

**Creating Music and Community: an Exploration of  
the Silver Programme at Sage, Gateshead  
Prepared for Communities and Local Government**

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*Creating Music and Community:  
an Exploration of the Silver Programme  
at Sage Gateshead*



*Report by Silver Researchers, part of the Silver Programme at Sage Gateshead, and Newcastle University's Social Inclusion through the Digital Economy (SiDE) project.*

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## **SUMMARY**

This report emerges from collaboration between researchers from the Silver Programme at Sage Gateshead with Newcastle University's 'Social Inclusion through the Digital Economy' project, (SiDE). The reasons for the success of the Silver Programme and the reported benefits of music participation to participants were explored.

Information was gathered through focus groups and semi-structured interviews with Silver Programme participants, with a view to understanding their journey through the Programme. It was found that taking part in the musical opportunities of the Programme supported an enriched sense of self, created a strong community and sense of belonging among participants, and provided a sense of purpose and achievement.

This report highlights the main themes and presents factors contributing to the success of the Programme and factors contributing to benefits for participants. In conclusion, recommendations are made which may be of use to policymakers and music practitioners interested in the relationship between music participation and wellbeing in later life.

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## INTRODUCTION

Choral singing has become an increasingly popular activity, with a substantial growth in community choirs in the UK and across the globe. Choirs and music programmes aimed at older adults are part of this growing phenomenon. A number of academic studies have linked participation in music activities with enhanced wellbeing. This report contributes to these discussions by focusing on the Silver Programme, which is a music participation programme in the North East of England.

The Silver Programme at Sage Gateshead provides choral and other musical opportunities to adults over 50 years old and has over 1,300 members. The Programme has grown enormously since it began in January 2005. The vision of the Silver Programme is to develop a broad range of musical opportunities through a day-time curriculum of supported workshops and events, aiming also to support positive mental and physical health.

At the time the research was conducted the Programme Director was Gilly Love. She had been involved in the Silver Programme at Sage Gateshead since its inception until her departure in 2012. Gilly had been working with older people in a community-arts setting for many years (see appendix 1). After receiving numerous awards for her work, Gilly moved to the North East of England in 1999. As Programme Director, she was pivotal in developing the Silver Programme. Before her departure, Gilly was nominated in the New Year's Honours 2013 and was awarded an MBE for services to community music.

## About Us

The authors of this report first considered engaging in research on the Silver Programme when it was suggested at a meeting of Silver Ambassadors (volunteers from within the Silver Programme) in July 2010. Those of us who came forward shared an interest in research, and believed (from our own experiences and from anecdotal reports) that the Programme was hugely popular and delivered health and other benefits to participants. We felt that initiating a piece of research which explored, scrutinized and documented these successes and benefits would be a valuable endeavour.

We were aware that previous research had been undertaken on the Programme as part of the NDA project (see Creech et al 2013; Hallam et al 2013) but felt that research conducted by its own members (with some support from university researchers) would validate these findings through further explorations of the issues, would be good for the self-esteem of those involved, and would demonstrate the ability of older adults to carry out such a project.

Collaboration with Newcastle University was initiated in November 2010, and we met with Professor Jim Edwardson, a prominent scientist keen to harness the experience

and wisdom of older people in academic research. We were then introduced to staff from the Institute of Health and Society (Dr. Suzanne Moffatt) and the SiDE Project <sup>1</sup> (Mr. Ranald Richardson and Dr. Angela Abbott) who presented an overview of the principles and practice of research, covering a range of relevant issues such as: producing research questions, outlining the benefits and limitations of various quantitative and qualitative research methods, research ethics, and how to manage research projects. From this meeting, Dr. Angela Abbott became involved in supporting the design and progression of our research project.

## Aims and Objectives of the Research

Because of the high demand and current membership, we knew the Programme was successfully attracting members. We wished to account for this popularity and to explore factors contributing to positive outcomes for personal wellbeing. We also sought to explore whether there was a link between the success factors and the perceived benefits. In light of these considerations, our research questions were:

- What factors are suggested by respondents to account for the success of the Silver Programme?
- What perceived personal benefits are derived from participation in the Silver Programme?
- What is the relationship, if any, between the success factors, and the perceived benefits of participation?

A secondary aim of the research was to build upon the skills and knowledge of the researchers themselves, so that increased research skills may reinforce and support Silver Ambassador activities in the future.

