

Learning to lead dementia inclusive singing activities

This resource explores the skills and strategies involved in leading dementia inclusive singing. We approach this through the experience of Jo Miller, a skilled community musician new to working in dementia inclusive settings.

 All websites linked to in the text are also shown in full at the bottom of the page.

Jo says:

I was contacted by Stirling Council's Creative Learning & Music Development Officer, who was keen to establish a dementia inclusive singing group in the local area. When **Stirling Carers Centre** came on board we jumped at the chance to work together, and so the 'Stirling Sunshine Singers' began in February 2025. As a local music leader, I'd wanted for some time to develop my practice in the community where I live, to support those living with dementia - and those caring for them. I have many years of experience leading music groups and know well the benefits of singing together. But the dementia inclusive environment was new territory for me.

I sought out opportunities to learn, exploring available resources, investigating other projects and asking around my own network. My colleagues **Kim Edgar** and **Christine Kydd** generously shared their experience. Luminate arranged for me to visit choirs led by Penny Stone ('Let's Sing', Musselburgh) and Bryan Marshall ('Every Voice', Dumbarton). These were invaluable opportunities to observe and participate in sessions with established groups, and to chat afterwards with the song leaders, who were very encouraging. This helped me to feel part of a community of musicians doing similar work. Anne Gallacher at Luminate enrolled me on a dementia awareness training course, and Stephen Deazley mentored me through the early stages of working with the Stirling group. With their encouragement I dusted off my old guitar and set off!

Here's what I learned.



Website addresses linked above

Stirling Carers Centre: stirlingcarers.org.uk/

Kim Edgar: www.kimedgar.com/about-kim/

Christine Kydd: www.christinekydd.com/

Getting going and keeping going

Like all participatory music making, planning is key to success! I had several preparatory meetings with other organisers to make sure we were all clear about our respective roles and responsibilities. As music leader, I also invested in a bit of professional development.

Using the network

- Find out which song leaders are already doing this work. **Luminate's Dementia Inclusive Singing Network** is a good place to start. **Scotland's Singing for Health Network** also has a useful collection of information and resources.
- Ask colleagues if they're happy to share tips and resources to get you going.
- Find out about practitioner-focused training through networks like **Scotland Sings**. If nothing is available, why not approach an organisation to host this?
- Attend a dementia awareness course.



Isabel & Iseabail



Website addresses linked above

Luminate's Dementia Inclusive Singing Network: singing.luminatescotland.org/
Scotland's Singing for Health Network: singingforhealthscotland.rcs.ac.uk/
Scotland Sings: sing.lovemusic.org.uk/

Don't go it alone!

Work in partnership

- Establishing good communication with partners at and between sessions
- Planning ahead
- Being clear about who's doing what, but leave some flexibility

Key tasks

- Publicising the group
- Communicating with carers
- Preparing venue signage, name badges and lyrics sheets in easy-to-read font (Arial 16pt) and bright background (yellow)
- Setting out chairs
- Handing out and collecting in song folders
- Welcoming participants
- Making tea
- Liaising with the venue
- Processing song leader's PVG scheme membership (a legal requirement for these kinds of roles)

Learn about the needs

of those living with dementia and their carers

Get to know people

- Using time at the beginning and end to chat
- Bringing props/prompts
- Nurturing a group identity – this takes time
- Choosing a name

Find resources

to sustain the activity – think about finance and staffing

Gather feedback

and measure impact

- Use existing feedback formats
- Monitor attendance
- Chat informally with participants to learn more about individuals – consider recording comments on a phone (with permission) to capture qualitative feedback

Musical matters

For many years my own practice has been based in the traditional music of Scotland. Initially I wondered if I had the breadth of repertoire which might be required for leading dementia inclusive singing. I'm not known for my familiarity with the latest popular music! In my teens however I played a lot of guitar and sang a diverse repertoire, from the Beatles to American folk songs. I've **really** enjoyed rediscovering this music and realising I had a larger 'song bank' than I thought.

Being your own musician

- **Be the musician you are:** you don't need to transform yourself. It's useful to observe the work of others, but you'll find your own way of working.
- **Be aware of your own expectations:** what feels familiar, and what might be more challenging?
- **Why are you doing this?** Find your way of leading dementia inclusive singing.
- **Risk-taking:** how do you proceed when you don't know what will work?
- **Be prepared to test things out.**
- **Make time** for reflection between sessions and adapt your practice as needed.

