COMMUNITY CHOIR AT THE OLD VIC



EVALUATION 2025–2026

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With generous thanks to all
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COMMUNITY CHOIR

Generously supported by
Tina Alexandrou, **Alan & Trish Banes**, **The Linbury Trust**
and **all of our Big Give supporters**

EDUCATION & COMMUNITY AT THE OLD VIC

Our renowned education and community projects inspire learning and connection. Each year we work with over 9,000 people of all ages, from five to 100+, in London and beyond, as well as a further 25,000 through our online learning platform, The Hub. We reach people at all stages of life to support skills development, employment prospects and wellbeing.

Our programmes build community cohesion, open up access to the arts and develop the emerging theatre professionals of tomorrow. We do this through a range of initiatives, including free theatre tickets, workshops delivered at The Old Vic, in schools, in the community and online, and through innovative employability and training programmes.

Our programmes are free to access and focus on engaging with communities who are underrepresented in the theatre industry, or who have limited access to it.



COMMUNITY CHOIR

Community Choir offers opportunities for participants to learn new skills, using singing to support wellbeing and connection for adults aged 18+ who face barriers to accessing the arts.

The project offers participants the opportunity to explore musicianship, build self-confidence and self-esteem through inclusive, beginner-friendly singing sessions, and to cultivate meaningful connections with new people who share similar interests. No previous singing experience or ability to read music is needed and we actively seek those who may have had limited opportunities to take part in choirs before.

Delivered over ten weekly rehearsals, the project is led by a professional choir leader, who supports the group to work towards a shared repertoire and a final sharing for friends, family and Old Vic staff. Participants develop vocal technique and range, breathwork and ensemble skills, and explore how these tools can be applied to support wellbeing and improve confidence. The programme includes free theatre visits, helping participants to develop a deeper relationship with The Old Vic and with the building itself as a place they belong.

Wellbeing support is embedded throughout the programme in the form of a wellbeing facilitator who is present at every session. An access and travel fund is available to help remove barriers to attendance. Referrals are accepted from link workers, social prescribers, community organisations or via self-referral.

‘The project idea was great because it brought all people together regardless of culture, disability or ‘talent’. We all felt we had something important to contribute and were listened to with care’

Community Choir Participant



RECRUITMENT AND CRITERIA

Applications opened in Mar 2026 for one month, inviting London-based adults aged 18+ to register interest via a short online form. Because this was a new pilot, we introduced a two-stage process where applicants first attended one of two taster sessions on Sat 18 Apr to meet the team and get a feel for the course content. Applicants then completed a follow-up form if they were still keen to join, from which the final cohort was selected. This ensured that we met everyone in person and could manage expectations about what the project entailed from the outset.

Applications were scored against three criteria:

— Applicants are beginners or have little to no experience of singing in a choir
— Applicants have experienced barriers to accessing arts opportunities
— Applicants show clear understanding of, and enthusiasm for, the programme's aims of building confidence, connecting with others and singing for wellbeing.

Priority was given to applicants for whom the Community Choir would represent a significant new opportunity rather than an addition to existing regular singing or cultural activity.

The programme was promoted via The Old Vic's website and social media channels, and through an email campaign to our OV Community Network (over 200 adults who have previously engaged with our community work) alongside a list of 210 people who had signed up to be notified via our website.

We carried out extensive outreach locally, working with organisations including Southwark Carers, Norwood Forum, Waterloo Community Counselling, Coin Street Community Hub and St John's Waterloo. We also sought out organisations further afield who support individuals currently underserved within our work, such as The Proper Blokes Club (Southwark), Old Diorama Arts Centre (Homeless Support) and Piece of Cake Productions, who engage Global Majority young creatives.

The taster sessions received **106 sign-ups**. As these were oversubscribed, we ran a ballot, prioritising applicants who met the listed criteria above and **invited 70 to attend**. In total, **69 attended** a taster session and **51 completed a follow-up application form**. From this list **42 were invited to join the choir** based on their eligibility and availability.