## Our Approach

We felt a qualitative approach was more likely to reflect our aims, and this fitted with the skills and experience of the university researcher. As a team of seven researchers, we made decisions about our respective roles and responsibilities on a task by task basis. Our data collection methods included focus groups and semi-structured interviews. We decided to conduct focus groups first so that the concepts and questions we had initially identified as relevant could be tested prior to committing time and resources to individual interviews. We felt that, as fellow participants of the Programme, these methods would create opportunities as well as

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<sup>1</sup> Supported by the RCUK Digital Economy Theme [grant number EP/G066019/1 - SiDE: Social Inclusion through the Digital Economy]. SiDE works with excluded populations to identify and overcome barriers to full participation in the economic, social and cultural life of society.



challenges for the research, as being able to relate and contrast our experiences might open up pertinent lines of enquiry.

Focus group participants were selected from representatives of the music groups in the Programme. A smaller team of three researchers conducted both focus groups. The purpose of the focus groups was to elicit opinions and experiences about the Programme. We did this using post-it notes and flip-chart paper to encourage discussion. Content analysis of this data informed the structure and direction of the individual interview schedule.

Interviews were conducted by pairs of researchers, each pair responsible for interviewing three or four respondents. Our interview sample was identified from across the spectrum of activities by inviting individuals from a membership list which was categorised according to duration of membership, (new and long-standing), and by extent of participation. We used purposive sampling so that a broad range of experiences was included. Twelve participants came forward, and we conducted eleven interviews in total (one respondent withdrew during the process, due to ill health). The interviews were held either in meeting rooms, cafes or in the respondents' own homes. The university researcher interviewed the Programme Director in order to gain insight into the context of the historical development of the Programme, its ethos and its future. This interview was analysed separately to those of participants of the Programme.

Data analysis involved meeting together to 'read through' the typed transcripts in order to seek clarification and compare analysis of content. We then held a research away day at the university to identify the themes emerging from the research. We grouped codes into themes and sub-themes, and then arranged these into an order to identify overlaps, duplications and relationships. Pairs of researchers each took responsibility for investigating and writing up these themes into report sections.

## **JOURNEYS THROUGH THE PROGRAMME**

In this section we summarise responses to questions asked during the semi-structured interviews. We categorise responses into three phases of experience: joining the Programme, taking part in the Programme, and reflections and observations about the Programme.

### **Joining the Programme**

Reasons given for joining the Silver Programme were varied. Most respondents suggested more than one reason for joining the Programme. These reasons included:

- looking for activity and routine following retirement
- a love of singing
- attracted by publicity material
- because friends and relatives were already members
- prestige of Sage Gateshead as a regional music centre



- prestige of the Sage Gateshead building
- to support and encourage another new member
- to derive health benefits following illness
- to learn to play musical instruments

Some respondents described themselves as outgoing and optimistic, whilst others described themselves as more reserved, so it did not appear that the Silver Programme attracted particular personality types. Personal circumstances often influenced decisions to join the Programme, retirement being the biggest factor. Many described losing their usual pattern and routine on leaving work, and felt that engaging in such a Programme would provide structure and purpose. Having the time to attend during the day was also an important factor, as employment had prevented many from taking advantage of such activities in the past. Some respondents described how ill health preceded their decision, and for one respondent, taking part in musical activities became more appealing as physical pursuits became difficult.

Almost all respondents described the process of joining the Programme as straightforward. Being made to feel welcome was a big part of this, as was the variety of offer, ensuring all individuals could find something suitable at an appropriate time. Many respondents described being able to relate easily to other members, and found the transition into the groups unproblematic. This was particularly true of those who joined with friends or family. However, a few respondents described feeling apprehensive about the process of settling into established groups as a new member, and one or two found this initially difficult, especially in larger groups. Some anxieties centred on:

- concerns that the leader/tutor would assume levels of musical competence
- uncertainty about the category of voice to which they belonged and where they should sit
- meeting new people

All respondents, whatever the initial anxieties, went on to describe themselves as fully embedded in the social and musical life of their respective groups. Some described how the Buddy system, which was introduced in 2011, had made this process a little easier.

