



Ruthless Research

Report:

Evaluation of the DISN Skills Exchange Programme

June 2024

Submitted by:
Ruth Stevenson

www.ruthlessresearch.co.uk

Table of contents

Introduction	3
EVALUATING THE PROGRAMME.....	4
Learning from the recruitment process	4
Engagement with the programme	4
Programme set-up and delivery	4
Learning from the visits	6
Learning from the sharing event	8
The impact of the programme	10
Challenges experienced.....	14
Looking forward	14
Progress against aims and objectives	15
Concluding remarks	16

About Ruthless Research

Ruthless Research is an Edinburgh-based independent research consultancy, through which Ruth Stevenson provides a range of qualitative and quantitative research solutions to organisations who work for the benefit of the community.

Contact Ruth Stevenson

Phone: 07884 023 781

Email: ruth@ruthlessresearch.co.uk

Website: www.ruthlessresearch.co.uk

Introduction

Background and context

The Dementia Inclusive Singing Network (DISN) supports people who take part in and those who provide singing opportunities for people living with dementia in Scotland. It helps ensure people can access the benefits of music to health and wellbeing and supports the song leaders who deliver these activities.

The DISN Skills Exchange Programme was a pilot programme designed to fund up to 10 participant song leaders (5 pairs) to visit each other, observe their rehearsals and share knowledge of inclusive singing leadership. Luminate took 7 applications forward for the 10 available places. The programme took place between October 2023 and March 2024, and the component parts of the programme were:

- Online introductory meeting with the DISN team;
- Exchange Visits, with partners visiting one another's singing group or choir;
- Discussions with exchange partner, between visits;
- Concluding sharing event on Saturday 9th March 2024 in Glasgow.

Through these exchange visits and a series of conversations it was intended that participants would gain knowledge and skills, be encouraged to reflect on their work, and be inspired to try new things with their singing group. Each participant received a participation bursary of £600 in addition to travel and accommodation costs.

The aims and objectives of the DISN Skills Exchange Programme were:

- To deliver a pilot leaders exchange programme between October 2023 and March 2024, that engages with up to 10 paid participants across Scotland;
- To enable singing group leaders across Scotland to connect and share relevant knowledge;
- To understand how peer learning opportunities can benefit singing group leaders;
- To improve the quality and ambition of dementia inclusive singing groups;
- To ensure that people living with dementia have a voice in the development of singing opportunities in their local areas;
- Through delivering this programme, to establish a model for future Singing Network knowledge exchange programmes.

Methodology

Researcher Ruth Stevenson was commissioned to independently evaluate the DISN skill-sharing programme. The methodology comprised:

- Online surveys completed by 8 participants in advance of the programme (including one person who dropped out because of other work commitments), and 6 participants at the close of the programme;
- 7x participant reflection forms completed following programme activities;
- Observation of the programme sharing event in March.

Findings are summarised in the report that follows.

EVALUATING THE PROGRAMME

Learning from the recruitment process

Through learning from undertaking the recruitment process, Luminare took the decision to change the model of visits to best meet the needs of the applicants. Anne Gallacher (Director, Luminare) described this process as follows:

“There was some important learning from the selection process that led to this slight reshaping of the programme, and the model of visits changed from the original concept.

We found ourselves trying to pair people on the basis of their applications, and considering a range of points including different operating contexts of the leaders (including rural / urban, and within healthcare settings / wider community settings), as well as different levels of experience and applicants’ own identified development needs. We realised very quickly that - in order to give us the best chance of participants maximising the opportunity - the process was more complex than we had foreseen!

This led to us deciding that two applicants’ identified development needs could not be met by the programme, and - for the selected 8 (with one dropping out before the programme started) - the idea of pairing them for reciprocal visits didn’t work. We made a new plan, therefore, which involved everyone making one visit to another leader’s activity, with two of the leaders hosting twice. Those who hosted twice were paid a bit more in recognition of this.”

Engagement with the programme

The following table describes engagement with the various elements of the DISN Skills Exchange Programme:

Programme element	Number
Number of participants attended online introductory meeting with the DISN team	7
Number of exchange visits held	5
Number participants attended sharing event in Glasgow	6
Number of participants completed programme	5

In total seven song leaders started the programme but one had to drop out along the way due to illness, and another had to postpone their exchange visit due to injury.