DELIVERY

Workshops

The Community Choir pilot programme focused on foundational vocal skills and collaborative song-making, delivered across 10 weekly workshops between May and Jul 2026, each lasting two hours. The sessions were led by professional choir leader Suzy Davies with wellbeing support provided by Ella Lovelock. Ella's role focused on supporting individual access needs in the room, so that participants could engage meaningfully with the musical activities on offer. They also opened each workshop with a warm-up game, designed to build group connection and strengthen their confidence in communicating.

As most participants were entirely new to choral singing, the early sessions concentrated on the basics such as breathing, listening within a group, and helping each participant find their vocal range and part that suited them. Building this technical foundation first, meant that no one was asked to perform before they felt ready.

Following this, several sessions were spent exploring songs across a range of genres before the group collectively decided which pieces they wanted to learn in more depth. Handing this choice to participants gave them creative agency and autonomy, something we found crucial to individual confidence and group cohesion. Participants advocated for songs that mattered to them personally, meaning that the resulting repertoire was more varied and more meaningful to the group than anything we would have selected on their behalf.

The final song choices spanned a range of genres and traditions:

— *The Rose*, Amanda McBroom
— *Happy*, Pharrell Williams
— *Ain't No Mountain High Enough*, Marvin Gaye and Tammi Terrell
— *Shosholoza*, a traditional southern African call-and-response song
— *This Is Me*, from *The Greatest Showman*
— *Make You Feel My Love*, Bob Dylan

'It's been the highlight of my year so far, I always felt welcomed and supported'
Community Choir Participant

Celebration event

The programme culminated in a sharing on Sat 01 Aug in The Old Vic's Greene Studio. Each choir member was able to invite at least one guest with remaining seats allocated via a waitlist; 54 people attended in total. The choir performed every song learned across the ten weeks in a 45-minute concert, followed by an audience sing-a-long, which included some sign language and movement.

The sharing was followed by a fully catered reception in The Old Vic's Backstage Cafe and Bar. This element proved more significant than anticipated. Being hosted and visibly celebrated within the building signalled that participants were valued by the organisation, which was an experience many had never had in a cultural venue before. Members spoke about the reception with evident pride, both in what the group had achieved and in occupying a space such as The Old Vic. It also created room for social connection between participants, their friends and families and Old Vic staff, extending the relationships built during the workshops beyond the rehearsal room.

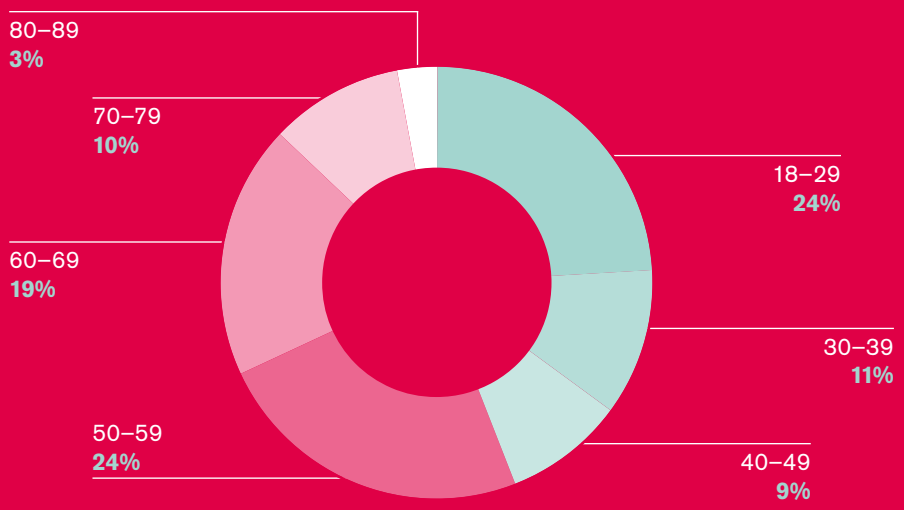
Building a community

All participants have been invited to join our OV Community Network, a brand-new network offering continued engagement through regular newsletters, creative drop-in mornings and ticket offers. This network aims to build and strengthen the connections made between participants during the programme and to continue providing meaningful access to the arts for those facing barriers.