Choosing repertoire

• Criteria to consider

- * A mix of well-known and new material. The familiar can be reassuring, but once the group is bonded, consider teaching new items. Short songs work best, with lots of repetition.
- * A range of styles and moods.
- * Melodic range: will people be able to sing it? At an octave and a fifth, 'My Love is Like a Red Red Rose' is challenging for many voices, whereas 'Loch Lomond' is within a comfortable octave range.
- * Songs which may be known by heart.
- * Create print outs of lyrics sheets in folders.
- * Adapt lyrics as needed for length or content. Two or three verses is usually enough.
- * Languages. Is there more than one language amongst participants and could the group include this in their songs? For my group, songs in Scots have been a particularly rich resource.
- * There may be some themes or language less appropriate for your group. Consider, for example, how hymns or other religious items may be received.
- * The role of a chorus: everyone can do this.
- * Counting songs.

• Responding to requests:

you don't need to agree to all of these. I keep a running list of suggestions and dip into it from time to time.

• Sharing a particular item

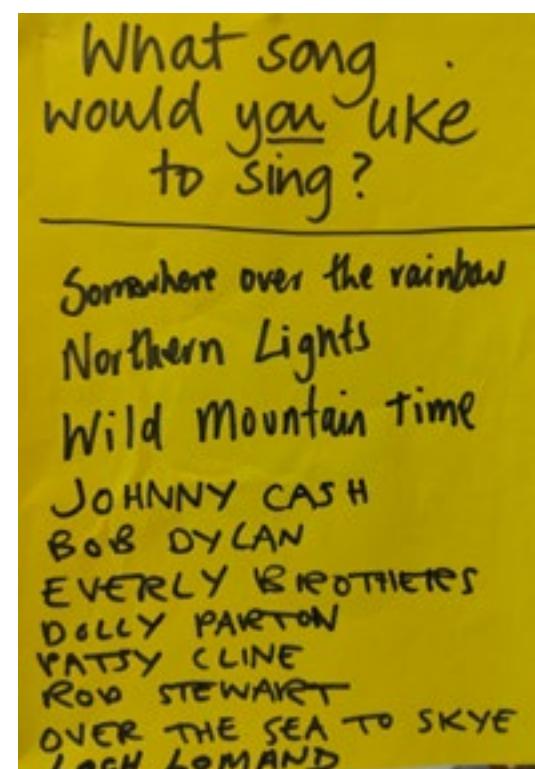
with the group may mean a lot to an individual. One of our participants told me 'Moon River' was the only song he knew by heart, so we sang it to create a moment of agency for that person.

• The role of accompaniment

- * Providing accompaniment for some songs varies the soundscape.
- * Some repertoire is more effective with accompaniment: I can't imagine us singing 'Blue Suede Shoes' without those opening rhythmic guitar chords.
- * It can be powerful to sing unaccompanied.

• Pros and cons of providing printed lyrics:

May be reassuring for some but daunting for others.



Music leading

- **Practise songs** before the session to check key (do you need a capo for the guitar?), introduction and speed.
- **Give clear signals**, such as counting in.
- **Introduce challenges** such as singing simple harmonies.
- **Give participants agency**, for example in making up lyrics, adding actions, taking turns or choosing songs.
- **Be prepared to work slowly**, and with repetition, as needed.
- **Plan** each session but be prepared to respond in the moment as to how you use ingredients such as:
 - * Warm ups (stretching, breathing, vocal exercises)
 - * Call and response songs ('Hello There')
 - * Energetic songs ('Hokey Cokey')
 - * Full voice or 'anthemic' songs (Rod Stewart's 'Sailing')
 - * Fun songs ('Ye Canny Shove yer Grannie Aff a Bus')
 - * Standing songs ('Head, Shoulders, Knees and Toes')
 - * Actions ('Swing Low, Sweet Chariot')
 - * Dancing ('Bring Me Sunshine')
 - * Gentler items ('All I Have to do is Dream')



Annmarie, Joyce & Estelle

Managing the session

I gave a bit of thought to how to arrange the room so that we would all feel comfortable. Personally, I like to see everyone, so we work in a loose horseshoe shape. This depends on the size of the group, of course, and whether extra space is needed for items like walking aids or wheelchairs. It's also good to have a little extra room for movement.