The injured sixth song leader intends to complete the programme when recovered, following the sharing event and evaluation period.

Programme set-up and delivery

The participating song leaders were asked to complete an evaluation survey at the start and end of the programme. Findings are summarised in the sections that follow.

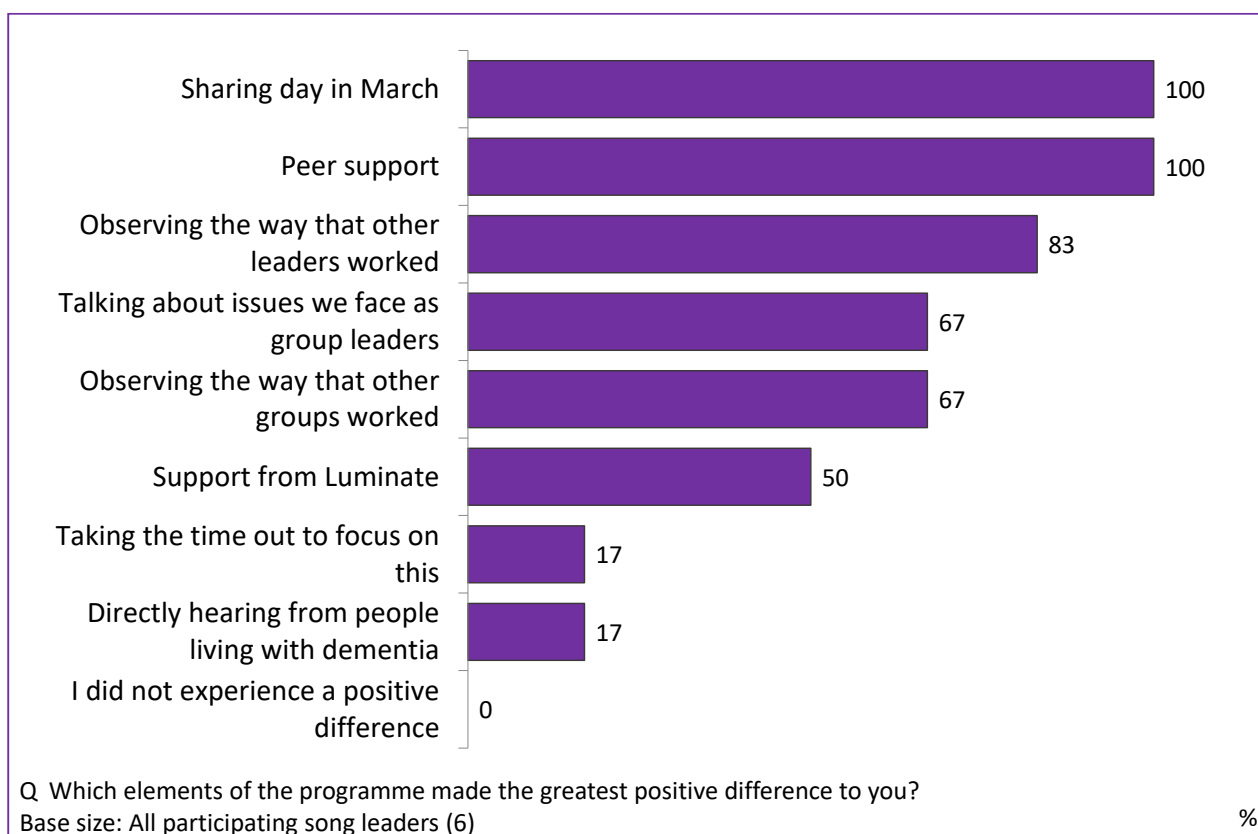
We asked the participating song leaders to tell us how they felt about the programme generally, and response is shown in the table below:

Base: All participating song leaders (6)	%
I enjoyed the programme	100
I felt supported within the programme	100
The programme was a safe space	100
The programme felt relevant and meaningful to me	100
I felt a sense of progression across the programme	83

The participating song leaders were extremely positive about the programme, with all (100%) agreeing that they *enjoyed the programme* and *felt supported within the programme*, that the programme was *a safe space*, and that the programme *felt relevant and meaningful* to them.