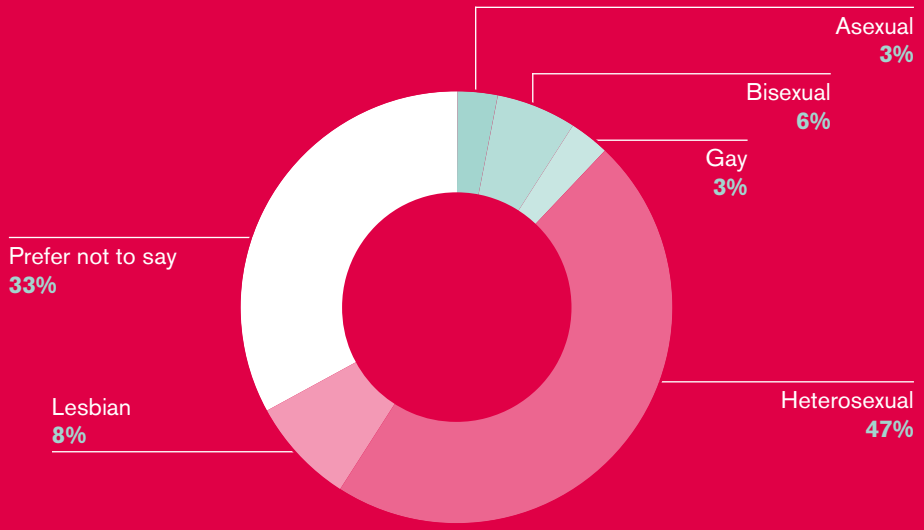
'The workshop leaders couldn't have been more joyful. Their genuine care for each of us and their commitment to getting the best from every choir member in order for us to get the most out of this wonderful opportunity was like a big hug each week'
Community Choir Participant

37 out of 42 participants completed an Equal Opportunities Form at the start of the programme.

