curve', which produced a greater awareness on the part of staff about the difficulties inherent in many looked after children's lives and of the value singing and creative activities had for them.

People from local authority music services as well as individual community musicians were sometimes involved in the projects. Some musicians commented that the social pedagogic approach was something that would inform their own practice with all children, not just those who were looked after.

Working exclusively with looked after children was a new experience for some of the organisations, and certainly for many of their staff. The evaluation revealed many challenges and learning opportunities which often came to affect the understandings and practice of the participating agencies. For some, cooperating with new partners who had their own requirements demanded a willingness to listen, to negotiate and to find new ways of working.

Sometimes complex procedures were required to assess risk and obtain consent for children's involvement. Others concerned the sharing of information about children and the use of photography. To some project leaders it appeared that these procedures were obstructive to the recruitment of children and the delivery of sessions. Whatever else, they often resulted in delays in projects starting up.

Nevertheless, there was evidence of both sides of a partnership having an impact on the other, with compromises being reached and some change in practice achieved – and a genuine satisfaction about this on both sides.

Legacy and Sustainability

The evaluation of the projects was carried out during a period of unprecedented public sector cuts and subsequent uncertainty for future funding and staffing. A concern was therefore voiced that the projects had raised expectations in young people only to let them down when the funding ran out.

It was recognized, however, that sustainability was not reliant on funding alone. Project partners indicated that strategies to secure the project's legacy would include information-sharing about participation in music for looked after children and networking with potential partners and influential organisations.

Singing and musical opportunities identified by the projects included involving local authority music tuition services, the possibility of using looked after children's personal education allowance to fund group singing tuition, and signposting children towards main stream opportunities such as community choirs. It was also thought important that the looked after children's right (in England) to free music tuition, as set



out by the Department for Education, should be observed. However, there needed to be clarity about which departmental budget in a local authority was responsible for this. One project leader aimed to ensure that music was integral to looked after children's Personal Education Plans. The projects were also aiming to include looked after children in their other activities, such as preschool music sessions, rapping and steel panning.

At the time of writing, it is not possible to say how many of these options and possibilities would be realized. However, there appeared to be a strong will to sustain the impetus supplied by the programme. The success of the projects had, in general, reinforced belief in the benefits of singing and creative activities for looked after children and therefore strengthened efforts towards sustainability.

Learning points

The following learning points are all derived from the findings presented above.

Projects in partnerships

Where they work well, partnerships developed to deliver looked after children's singing projects can have a positive impact on the wider practice of the organisations involved as well as on the project itself.

There are a range of partnerships appropriate for arts agencies working with looked after children, such as other arts organisations and local authority music services. Of utmost importance and essential to the success of the project are local authority children and young people services. They can assist children in accessing projects and support music agencies in complying with local authority requirements regarding looked after children.

Partnerships which depend on the goodwill of one person within the local authority can be precarious. Agencies wishing to work with looked after children should involve, and keep informed, personnel as senior in the management structure as is feasible, from the outset. Otherwise the project is vulnerable if there are staff changes.

Working with looked after children often requires time to set up projects, engage with partners, undertake any necessary workforce development with singing leaders, and recruit participants. The time needed is perhaps more than initially envisaged, project leaders should allow for this.

Local authorities require, to different extents, the consent of a number of parties before children are allowed to participate in organised activities. Sometimes local procedures go beyond what is required nationally and it may be that some discussion expedites permission. Nevertheless, projects should allow sufficient time to deal with consent issues, so that they can keep to schedule.

Looked after children are not a stable population. Projects leaders may wish to consider 'over recruiting' participants, in the first instance, to compensate for children who move on before the project commences or during the course of the project.

The venue

The venue chosen can enhance or undermine children's experience. Children enjoy an interesting venue. While schools may be the only possibility in some cases, they may be less favourable as sites for free-time singing activities than other options. This needs consideration.

Foster carers

Foster carers manage a busy and complex workload. If they are to maintain children's engagement with the singing sessions, the foster carers own needs require consideration, and attention to, for example, the timing of sessions, traffic and parking issues.

Personal contact with the carers on the part of the project leaders in between sessions can enhance their engagement and participation, as well as being a source of appropriate information about the children.

Given sufficient encouragement, foster carers can actively enjoy singing in spite of having reservations at first. Taster sessions can help.

Foster carers' active participation in music making can be an opportunity for joint learning with the children which can help build the relationship between them.

Foster carer's roles should not be confined to troubleshooting. If they participate in sessions in any way they should be seen as part of the project team.



Children

There were many reports from foster carers, from other adults and from the children themselves about their enthusiasm for singing and music making. There were also benefits such as enjoying interesting venues, making friends, being excited about performance and becoming generally more confident.

It is helpful for project and singing leaders to understand that looked after children may be especially vulnerable because of their life experience. They are, nevertheless, children first and foremost. Workforce development activities should stress this, and avoid stigmatising and labelling looked after children, for example by over emphasising behavioural problems.

There may be a danger of stigmatising looked after children where sessions are provided solely for them and this should be guarded against. At the same time, the advantages of attending sessions specifically for looked after children were highlighted by some foster carers and children.

Young leaders

The experience of being a young leader can be interesting and useful in itself, as well as opening up areas of interest, education and, for some, career development.

Young leaders should be seen as part of the project team.

Young leaders, especially those who are themselves looked after, need the support of the rest of the project team if they are to make the most of their opportunities. For some this may extend to reminders about attendance and help with transport arrangements.

It can be of benefit to young leaders to include them in reflecting on practice, their own feelings about it, the effects that practice has on participants, and the steps necessary for building on success and avoiding difficulties.

Singing leaders

Singing leaders can be surprised and inspired by what children achieve. Singing leaders should be supported by project leaders in finding a balance between being musically ambitious for the children and meeting children's other needs.

Leaders' practice can benefit from knowing about any difficult events arising in children's lives which affect their participation. At the same time, confidentiality must be observed.

In order to work well with looked after children, singing leaders need to be part of the project team, rather than merely session workers. Singing leaders need to have adequate time for planning and reflection, in addition to the time spent in contact with the children.

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Project managers should be aware of what happens during sessions, musically and in other ways, and provide singing leaders with supervision and support.

Singing leaders should regard support workers as part of their team – not just people on hand to control the children.

Music and social pedagogy

One of the biggest learning points of the Sing Up NCB looked after children projects is children's capacity for creativity, singing and enjoying challenging music, both from the Western tradition and from world music.

This should not be under estimated.

Leaders said that performance or the production of, for example, a CD or DVD gave children a sense of achievement – but the children's needs came first and leaders should not put them under undue pressure to achieve a polished performance.

The principles of social pedagogy were seen to benefit singing and music making because they set a social context where children could enjoy themselves, feel safe and accepted, and risk making their own valuable contributions to activities.

Many looked after children have already experienced instability and rejection and this may lead to behaviour which is seen as unacceptable. Adhering to the principles of social pedagogy did not mean that projects ignored unacceptable behaviour: the ethos of a project could be communicated, through discussion and example to all participants. This was important because singing leaders had a responsibility for the safety and wellbeing of all participants.

Leaders found it helpful to think not of 'managing unacceptable behaviour' but of understanding the whole child and managing the social context so that children felt secure and had less need to behave in ways unacceptable to others. It was found helpful for differences in approach among the staff team to be recognised, addressed and reflected on.

It was reported that social pedagogic reflection was a valuable means of project and workforce development. It supported team building, especially necessary where staff came from different professional backgrounds.



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