All but one of the participating song leaders (83%) agreed that they *felt a sense of progression across the programme*. The individual who did not feel a sense of progression across the programme commented that *“I have been unable to participate fully in the programme due to injury. This is why some of my answers are neutral.”* This is also reflected in their response to subsequent questions. They also commented, however, that *“so far I have felt supported, encouraged, and look forward to getting started properly.”*

We asked the participating song leaders to tell us which elements of the programme made the greatest positive difference to them, and response is shown in the graph below:



All of the participating song leaders (100%) felt that *peer support* and the *sharing day in March* made the greatest positive difference to them.

On average, the participating song leaders selected 5.2 elements from this list indicating that they benefitted from multiple elements of the programme. Other frequently selected elements that made a difference to participating song leaders were *observing the way that other leaders worked* (83%), *talking about issues we face as group leaders* (67%) and *observing the way that other groups worked* (67%).

Learning from the visits

It was refreshing to be a participant and to take time to observe reactions and to sing as part of the group rather than a 'leader'.

The participating song leaders were asked to fill in a structured observation form following their exchange visits, and their learnings are summarised in the section that follows.

Feelings about visits

The participating song leaders enjoyed their exchange visits, finding the experience to be “warm” and “positive”. Taking part in the singing activities was “truly uplifting” and “beautifully moving” for the participating song leaders, and as one described: “seeing the joy people obviously gained from the group made me feel joy too”.

Having attended these learning visits, the participating song leaders left feeling “encouraged” and “inspired” and “enthused”, as well as being “refreshed” and “re-invigorated”.

Observations about atmosphere and engagement

The participating song leaders made observations about the atmosphere of the groups that they visited, noting that they were “relaxed” and “collaborative” with “an obvious sense of community and support”.

They recognised the positive engagement approaches taken by their fellow group leaders, including “great communication” and “buoyant leadership” and “quality banter” to put choir members “at ease”, which led to “a lovely flow” and “kept everyone focused and motivated”.

Learning from conversation

Several participating song leaders noted that they had appreciated the opportunity for discussion with their fellow group leader, for example:

“I was able to ask the session leader questions before and after the session.”

“They were very helpful in talking to me before and after the session.”

“They answered my questions and made me feel welcome.”

Learning from difference

The participating song leaders found it particularly helpful to learn from *“taking part in a very different style of group to my own”*. The type of difference varied, for example:

“I work in a city. It was particularly interesting and useful visiting what is effectively a rural group, as the needs are a bit different, and the framing/set up of the group is designed accordingly.”

“Much more unaccompanied singing than I currently deliver in my sessions and more harmony singing.”

“This was interesting for me as the group was condition specific (dementia). The choirs that I run are open to all (and very much dementia inclusive).”

Changes to practice

Reflecting on their visits, the participating song leaders described a variety of ways in which they intended to make changes to their own practice.

Many of the participating song leaders had learned from the musical approaches that they had observed, and felt that they would like to try something new based on this:

“I’m considering making a clearer space for people to share songs if they’d like to on a more regular basis.”

“It inspired me to try more harmony singing with my groups.”

“I actually used one of the songs today in my session, it went down very well.”

“I loved the way they morphed ‘Wild Mountain Thyme’ into ‘Loch Lomond’ and I am keen to try this with all my groups as they are both well-loved songs!”

“Some of the more modern songs – pop songs like ‘True Colours’ – were really enthusiastically sung and so I will be more confident to try some of these. In fact today I was inspired to go rogue and try a Queen song – ‘I Want to Break Free’ and the group responded very well – many knew the words and chair-danced along, enthusiastically!”

One of the participating song leaders had learned from the practicalities that they had observed, and felt that they would like to try something new based on this:

“I love the way the group have song sheets in a folder, all numbered. I think I might try this for some of my groups. Much easier to locate a song with a number.”

Some of the participating song leaders had learned from the leadership and engagement styles that they had observed, and felt that they would like to try something new based on this:

“To get out from behind the piano a bit more. I can get stuck with my head down sometimes.”

“They invited people to thank those sitting near for singing with them. I may use this in my care home setting as a way of helping the residents interact with each other.”