AGE

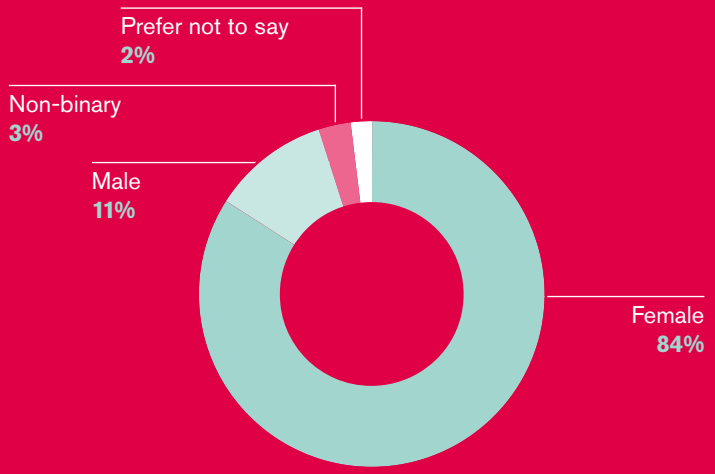


SEXUAL ORIENTATION



PARTICIPANT INFORMATION

GENDER



ETHNICITY

3% Asian or Asian British: Indian

6% Asian or Asian British: Other

3% Asian or Asian British: Pakistani

9% Black or Black British: African

9% Black or Black British: Caribbean

3% Latin American

6% Mixed: Black Caribbean and White

3% Mixed: Middle East and North Africa

3% Mixed: Other

34% White: British, English, Welsh, Scottish, Northern Irish

3% White: Irish

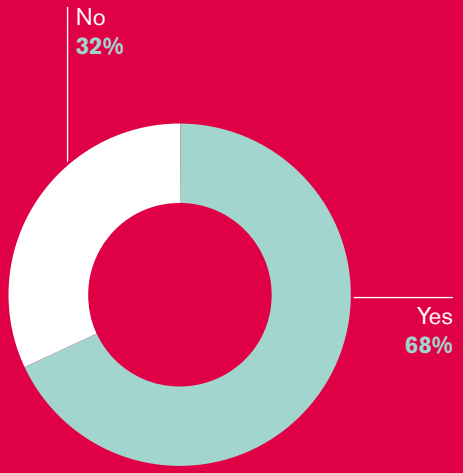
6% White: Other

3% None of the above backgrounds

11% Prefer not to say

Other (Participants specified: Jewish, Kurdish, Sri Lankan and Portuguese)

DISABILITY



Of the 26 out of 38 participants who selected yes:
(able to select more than one response)

31% Learning, concentrating or remembering (e.g. dyslexia, dyspraxia, dyscalculia)

38% Mental health (e.g. anxiety, depression, bipolar disorder)

42% Mobility (e.g. difficulty walking short distances, climbing stairs, lifting and carrying)

42% Social or behavioural (e.g. autism, attention deficit disorder)

12% Stamina or breathing difficulty

4% Vision (e.g. blindness or partial sight)

4% Other (Participant specified: crohn's disease)

CARING RESPONSIBILITIES



26%

Yes



74%

No

BOROUGH

3% Barnet

3% Brent

9% Camden

6% City of Westminster

6% Croydon

6% Enfield

3% Royal Borough of Greenwich

3% Islington

3% Royal Borough of Kingston upon Thames

29% Lambeth

6% Lewisham

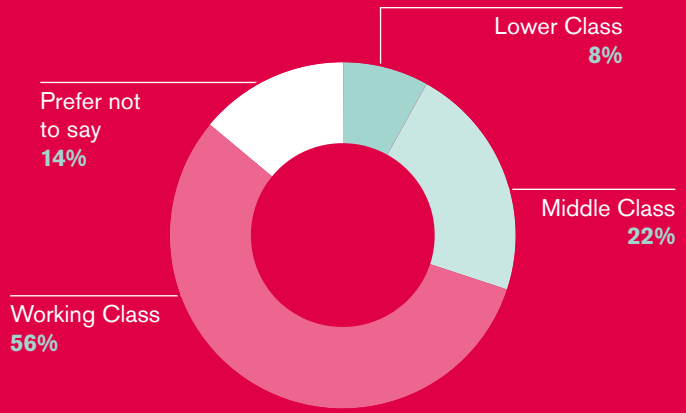
11% Southwark

9% Tower Hamlets

3% Waltham Forest

SOCIO-ECONOMIC BACKGROUND

What do you feel best describes your socio-economic background?



CARE EXPERIENCE

Are you care experienced/a care leaver?

3%

Yes

97%

No

'This was something I looked forward to every week, it gave me peace after a hectic week with the kids , work and health issues . Having that space just gave me time to breathe and think of nothing else'
Community Choir Participant

PARTICIPANT INFORMATION

34 out of 42 participants completed the end of project survey.

QUALITY AND IMPACT

100%

of participants strongly agreed or agreed that:

As a result of this project, they felt comfortable and welcome at The Old Vic

Overall, this project was excellent

Overall, the workshop leaders were excellent.

99%

of participants strongly agreed or agreed that:

As a result of this project, their wellbeing had improved.

97%

of participants strongly agreed or agreed that:

As a result of this project, their confidence in singing had improved

As a result of this project, their musical knowledge and skills were developing

As a result of this project, they did something they didn't know they were capable of.

94%

of participants strongly agreed or agreed that:

Overall, the project was accessible to them; their access needs were understood and supported.