There is no requirement to audition to join the Silver Programme. This policy is guided by an inclusive ethos so that opportunities to participate are open to all. Indeed, the majority of respondents suggested they would have been too daunted to come forward for auditions:

*'I've never auditioned for a choir and the idea of having to sing on my own would be pretty terrifying.'*

Despite this inclusive ethos, there is still an expectation that groups in the Silver Programme aim for the highest standards possible. This brings a set of challenges to the groups and to their members. The frequent introduction of new participants and variation in levels of skill and experience could potentially impact upon the advancement of the group as a whole, which could sometimes frustrate long-serving members.

## Taking Part

The time invested by participants in the Silver Programme ranged from just a few hours per week to three days per week, and for some respondents, whole days were fully occupied by Silver Programme activities. Reasons for the chosen levels of participation varied. Those who participated in only one or two activities suggested they might like to join further activities in the future, but some were restricted by health issues, caring responsibilities or other personal circumstances and commitments. One respondent who took part in two choirs felt that she would not have the concentration needed to learn an instrument, and so was content with her current level of involvement.

Some respondents have maintained similar levels of involvement since the beginning, usually those involved in a moderate number of activities or those who have recently joined. A few respondents with low participation levels had reduced their activities over time in response to illness, constraints over travel times, or because of a change in personal circumstances. Some indicated they had left activities because they hadn't 'gelled' with the group or with the tutor, or with a particular musical style.

When deciding which activities to take part in, some respondents suggested that reaching a certain level in one group often stimulated interest in another. Sometimes it was the rapport established with particular tutors or other group members that prompted decisions to 'follow their lead'. Most respondents were positive about the range of activities within the Programme, which allowed them to follow a path of their choosing. It was noted, however, that the variety of offer might not be accessible to all due to individual skill levels, or for more practical reasons of location and session time.

Respondents travelling by car sought to avoid the rush hour wherever possible. A few travelled a considerable distance and were more likely to select groups which allowed them to stay all day, rather than travel on numerous days. Most sessions are held in the daytime and this was regarded as more appropriate for older people. The timing of sessions was designed to enable people to use their travel passes<sup>2</sup> within the designated time periods.

The cost of participation was not regarded as burdensome to respondents. Though prices had risen over the years to £4 per session, this was generally regarded as reasonable and good value for money, representing little more than the cost of a coffee. However, it may be the case that some participants limit the extent of participation to keep it affordable, and we are unable to speculate whether cost is a barrier to those not involved in the Programme. In order to promote affordability, there is no requirement to sign up for a whole term. In cases of difficulty, there is a fund which is financed by participants. This fund is managed by a committee of members of the Programme and can be drawn upon.

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<sup>2</sup> *Travel passes for the over 60's cannot be used before 09.30am.*

Some respondents referred to how accommodating the Programme can be. For example, if a problem arises which reduces participation, such as illness or bereavement, a place is kept open until the situation improves:

*'Having had more than a term out, it was wonderful to be able to come back in September and join in with the groups that I'm in, have that hour and a half where you just shut off really.'*

The scale of the Programme and its caring ethos make this possible.

The variety of offer was identified by most respondents as a strength as there were numerous opportunities to develop musical skills and to try something new and different, including activities people had not expected to be able to pursue in retirement:

*'It's made me more optimistic about seeing something and thinking "Have a go. Why not have a go?"...I've been successful in what I've done, I think, and had opportunities I never thought I would have.'*

Respondents valued this variety regardless of the extent of their own levels of participation:

*'I think there's something for everyone there. Even just in the singing, you've got all the different genres, haven't you? You've got classical, pop and rock...Yes, there is such a varied choice of singing and if you'd like to do musical instruments, well then, there's even more, isn't there?'*

The opportunity to embark upon fresh challenges as well as or alongside current activities led to great anticipation of the future and its musical possibilities. The singing groups embrace a variety of genre, and there are different sizes of group which influence how these are experienced. One respondent suggested that there is a marked contrast between learning in larger rock music groups, where the emphasis is often on making things 'hang together', compared to learning in smaller groups, where the emphasis is on particular instrumental skills. Some groups, such as rock and pop, have been set up in response to interest expressed by participants, and others, such as recorders and bell plates, are peer-led.

Participation in singing groups within the Programme has led to opportunities to take part in larger events, including projects involving different age groups, and this was appreciated. There was general satisfaction that there are performance opportunities for all groups and that these take place at a variety of interesting venues including Sage Gateshead.