“They led with a very chatty style. They encouraged a large amount of interaction with the group - asking people to speak to the people around them on several occasions. It made me think that I would like to implement more of this type of thing in my own sessions.”

Learning from the sharing event

We do it because it matters, and the people we work with matter.

The sharing event took place on Saturday 9th March 2024 at the Glasgow Royal Concert Hall. Six participating song leaders were in attendance, along with five members of the Luminare extended team. As well as group discussion, each participating song leader was invited to share a singing activity with the group.

The aims for the sharing event were:

- To share individual learning and reflections from the skills sharing visits;
- To identify and reflect on key themes from the learning to date;
- To explore further development needs identified through the pilot, and potential approaches to meeting these needs;
- To explore ways of sharing the learning from the pilot with other singing leaders.

Reflections on the skills sharing visits

The participating song leaders reflected that the skills sharing visits were *“really useful for me”* and *“really made me think”*.

The following key themes arose when the participating song leaders reflected on and discussed their visits:

- Considerations around varied musical elements of delivery:
 - Splitting the group for singing activities
 - Working with harmony
 - Using intuitive movements alongside song
- Considerations around accessibility and inclusion:
 - Ways of making singing activities accessible
 - Ways of sharing song lyrics during singing activities
 - Ways of building engagement with group members
 - Ways of making connections between group members

- Understanding the wider network of each singing group:
 - Volunteers
 - Partner organisations
 - The role of carers within and outwith the group
- Having a sensitivity to circumstances:
 - For example dementia / caring relationships / grief
- The value of the experience:
 - This is *“more than a sing-along”* and *“not just entertainment”*

Identifying the fundamentals of this approach

Reflecting together, the participating song leaders identified the following elements as being fundamental to their approach to providing singing for people living with dementia:

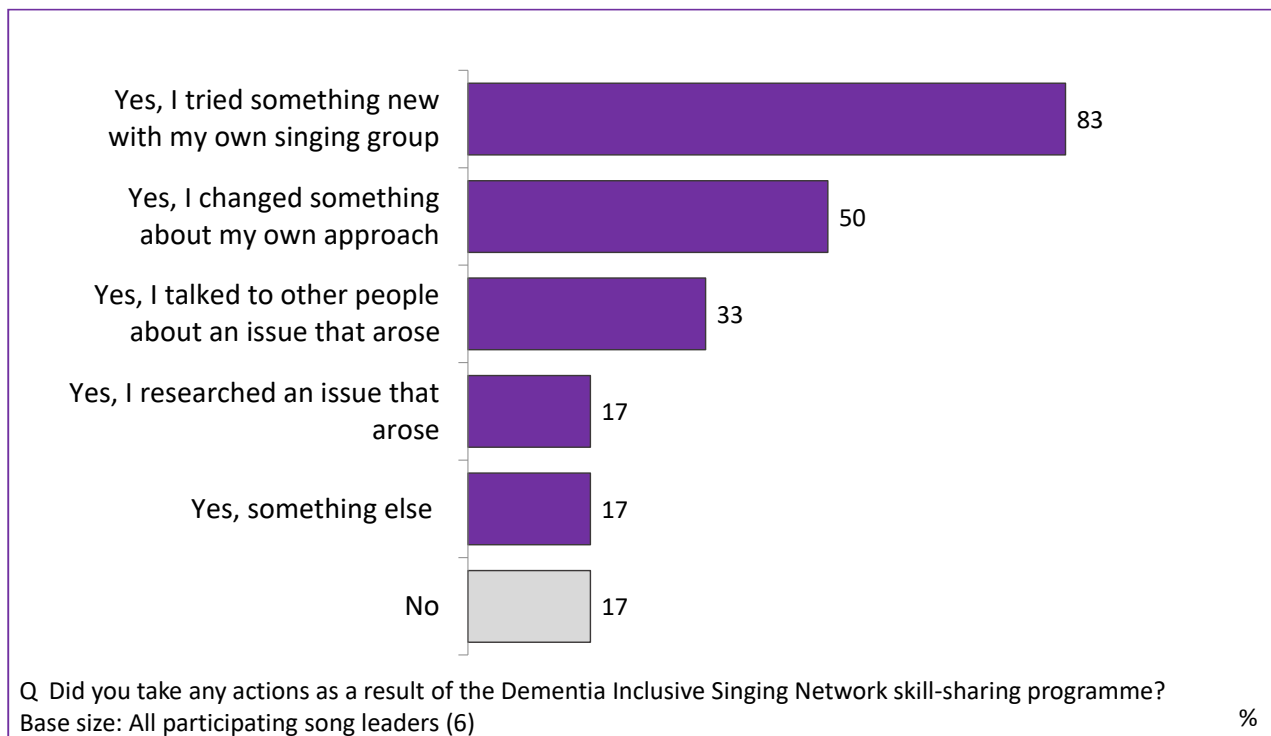
- The group leader sets the tone of the group and the sessions, bringing:
 - Warmth
 - Support
 - The belief that this is ‘more than a sing-along’
 - Knowledge and living experience of dementia
 - Behind the scenes structure (including managing the group dynamic, flexible planning, the musical approach taken, and practicalities such as arranging an accessible venue)
- The musical engagement approach is:
 - Bespoke
 - Organic / a gradual evolution
 - Ambitious, including opportunities for group members to learn and be challenged
- The focus of each session is:
 - Singing!
 - Fun
 - Non-judgemental participation
- Consequently, those in the room experience:
 - Being together in the moment
 - Contributing to the group
 - A feeling of connection
 - Creating and being part of a community
- Ultimately, the group members feel:
 - A sense of achievement
 - Included
 - Valued