92%

of participants strongly agreed or agreed that:

As a result of this project, they had more confidence to take part in cultural/creative activities.

91%

of participants strongly agreed or agreed that:

As a result of this project, they had built new social connections.

'It's just wonderful to spend time in a space where people assist you with your needs and also still see you as a person. Everyone involved in making this project happen just went above and beyond'
Community Choir Participant

PARTICIPANT OUTCOMES



PARTICIPANT OUTCOMES

PROJECT

What did you find most useful about the project and why?

‘I loved the feeling of community, singing with others.’

‘Coming together and singing made me burst into tears as it was energetically beautiful. We need more of this in this world.’

‘Increased my confidence in singing and my musical awareness and it gave me additional awareness for the needs of others.’

‘Breaks social isolation and loneliness, whatever people’s lived experience is.’

‘Singing and being part of something uplifting and positive.’

‘Meeting regularly every week — I am going to miss it and everyone.’

‘A space to be creative and potentially connect with people local to me.’

‘I found the whole project so positive and life affirming.’

‘Learning to sing in a fun, inclusive and supportive environment.’

SCALE

Participants were asked on a scale of 0–100, how likely they would recommend this project to a friend. The average score was:

98%

0 (not likely at all) **100** (extremely likely)

Participants were asked on a scale of 0–100, to what extent they felt that The Old Vic is an inclusive environment. The average score was:

93%

0 (not very inclusive) **100** (very inclusive)

‘I was part of something bigger than me, you know, and that was a really good feeling because there was definitely camaraderie and a buzz in the room, a shared emotion, a shared experience’

Alex is a 34 year-old Jamaican and British woman who works as a freelance artist. Alex had sung solo before at open mic nights but wanted to join the choir to try group singing because she thought it would be more ‘*comforting and reassuring*’. It was important to Alex to find a project that was ‘*short term and manageable*’, that she could fully commit to and that would hopefully build up her confidence.

When asked how she would explain the project to a friend Alex described it as ‘*amazing*’. Alex explained that the project was well organised with clear objectives and expectations for each session. Alex shared that she does not consider herself a particularly sociable person but that the project had introduced her to a wide group of different people who she wouldn’t normally have socialised with.

‘*I got a lot more exposure to lovely people from different walks of life.*’

When asked to share what made it easy to attend the choir, Alex shared that it was the choir’s inclusivity, accessibility and organisation. This was both in the communication she received outside of the sessions and during the sessions themselves.

Alex talked about the surprising impact of the visual story which was sent before the first taster session. This is something Alex had not come across before and was surprised at how much it had helped reduce anxiety on arrival for the first session.

Alex described feeling ‘*safe and secure*’, that there was no pressure to arrive at each session in a particular way. Alex explained that she knew she could always attend the session even if she was feeling tired because she would be supported and could do whatever she needed to do feel comfortable in the space.

‘*Everybody was accommodated and how, you know, nothing was too much, nothing was, you know, out of the way. Everybody was just really happy and willing to do whatever it was that was needed to make someone feel comfortable.*’

Alex was clear that the aims of the project — to build confidence, creativity, wellbeing and to create connections between adults from different backgrounds were successfully met. In terms of skills, Alex thought that her singing skills had improved and that she was challenged throughout the process in a positive way.

‘*I definitely developed confidence in singing. I feel that I got a lot of positive feedback, a lot of encouragement.*’

Alex shared that she had gained confidence in herself from committing to the programme for the full 10 weeks and had also gained confidence socially. Alex reflected that the project had enabled her to connect with people from a wide range of different backgrounds.

‘*There was a quite a broad age range, which I thought was good and people from all different walks of life, people with varied needs. So that was really good.*’

Alex is a very creative person but said that the project had increased her creativity at home. Alex shared that as the project progressed, she noticed herself returning to writing she had started before and had also started singing at home.