Several respondents commented upon the extra activities which take place throughout the year, such as summer break activities or residential trips. For instance, the Programme Director organised special music days separate from the usual groups, such as a 1940s Day; a Calamity Jane Day and a Music Hall event where people from all parts of the Programme could come together, dress up and have fun. These were much enjoyed by respondents.

Some participants made reference to the voluntary roles and opportunities which were available within the Programme. This could involve supporting the activities of

the Programme as an Ambassador or Buddy, or through involvement in outreach activities, such as Silver Lining, which supports music participation for older adults with dementia living in care settings. Having an opportunity to make an active contribution to the running and development of the Programme was regarded as important and valuable.

## Observations and Reflections

When the Silver Programme began, Gilly Love was its sole leader, and consequently her vision strongly influenced its development. The first choir started by Gilly was named the Silver Singers. Due to demand, there were soon several Silver Singers groups on different days, all being led by Gilly. It was noted that the leadership of the Silver Programme had always welcomed and responded to participants' suggestions, including ideas about expanding the offer. The growing number of tutors and venues opened up a wealth of further opportunities within the Programme, such as the creation of Silver Rock. However, some respondents were concerned that, as the Silver Programme had grown, it had become a victim of its own success and fears were expressed that it could become too big and impersonal:

*'Even though it's got much bigger, it's still a caring community. How long that can go on really, as things get bigger, would be a slight concern, I think.'*

During the research interviews, several respondents offered suggestions for improving the Programme further, such as aiming to become *'more professional'* and attracting a greater number and wider social mix of new members, trying different venues, and by continuing to expand the musical offer. However, others felt that such moves might encourage the various elements to move away from the original core choral aspect of the Silver Programme.

Venue changes were raised as an issue of concern. Some people regretted that the Silver Programme was no longer as connected to Sage Gateshead as it had been in the past. The prestige of Sage Gateshead as a building and as an organisation had made one respondent feel *'part of something that was important'*. Since many groups were now being held away from the Sage Gateshead building, one respondent felt like the Programme was no longer *'in its home'*.

At the time that the research was being undertaken, the Programme Director announced she was leaving, and no replacement had yet been found. This may have influenced the degree of concern articulated about the future direction of the Programme. As one respondent remarked:

*'It's crucial, I don't quite know how you get round it really. Because there's some very good people, but it's this combination of being good (talented), but also having the necessary bounce and force and vigour to drive things on because it's a very big and dispersed Programme. It's very big. Keeping tabs on everything that's going on and enabling things to flourish is going to be a hard job.'*

The eventual departure of Gilly Love as Programme Director in 2012 created some uncertainty among participants as she was regarded by many as crucial to its successful development and its positive ethos. At the time the research was concluded, no replacement had been appointed to lead the Silver Programme, although the Programme itself continued.

## **MAIN THEMES**

This section draws together elements from the research into the main themes which emerged. Some of these themes corresponded with earlier assumptions we held about the Programme (derived from earlier focus group discussions and from our experience as Programme members), but some emerged from the data in ways we had not anticipated.

### **Post Retirement Transitions**

The Silver Programme is open to all adults over 50 years old, therefore not all participants are retired from paid employment. However, retired people constitute a large proportion of members of the Programme, and all respondents in this research had retired. Indeed, most respondents stated that the process of retirement prompted the decision to join the Silver Programme.

Occupational norms, health and financial circumstances influence when and how people retire. Common understandings of retirement have been influenced by a former period of economic life in which heavy industry and manufacturing predominated. In this era, life post-retirement was often spent in relatively poor health, with a focus on leisure and relaxation (Nelson and Bolles 2010). For those in professional occupations, retirement was regarded more as the opening of new horizons and opportunities for self-development. Since the economy has become more service oriented, and as people experience better health in later life, expectations have changed. With increasing longevity and improved health in later life, a retirement based purely on leisure no longer makes sense as we are likely to spend more years in retirement than previous generations. This is in spite of increases in the state retirement age and the increasing propensity for older adults to work beyond the state retirement age (Wheatley 2013). Therefore, the more emergent view of retirement frames it as an opportunity for personal growth and self-fulfillment. Nelson and Bolles (2010) suggest the transition from work can bring about a change in our social networks, which can be negative, but it can also open up opportunities to engage in more fulfilling activities and meet new people. They argue we should view retirement as moving 'from something to something'.