The impact of the programme

I feel more connected to my peers. Although there is inevitably limited time as a self employed person I feel enriched by spending time with others doing similar work with different backgrounds and skill sets.

Actions taken following the programme

We asked the participating song leaders to tell us whether they had taken any actions as a result of participating in the programme, and response is shown in the graph below:



All but one of the participating song leaders (83%) had taken an action as a result of the programme, with the person responding 'no' being the individual who had been unable to participate fully due to injury.

The participating song leaders most often *tried something new with their singing group* (83%), followed by *changing something about their approach* (50%) and *talking to other people about an issue that arose* (33%).

Those that took an action took an average of two actions each, in all cases including trying something new with their singing group.

Four examples of actions taken were provided by the participating song leaders, and these were:

"I am still reflecting on some of the stuff shared, and some changes might come from it, but the greater understanding and reflection is also part of the value of this time spent with peers."

“I am experimenting with some of the things I learned or shared through the peer support group.”

“I am using a bit more repertoire in parts.”

“Using a range of lyric enablement - giant post-it note chorus, traditional lyrics and call and response (no lyrics)”

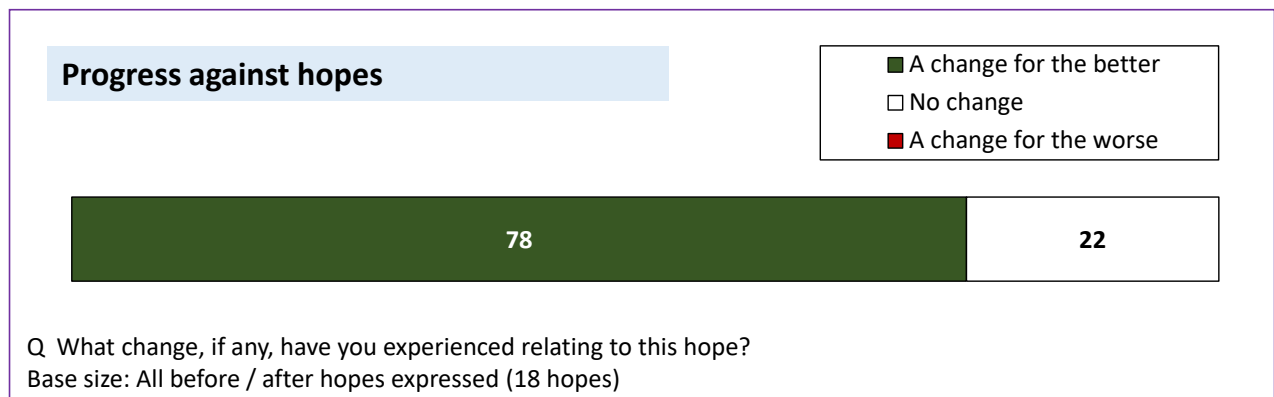
Evaluating progress against personal goals

At the start of the first block of sessions we asked the participating song leaders to tell us up to three things that they hoped to get out of participating in the DISN Skills Exchange Programme. This gives us an indication of personal expectations for the programme.