Alex talked fondly about the camaraderie within the group and the atmosphere that was created in the room. Alex explained that when her family had come to the final sharing and noticed the ‘*buzz in the air*’, Alex told them that was what it had been like every week of the project.

Finally, when reflecting on what makes projects at The Old Vic special, Alex used the words ‘*welcoming*’, ‘*inviting*’, ‘*friendly*’ and ‘*organised*’. Alex described how welcome she had felt because the team running the choir were always engaged and positive; wanting to make the experience the best it could be for the participants.

‘*Sometimes you could be in spaces and people project something with their words or their ethos or, you know, because they want to be seen to be doing that thing or be seen to be that thing. But I felt that The Old Vic team actually encompassed it and was about it. That’s what really created all the special moments between the group. I think we were able to flourish because of that foundation.*’

CASE STUDY
ALEX



MUSICAL QUALITY AND SKILLS DEVELOPMENT

The Community Choir was designed to give participants technical musicality, artistic ambition and a high-quality output. This was clearly reflected in the survey outcomes. 97% of participants reported that their confidence in singing had improved and 97% agreed that their musical knowledge and skills were developing.

Within a short 10 week course, a group largely new to choral singing moved from foundational work on breath and finding their vocal range, to complex harmonies, call-and-response singing and mash-up medleys. The facilitators never placed pressure on participants to perform to a particular standard. Even so, the resulting output was of an exceptionally high musical quality, which gave members a sense of achievement and professionalism akin to any mainstream choir. Much of this came from the decades-long professional experience of the Choir Leader, Suzy Davies, in gently pushing community participants beyond their usual comfort zones. Because this was combined with the access provision and care described earlier, participants felt safe enough to stretch themselves and the results were artistically brilliant.

The sharing showed this musical progression most clearly. Friends and family in the audience expressed amazement both at the quality of the sound and at the musical confidence of the loved ones they watched perform. One audience member shared that '*everyone's contribution was not only in key but blended in harmony so beautifully, and that can only be built through understanding, acceptance and desire to excel. It was a powerful and deeply moving performance and exceeded my expectations in every single way*'.

'The first hum on the outbreath did it for me – tears rolled and emotion escaped freely. So glad I came and so overwhelmed by how brilliant the performance was, what a beautiful experience. It has made me want to join a choir myself!'

Community Choir Audience Member

ACCESS AS CENTRAL TO PARTICIPATION

One aim of the Community Choir was to reach Londoners with the fewest opportunities to take part in the arts. 68% of participants identified as disabled, most managing multiple or long-term conditions that had previously kept them from enjoying cultural offers elsewhere in London. The Creative Health Review 2023 found that the **potential of the arts to improve health and wellbeing depends on reaching precisely these isolated groups**, and that embedded access is the vehicle through which that happens. In *Art Cure*, Daisy Fancourt explains that **access to the arts is an enshrined UN human right, but the only one not monitored in any way, and the people with the least access are consistently those who stand to benefit most in terms of health and wellbeing outcomes**.

100% of respondents felt comfortable and welcome at The Old Vic and 94% agreed their access needs were understood and supported.

Access was designed into the programme from the outset rather than handled reactively. An access audit was carried out with every participant before the project began, giving people an early and low-pressure way to share what they needed. All sessions provided a break-out space, and a visual schedule was circulated in advance of each week to support a range of processing needs. A dedicated access fund removed financial barriers to attendance, including covering transport costs. One participant shared, '*I have never experienced being in an inclusive space with such a high level of accommodations for each individual's needs. The visual story reduced my anxiety towards going to a new place by a lot, right from the taster session*'.

'Experiencing a truly inclusive space has changed me. I have always heard about accommodations, inclusivity and safeguarding… but to experience this at my age has made me realise how at ease I can become in social situations, when the baseline is acceptance, community and positive shared goals'
Community Choir Participant

Employing a wellbeing facilitator throughout the course was a further reason participants felt able to engage meaningfully, and one that feedback highlighted consistently, '*seeing how open and positively the facilitator always responded to requests or needs made me feel assured that if I needed anything I was in a safe space to express that. It helped me to relax and feel comfortable to be myself fully*'.