Attitudes to ageing and responses to retirement are often reflected in the types of activities that older adults engage in. Some of these activities may be gender-normative, with men and women pursuing separate activities. Some may continue to pursue their careers indefinitely; some may opt for part-time employment; engage in volunteering activities; care for grandchildren; or take up hobbies such as gardening, crafts and cookery. Many will participate in learning opportunities of various kinds. For some, engaging in the arts, including music will be a particular attraction.

Several studies have sought to identify a link between attitudes to ageing, activities in later life, and general wellbeing. For example, Mein et al (2003) found that retirement at age 60 had no effects on physical health functioning, but was associated with an improvement in mental health, particularly among high socio-economic status groups. A twenty year study of ageing in Australia found that negative self-perceptions of ageing increased the risk of dying by 12% and the risk of a cardiovascular event by 34% (Sergeant-Cox 2013). However, as Bedding and Sadlo (2008) have proposed, the way different activities contribute to the wellbeing of retired people is not well understood. In their study which explored artistic practice among older adults, they found that painting brought 'satisfaction, challenge, time transformation, a sense of achievement, productivity and a boost to confidence'. They found that benefits were derived, not just from the artistic practice, but from participating with others. Being able to learn and be encouraged was an important aspect, and the socialising was regarded as equally important to the art itself.

As Robert Atchley (2000) argues, retirement is often viewed as an event, yet it should more properly be regarded as a process. He proposes six phases of retirement that represent a transitional process that some individuals go through when they permanently exit the workforce. He suggests that these phases do not apply to everyone as retirement is experienced on an individual basis. These phases include:

- **Pre-retirement** – disengaging from the workplace and planning for what retirement will entail
- **Retirement** – during this phase people take one of three possible paths, the honeymoon path, feeling that you are on permanent holiday, or the immediate retirement routine, or the rest and relaxation path of low activity
- **Disenchantment** – following the honeymoon period there may be a period of disappointment or uncertainty
- **Reorientation** – people have a period of reorientation to design a lifestyle that is satisfying and enjoyable
- **Retirement Routine** – this can last for many years
- **Termination of Retirement** – when a person can no longer live independently due to disability or illness

Given this process understanding of retirement, we should perhaps think of it as 'a stage of life that can last for many years' (Price, 2013). Similarly, Wheatley (2013) proposes that retirement affects people in different ways and can be experienced in similar stages to bereavement, including loss, denial and anger, which require adjustment. It therefore becomes increasingly important to consider how one should deal with the loss of paid employment and structure the forthcoming years.

Considering participation in musical activity in particular, Creech et al (2013) explored the relationship between active music making and subjective wellbeing in older peoples' lives. Drawing on three case studies (which included the Silver Programme at Sage Gateshead), they asked a sample of older people to complete questionnaires and psychological needs-scales which related to autonomy, competence, relatedness and self-realisation before and after a substantial period of engagement with music. They found that groups engaged in music-making gave more positive responses. They suggest that enhanced wellbeing may be due to an increasing sense of purpose through progression, that greater control and autonomy

may be derived from the 'holistic nature of musical engagement' and that social affirmation was improved by greater social interaction, giving and receiving peer support and by giving something back to the community.

A number of issues were raised by respondents of this research, including the way retirement meant a change or loss of structure to the day, and the loss of opportunities to demonstrate commitment, self-discipline and effective self-organisation. Retirement was sometimes described as disrupting one's sense of identity, status and belonging, with some loss of the social groups which had been established at work. There were positive elements to retirement as well as the challenges described. Post-retirement changes were identified by respondents in a number of different ways. These included:

- influencing wellbeing
- creating routine and structure
- having direction and focus
- encouraging self-discipline
- rebuilding one's social network
- having the freedom to initiate or rekindle one's interests
- renewed self-confidence
- ability to draw upon existing skills
- being able to step outside of the everyday

### **Changing Health Circumstances in Later Life**

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A common theme in the literature suggests that participation in music activities can support better health and wellbeing (Wise et al 1992; Clift et al 2008, 2009, 2010; Skingley and Bungay 2010; Hallam et al 2013). For older adults, health circumstances can play a greater role in current circumstances and concerns, and in occupying thoughts and concerns about the future. It is therefore more likely that health benefits are suggested as a potential factor influencing involvement in music programmes than for younger age groups. In this research, we asked respondents whether they felt their participation had any such effect on health and wellbeing. Given that the Programme is open to individuals over 50, with a participant age range of around 40 years, it is likely that the health circumstances of participants vary considerably.