- **What will you wear?** Strong colours are good but avoid busy patterns. I try to be consistent, using the same colour top (blue) and scarf at every session, and always wearing a name badge.
- **Take time to greet people as they arrive.** Engage with individuals by using eye contact, touch or bringing a prop as a talking point. This might be sensory items such as a seasonal plant or flower or something to smell, touch or taste.
- **Consider keeping beginnings and endings consistent.** These act as musical signals to focus attention when you start and indicate a clear ending for the activity. I use 'My Bonnie Lies Over The Ocean' for the former and 'Coorie Doon' to finish.
- **Be aware of individual circumstances.** For example, I include some simple breathing exercises using The **The Cheyne Gang** resources. These benefit everyone but especially some like Margaret, who says:

"I can't tell you what this has done for me. See when I am trying to sing, this has all helped my breathing when I am singing. I have bronchitis and the singing has been helping me with my breath and stamina. After no' feeling well, I am absolutely loving coming here to this group."

- **Read the room and be spontaneous** - there's a place for play, messing about and improvising.
- There's fun and learning to be had from **physical warm-ups**, body percussion and dance. Manage expectations around movement, but it's always good to try.
- **Reflect on role of talking** during the session (for leader and participants). When is it necessary? What's it like if you concentrate on getting a musical flow with minimal speech?
- **Check in with how people are feeling.** Questions to ask might be: 'how does it feel when we sing quietly', or 'where do you feel the song in your body'?



Website addresses linked above

The Cheyne Gang: www.thecheynegang.com/info

- Occasionally **introduce a different element** such as a short listening item: perhaps you play another instrument, or have a guest musician?
- **Encourage others to share aspects of leading** the activity. These could be members of the group who come to the front, or organisers/volunteers who can accompany, hold a harmony, sing a verse or lead part of a round. One week when I was unavailable, our group was led by two Stirling Carers staff, one of whom plays guitar. They had access to our folder of songs, had also attended some previous Sunshine Singers sessions and knew most of the participants.
- How will you **encourage folk to keep singing between sessions**, especially if you have a break of more than a week or two? I recorded videos of myself singing and playing our repertoire and uploaded them to a YouTube folder. Stirling Carers then shared the link with our group. People told me this was a great resource to keep them in touch with the activity, and with our songs.

What next?

I've found this work extremely rewarding in several respects. Getting to know participants and their stories is always fascinating. At the time of writing, Stirling Sunshine Singers' top three songs are:

- **Westerling Home**
- **Bring Me Sunshine**
- **Let The Circle Be Wide**

As a community musician, leading dementia inclusive singing has both drawn on my existing experience and presented new challenges. One of the unforeseen but most pleasurable aspects has been rediscovering bits of my own musical identity which have long been dormant - a reminder that we have more music in us than we realise. It's an ongoing learning journey, and I've found it important to make time for reflection as my experience develops. A great resource for this is to find a colleague doing similar work and establish a peer-to-peer mentoring relationship through which you can both learn, support and grow.

The power of singing with a group



The choir is absolutely amazing. I get so much out of it every week, I really do. It makes you feel cheerful, included, and personally I love singing so it's given me an outlet for this as well. Everyone enjoys it so much – I can hear it in their singing and see it in their faces. It's more uplifting singing together as part of a group than myself."

(Former carer)

Case study

Jim and Jean's experience

Jim (74) has a dementia diagnosis. His main carer is his wife Jean, and they've been attending the Stirling Sunshine Singers since we started. Jim is a naturally reserved man, and in the early weeks his participation was limited. Then one day we sang 'Loch Lomond', at which he wept. Others in the group were supportive, and we reassured him that he needn't feel embarrassed about this response. Jean said:

“He has never done this before and it's great to encourage emotion in him again. He really looks forward to this group, it's the only one he enjoys attending. I definitely enjoy coming myself, this is a release for me coming here, I find it better than sitting talking to people as I can completely escape. I feel like a different person when I come here.”

Jim's now singing more and reading lyrics (with help) from our song sheets. When two old schoolfriends joined the group, he became more sociable. As Jim's symptoms progressed, he kept coming. If he is very tired his participation may be limited but always seems happy to be there. Jean tells me that when Jim became lost in the town centre, he took himself to the hall where we sing. Recently he's been singing more than at any point previously, and openly laughing, clapping and tapping his feet. It's been rewarding to see his growing ease in our company and increasing enjoyment of singing.



Jim & Jean

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