Others described the tailored access provision as the difference between just getting through a session and being able to take creative risks, pushing past boundaries their access needs had previously made them feel ashamed of, '*the team made it so comfortable and safe that I allowed myself to let go of my taboos and barriers*'. Another choir member shared, '*I gained so much more from the experience by existing as I was and not attempting to mask my feelings or behave in a particular way*'.

The inclusive care modelled by the facilitation team was reciprocated between participants, which deepened the social connections that were formed, '*I made some really nice friendships with beautiful people who understand me and allow me to be me without pretending that I don't have pain or can do it all*'.

Ultimately, access provision was the '*foundation that enabled us to flourish*', and the reason the outcomes were achievable for many participants at all.



CONNECTION ACROSS DIVERSE LIVED EXPERIENCE

Another aim for the pilot was to reduce isolation and foster meaningful connections between people of all ages and backgrounds. **Loneliness carries a significant health cost, with social isolation increasing the risk of early death by 26%, an impact comparable to smoking 15 cigarettes a day**. Intergenerational connection between communities is also on the decline, with **only 17% of UK adults regularly engaging with people from a different generation**.

Against this backdrop, the programme deliberately selected an intergenerational cohort aged 18 to 89, with a diverse range of lived experience: 14 London boroughs, a wide range of ethnic backgrounds, 56% identifying as working class, 68% as disabled and 26% with caring responsibilities. It was this diversity itself and '*connecting with people that don't make up my usual social groups*', that came up repeatedly in feedback as the reason the connections between participants were so supportive.

By the final session, 91% of participants reported they had built new social connections. One participant valued the '*real cross-demographic community*', another enjoyed '*being in an intergenerational space*', while another shared that the choir had inspired her to '*engage with people who I don't typically cross paths with. It was truly so lovely to be in a group with such a range of ages!*'.

These connections have even outlasted the programme itself. Participants set up a WhatsApp group entirely unprompted and have since written to staff to share that they are meeting for coffees, attending gigs in Brockwell Park and '*going to the Proms with a whole group of us!*'. For a relatively short length pilot, the fact that the group remains in regular contact is a significant outcome and reflects how genuinely the group came together.

'It's like my inner voice being heard for the first time'
Community Choir Participant

BUILDING SELF-CONFIDENCE AND SELF-ESTEEM

It is well documented that arts engagement can '**provide a sense of purpose, empowerment and personal growth, as well as improving self-esteem and confidence**'. The outcomes of the Community Choir align with this evidence:

97% did something they didn't know they were capable of

91% felt more confident about taking part in cultural activities generally

99% reported improved wellbeing.

These results reflect the deliberate planning decisions that were put in place for a 'beginner-friendly' and supportive pilot. Facilitators used a staggered approach with early sessions designed to build understanding around breathing, listening and vocal range, so no one performed before they were ready. Choir Leader Suzy Davies' mantra of '*if you can speak, you can sing*' recurred across participant evaluations, with one sharing that the facilitators were '*extremely understanding and judgement free. I felt my fears and nervousness were erased away, it gave me so much confidence with singing and I just felt so happy being a part of it*'.

Another aspect that shone through was the group being given full creative autonomy over the song choices they learnt; treating participants as active creatives in the project rather than recipients of it was a noted factor in confidence building, '*I have never been to a project where the facilitators were so welcoming, inclusive and open to so many ideas and suggestions, we were always given so much consideration*'.

Crucially, this confidence did not just end with the sessions but went far beyond and into their everyday lives. Asked what the Community Choir had inspired them to do, participants looked to their creative futures almost without exception, joining other choirs, returning to music after long absences, booking singing lessons, writing again after creative 'drought', joining new community initiatives in their local area and being '*bolder in everyday life*'.