We found that most respondents did not strongly identify significant physical health benefits which could be attributed to their involvement in the Silver Programme, although there was some acknowledgement that singing improved breathing.

*'Actually I think it helps you exercising your vocal cords and your lungs. So I'm sure it does help with the breathing'.*

Some suggested there may be a general benefit to being more active, both physically and mentally:

*'I feel a lot fitter. Whether that is the fact that I have retired, or – I am doing a lot of other things, some more exercise and everything. But, I like to have*



*something to work at. It keeps your brain going. Just learning music is really good for that. I hope it is beneficial, but I'm sure it probably is'.*

There was a suggestion that whilst there was no direct benefit to health, having a focus in life distracted from the possibilities of becoming ill:

*'Sometimes we laugh and say that we haven't got time to go to the doctors because we've got too many things on.'*

The most common response was to propose a link to cognitive improvement and emotional wellbeing. This resonates with existing literature. As Clift et al (2010) found:

*'Choral singing involves education and learning which keeps the mind active and counteracts decline of cognitive functions'.*

Several respondents in this research commented on the way the process of learning music improved mental stimulation, and on the potential for music participation in group settings to counteract depression and stimulate feelings of emotional wellbeing. As one respondent put it, taking part produced a *'high glow for hours to come'*, or, as another suggested, the Programme offered *'another part of your life which is on the positive side as opposed to the negative side'*. The strong sense of belonging among participants was also cited as a factor influencing positive feelings of wellbeing. These comments alert us to the way perceived improvements to health and wellbeing is a consequence of various factors present within Silver Programme.

## **Expanding and Exploring Interests**

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Several respondents referred to retirement as bringing greater freedom and time to engage in interesting and stimulating activities. Whilst the context may differ for individuals (influenced by health and financial circumstances, ongoing work and caring responsibilities and other interests etc.) for most people, this stage in the life course afforded greater opportunities for self-expression and self-development than previously experienced. One respondent, a former teacher, described her thoughts on leaving behind a particular aspect of her paid employment:

*'That was one of the things that I thought when I walked out of the job: that I just actually never want to have to perform again. I'd rather just be me. I'd like to be me.'*

Some respondents found that, as members of the Silver Programme they could pick up interests they had pursued when younger, whether this was regaining the sense of enjoyment experienced from family sing-alongs, earlier experiences of choral singing or playing musical instruments.

An important aspect was the creation of anticipation, an expectation that there will always be something to look forward to, such as the next group session, the next public performance, the next special event.

*'I suppose always the feeling of there's always going to be something just around the corner.'*

Participants were able to engage in enriching and fulfilling experiences to create a more purposeful retirement. Most respondents described their initial excitement at these opportunities for self-development, which ranged from performing in a rock band, to singing operatic arias in a cathedral, or playing a ukulele on stage in the main concert hall at Sage Gateshead with the National Ukulele Orchestra of Great Britain.

*'Just about anything musical you want to do, you can do. This, in retirement, is something that's totally unexpected and amazing.'*

Skills and knowledge brought from working lives or other activities could also be brought to bear in the supporting roles of the Programme (such as the Silver Ambassadors and Silver Champions)<sup>3</sup>, which were regarded by several respondents as an asset to the Programme. Those engaged in these roles felt that their opinions and expertise were valued by the management and participants of the Silver Programme. For some, contributing in this way offered more than an opportunity to increase musical skills, it enabled the development of what might be termed an unpaid "encore career". The Programme can provide a set of structures, routines, responsibilities and opportunities for continuous self-development similar to those experienced within paid employment.

## **Disrupting and Creating Everyday Routines**

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Though potentially useful as a frame of analysis, because of the small sample size we did not seek to categorise respondents into the retirement phases outlined by Atchley (2000). Respondents who had recently retired described how the Silver Programme had rebuilt routine and structure to their lives, as the initial freedom and fluidity enjoyed at the early post-retirement phase could not be sustained for long.