Personal hopes included:

- Hopes relating to skills / techniques (28% of hopes)
- Hopes relating to working with dementia (28% of hopes)
- Hopes relating to support (17% of hopes)
- Hopes relating to new perspectives / ideas (17% of hopes)
- Hopes relating to understanding operational delivery (11% of hopes)
- Hopes relating to inspiration (6% of hopes)
- Hopes relating to information (6% of hopes)

In March 2024 we reminded the participating song leaders of what their hopes had been, and asked the same individuals to indicate their progress against these. This enables us to evaluate whether personal goals were met:



At the end of the programme all six participating song leaders re-visited their hopes. 18 hopes were listed, and positive progress was experienced against 78% of these hopes. This indicates that the vast majority of the participating song leaders got what they hoped to get out of the programme.

All participating song leaders experienced some positive change. Four participating song leaders experienced *no change* against a single hope each, and these hopes were:

“Song and warm-up sharing.”

“Skill share.”

“To gain more information about dementia as a condition.”

“To learn how other song leaders survive re funding.”

No participating song leaders experienced a change for the worse in relation to their hopes.

The impact of the programme on participating song leaders

We asked the participating song leaders to tell us how they felt about going forward as a leader of dementia inclusive singing activities, and response is shown in the table below:

Base: All participating song leaders (6)	%
I feel supported to lead dementia inclusive singing activities	100
I feel ambitious about going forward as a leader of dementia inclusive singing activities	100
I feel confident to lead dementia inclusive singing activities	83
I feel I have the knowledge I need to lead dementia inclusive singing activities	67

At the close of the programme all participating song leaders (100%) felt *supported* and *ambitious* to go forward as a leader of dementia inclusive singing activities.

All but one participating song leader (83%) felt *confident* to lead dementia inclusive singing activities, and all but two participating song leaders (67%) felt that they had the *knowledge I need* to lead dementia inclusive singing activities.

We asked the participating song leaders about their levels of confidence and knowledge at the start and end of the programme which enables us to track change for individuals:

Base: All participating song leaders (6)	Negative change %	No change %	Positive change %
I feel confident to lead dementia inclusive singing activities	0	50	50
I feel I have the knowledge I need to lead dementia inclusive singing activities	0	50	50

Half of the participating song leaders experienced a positive change in their level of leadership knowledge, and half experienced no change. Similarly, half of the participating song leaders experienced a positive change in their level of leadership confidence, and half experienced no change. As one of the participating song leaders commented:

“I definitely feel more confident with all my groups and more willing perhaps to try different approaches.”

However notably, two individuals experienced no change in their level of knowledge or confidence, and the individual who was unable to participate fully in the programme due to injury left the programme feeling not yet knowledgeable or confident in these respects.

Impact on quality

We asked the participating song leaders to tell us whether they felt that attending the programme had improved the quality, and response is shown in the table below:

Base: All participating song leaders (6)	%
The way that you lead your singing group	100
The experience people have when participating in your singing group	100
The experience people living with dementia have when participating in your singing group	100

All of the participating song leaders (100%) agreed that attending the programme had resulted in improved quality, in terms of the quality of the way that they *lead their singing group*, the quality of the *experience people have when participating* in their singing group, and the quality of the *experience people living with dementia have when participating* in their singing group.

As one of the participating song leaders commented:

"I hope my own learning will benefit the groups I set up and lead in the future."

Challenges experienced

In delivering the DISN Skills Exchange Programme Luminate experienced some challenges in maintaining channels of communication with participants, which led to issues around scheduling and engagement generally.

Looking forward

I really hope the connections we made will continue into the future and that we can all help to support other singing leaders working in this area.

Reflecting on the programme

Reflecting at the sharing event, the participating song leaders felt that the skills sharing visits were a *“valuable thing”* for them which could be replicated further with other song leaders, perhaps taking more account of varied levels of leadership experience and perhaps including group volunteers.