A CLOSER RELATIONSHIP WITH THE OLD VIC

Having Backstage and the Clore Learning Centre enabled us to welcome community participants onsite for the first time. Over a quarter of participants had never set foot in The Old Vic before and 85% agreed that being in the Clore Learning Centre made them feel connected to the theatre.

One Lambeth resident had passed the building for years without entering; she shared that the project and free theatre tickets gave her an experience that '*opened me up to going again in the future*', which she felt would not have been possible without the project. Another described the Clore Learning Centre as '*a new space where I felt like I could belong in London*'.

The celebration event came to be as significant as the sessions themselves. Being properly hosted with a dedicated sharing event followed by a catered reception backstage, communicated that participants were valued across the building, and that their work deserved to be seen, shared and celebrated. Speaking about the sharing event and the impact it had on her and her family, one participant remarked, '*I didn't know that places existed like this for people like me*'.

Participants also valued that The Old Vic's artistic standards and high-quality outputs were extended to them rather than '*diluted down for community projects*'. 100% rated the project and the workshop leaders excellent with one participant describing the programme as, '*powerful and brilliant work, that finally brought me into the world of the previously intimidating grand Old Vic*'.

'It was clear that a lot of care and intention was put into the project and brought into the space each week. I had such a wonderful time and laughed a lot. Thank you all, my Thursday afternoons won't be the same!'

Community Choir Participant

BROADENING REACH THROUGH DEEPER PARTNERSHIP WORK

The choir was heavily female-identifying (84%). **Men face heightened barriers to both arts engagement and social connection, in part because of the additional stigma attached to seeking these out**. Reaching more male-identifying participants would allow us to represent a fuller range of London's lived experience.

We will invest in deeper and more sustained recruitment in this area and adapt how we write and promote our opportunities to reflect the different needs of this audience. This will mean connecting with link workers, health referrers and organisations already trusted by men such as Men's Sheds, Walk and Talk groups, men's health forums, sports clubs and community mentoring networks such as 100 Black Men of London.

'Great vibes, great people, great experiences — thank you!'
Community Choir Participant



IDEAS FOR THE FUTURE

RECONSIDERING TIMINGS AND STRUCTURE

Some participants commented that they mainly got to know the members sitting next to them, which was a consequence of the seating format. Some wheelchair users also found the fixed seating areas difficult, as they were left relying on others to reach the refreshments. We are looking to build in a weekly paired or small group activity that rotates people out of fixed seats. We will also protect a longer social window at the celebration so that participants who need more time to approach others are able to fully participate.

Several participants commented that a two-hour workshop often felt too short once check-ins, warm-ups, and the half-time tea break were all factored in. Our facilitators suggested sessions lasting two and a half hours, would create a more relaxed delivery pace for them and reduce the sense of rushing. This would ensure full reflection at the end of each session, as this was often impacted by timing. We will be looking to expand the timings of sessions for next year to reflect some of this learning.

KEEPING A LEGACY FOR ORIGINAL CHOIR MEMBERS

The most repeated response across the evaluation survey was a request for the programme to continue in some form, so that participants could keep strengthening connections and build on what they had just begun to learn. This is also important in terms of health outcomes with research suggesting that one-off projects rather than sustained engagement can often even have a counterproductive impact on communities.

Across 2026–27 we will explore ongoing touch points for the original cohort to reconnect, sing and continue to feel part of The Old Vic. This is already underway with a reserved place created for Community Choir members to join another Old Vic project, 12 Choirs. This project will see them performing together again on The Old Vic's main stage in Dec 2026, alongside primary schools and other community groups from across London. All choir members have also been invited to join the OV Community Network, which will meet quarterly for socialising and gentle creative activity.

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The Old Vic Theatre Trust 2000 Charity No. 1072590
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