*'When you first retire it's tempting to think, "Hey we are on holiday, isn't this fun?" You're not. You've got to do something that gets some pattern back into your life.'*

The importance of getting a direction and focus in your life was echoed by respondents who were looking for something new upon leaving paid employment. Having the ability to select as many activities as one wished from a broad timetable meant the Programme was accessible and could fit with lifestyles and existing commitments. For those with few activities already, the Programme provided greater self-discipline, helping people to get up in the morning with a renewed sense of purpose. This was reflected, for example, in the way they needed to be organised, such as ensuring that they had the correct music and kept it in the right order. Respondents commented that they invariably felt better when attending classes and

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<sup>3</sup> See p.28 under the heading, 'Supportive Structures and Cultures' for an explanation of these roles

many described the sense of commitment and responsibility they felt towards the other people in the group.

*'I think there are many factors that keep me going. I'm quite lazy in many ways and getting up every Tuesday and Wednesday is a discipline. I felt that was quite useful.'*

Sometimes, aspects of one's personal life affect the capacity of some individuals to take part in activities as they might like. Caring responsibilities were reported as restricting the type and number of activities, but even limited participation could provide respite from everyday activities.

*'If I'm having an off day or worrying about something or something's happened, by the end of the session you've forgotten about it. I think you do concentrate on the singing and wanting to do your best for the leader and just enjoy it, it's just uplifting.'*

Other issues raised included:

- socialising with people from different walks of life
- increasing opportunities for enjoyment
- expressing one's personality through humour
- going beyond usual responsibilities (e.g. caring responsibilities)
- shifting musical habits to explore new genres

In conclusion, the overwhelming response from respondents was that the Programme made a significant difference to the quality of their lives post-retirement. There were challenges for some people such as a loss of professional status, loosening of ties with communities of work, and the disruption of structure and sense of purpose. For many, the Silver Programme eased the transition from work to retirement by bringing structure and purpose to the day, a sense of community belonging, and the opportunity to enjoy new experiences. It was clear that for many respondents the Silver Programme enabled them to re-imagine themselves and their futures, creating new or reawakening former identities. This was regarded as a valuable aspect of their participation.

## Appeal of the Venue

Sage Gateshead is an impressive building situated on the south bank of the River Tyne. It was built in 2004 as part of a wider Programme of urban regeneration of Gateshead and Newcastle. Iconic arts buildings are increasingly common ways of marking such transformation of the urban landscape. As Sir Norman Foster (Lord Foster of Thames Bank), the eminent British architect, asserts:

*I have always believed that the arts are an essential part of the life of a city. The arts can inspire and educate, they can also be a force for the revitalisation of a city district. When we designed Sage Gateshead, it was foremost in our minds that the project should not only contribute to the urban*

*regeneration of Gateshead, and symbolise the cultural emergence of Tyneside, but also provide an 'urban living room' in which the local community can enjoy a wide range of music. (Foster, 2013)*

As well as being a cultural centre and entertainment hub, Sage Gateshead is also a learning environment. A report by HEFCE (2006) suggests that the design of physical spaces are linked to 'an institution's strategic vision' and articulated in every detail of the design, and that the particular characteristics of learning spaces can be important for creating motivational atmospheres.

An important consideration to architectural design is the sense of space that is created, and the emotional responses they elicit (Allen 2006; Zumthor 2010; Kanjo et al 2013). Kanjo et al (2013) in a study of people in urban environments found that there is a complex interplay between emotion, mood and places, which is influenced by a number of factors. Allen (2006) argues, from a phenomenological perspective that our experiences are 'had, not known – that they come about through our involvement in a world that is ready-to-hand'. As we experience different urban settings, we are affected by them in various ways, experiencing excitement, fear, comfort etc., without necessarily identifying why this is so. The range and type of spatial experiences may alter in later life as older adults may lose attachments to some physical places or journeys from home when retiring from paid employment.