The participating song leaders found the sharing event to be *“almost as valuable as visiting a group”* and they would like to have the opportunity to do this again, perhaps involving a larger group of practitioners.

Ongoing peer support

Together, the participating song leaders spontaneously decided to form a WhatsApp group in order to keep in touch for future peer support.

Next steps

Looking forward, the participating song leaders felt that they would like to see *“a bigger structure to support people”* in delivering singing opportunities for people living with dementia in Scotland, with suggestions including:

- More meeting opportunities for practitioners;
- Offering mentorship for new or less experienced practitioners;
- Building the skills and capacity of group volunteers;
- Planning a wider event that showcases work around delivering singing opportunities for people living with dementia, and makes connections between professional stakeholders;
- Advocating for work around delivering singing opportunities for people living with dementia, including a need for having an arts voice at the table when providing services and support for people living with dementia.

It was acknowledged that activities such as these *“often involve unpaid labour”* and that this must be avoided when engaging practitioners in any way.

Progress against aims and objectives

The following table summarises progress against Luminate’s original aims and objectives for the DISN Skills Exchange Programme.

Luminate Outcome	Indicators of success
To deliver a pilot leaders exchange programme between October 2023 and March 2024, that engages with up to 10 paid participants across Scotland	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ <i>The DISN Skills Exchange Programme</i> took place between October 2023 and March 2024. ▪ 5 song leaders completed the programme.
To enable singing group leaders across Scotland to connect and share relevant knowledge	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ The participating song leaders connected and shared knowledge via Exchange Visits and a sharing event.
To understand how peer learning opportunities can benefit singing group leaders	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ All of the participating song leaders (100%) felt that <i>peer support</i> and the <i>sharing day in March</i> made a positive difference to them. ▪ The participating song leaders left their Exchange Visits feeling “<i>encouraged</i>” and “<i>inspired</i>” and “<i>enthused</i>”, “<i>refreshed</i>” and “<i>re-invigorated</i>”. ▪ All of the participating song leaders that completed the programme tried something new with their groups as a result of the programme.
To improve quality and ambition of dementia inclusive singing groups	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ All participating song leaders (100%) felt <i>supported</i> and <i>ambitious</i> to go forward as a leader of dementia inclusive singing activities. ▪ All of the participating song leaders (100%) agreed that attending the programme had resulted in improved quality, in terms of the quality of the way that they <i>lead their singing group</i>, the quality of the <i>experience people have when participating</i> in their singing group, and the quality of the <i>experience people living with dementia have when participating</i> in their singing group.
To ensure that people living with dementia have a voice in the development of singing opportunities in their local areas	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ People living with dementia were present as group members during Exchange Visits.
Through delivering this programme, to establish a model for future Singing Network knowledge exchange programmes	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ A future model for supporting song leaders should focus around: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Creating opportunities for discussion between peers; ▪ Learning from difference in approach. ▪ Future models should: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Continue to provide participation bursaries in acknowledgement that song leaders are likely self employed; ▪ Anticipate challenges with scheduling and maintaining lines of communication, and look for ways to avoid these; ▪ Manage participant expectations around administration and engagement required in exchange for the bursary.

Concluding remarks

The DISN Skills Exchange Programme was appreciated by the participating song leaders that who all found it to be enjoyable, supportive and relevant.

The participating song leaders learned from and were supported by their peers, and were inspired to take tangible actions as a result of these opportunities. Whilst some of the participating song leaders did not experience any change in their level of knowledge or confidence as a result of participation, they still substantial found value in peer support which would not have been available to them without the DISN Skills Exchange Programme.

In delivering the DISN Skills Exchange Programme Luminare experienced some challenges in maintaining channels of communication with participants, which led to issues around scheduling and engagement generally. This does not appear to have been of substantial detriment to the value experienced by participants when they were actually in a room together, but arranging for this to happen was not always straightforward and future iterations of the programme should look to better manage participant expectations around engagement required in exchange for the bursary.

That said, there is certainly an appetite for Luminare to continue to facilitate opportunities for discussion between song leader peers where they can learn from differing approaches.