In this research, we considered the felt experiences of respondents involved in the Silver Programme by exploring experiences of space and place. The importance of Sage Gateshead as a venue came through very strongly. The key elements included:

- the 'iconic' status of Sage Gateshead
- status of Sage Gateshead as an international music centre
- vibrant atmosphere and sociality
- accessibility and comfort

Other aspects of the venue which were reported by some respondents as important included:

- availability of the rehearsal rooms
- the experience of performing on the concourse and in the concert halls of Sage Gateshead
- possibilities of mixing with international visitors and performers
- the buzz created by the coming together of the wider musical community
- interacting with different generations of people in one space
- being amongst musicians and performers on the concourse or in the café
- visibility of information about the range of musical opportunities
- panoramic views of the river and city

## **Iconic Status of Sage Gateshead**

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As well as a modern structure designed for accessibility and comfort of the wider community, Sage Gateshead is a prestigious centre for musical learning and

performance. The functional and aesthetic elements of the building, designed as an impressive entertainment arena were an obvious positive aspect of participation in the Programme. These responses suggest value was placed on Sage Gateshead as an iconic building and purpose-built venue for participation, but also as a prestigious music organisation. In combination, they gave a definite kudos to participants of the Silver Programme among family and friends as the name is immediately recognisable and carries some prestige. The building's iconic status and appearance drew some respondents to the venue.

*'If you stand in here at night- it is just so beautiful...it gives you a sort of warm glow to be part of it.'*

Several respondents suggested that whilst the initial attraction was the building and its location, it was also its status as a music organisation that brought people 'through the door' and this held a more enduring appeal.

*'It was a real attraction in that initially, it was an exciting building, exciting location. It was great; you felt that you were really part of something that was important.'*

## **Vibrant Atmosphere**

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The enduring attraction in terms of positive experiences of place were often described in terms of the vibrancy or buzz created by the people within the groups, wherever these were located. Sage Gateshead in particular was felt to create this 'buzz'. Respondents frequently referred to the main concourse where musicians of all generations mix together, but being able to participate in the wider city's cosmopolitan atmosphere was also an attraction. One respondent, who lives in a rural area, commented:

*'It puts me on a high because I get a buzz from going into the centre (of the city) and seeing young people. You see, that never happens where I live. You don't see groups of young people, and I see faces that aren't white. I miss that.'*

The inter-generational atmosphere was particularly welcomed:

*'To me, the Sage has always been the fact that it's almost cradle to the grave, isn't it, if you want to put it that way: you've got little toddlers, people bringing their grandchildren in and then you've got the Silver Programme. Some of the people are in their 70s and above. So, I like the wide age range.'*

For this reason, some felt other venues were not comparable in terms of experience, as often they accommodated activities mainly aimed towards older adults.

*'I liked going into the Sage because it wasn't just old people. I don't know what I thought it would be. They said "Over 50" and I thought it might just be very, very old people, but in fact I loved going in and you would see young people and they would have bass cases, violin cases. You'd see them in the*

*café and you'd know that different things were going on and different musical things. I used to stand for ages looking at the notice-board and thinking, "Gosh, I wish when I was young I'd done more music."*

Whilst Sage Gateshead as a venue was regarded as an important pull factor towards the Programme, and was positively experienced by respondents when taking part in musical and social activities, Sage Gateshead building was not sufficient in itself as a motivation for continued participation.

*'I think the general feeling of coming to the Sage was certainly part of it. But as things have gone on, obviously we're in different venues and different places; I think the important thing is the group really, wherever you are taking part.'*

Some respondents suggested that they may never have got involved if the Programme had been started elsewhere. There was a feeling among some respondents that the Silver Programme was being pushed out and sidelined because of commercial considerations, and whilst the change of venues had not significantly impeded their enjoyment of the Programme and its community, their connection to the prestige of Sage Gateshead had visibly waned.

## **Accessibility and Comfort**

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Accessibility and comfort are important considerations to the overall experience of many older adults. Sage Gateshead building is a recently constructed purpose-built music venue which was designed in a way which would be suitable for a range of visitors, including those with disabilities. Respondents noted that the building is well catered for in terms of access to public transport and car parking facilities. The building was described as warm and comfortable, with a central cafeteria and good access to toilets. The concourse regularly hosts events and small performances, the 'stage' area positioned to take advantage of the dramatic river view and skyline. This social amenity was highly valued by respondents.

However, some respondents suggested that the building's elevated position on the banks of the Tyne made it difficult for those with mobility issues to reach on foot, and this is exacerbated in bad weather. Its location in the centre of a busy city conurbation was also regarded by some as problematic. Avoiding rush-hour traffic was an important consideration for some in selecting appropriate music opportunities, at Sage Gateshead and at other venues across the city. Some of the new venues were regarded as less comfortable, this was because of inadequate heating, more difficult access on foot and less convenient public transport.

## **Influence of the Music**

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An early question raised by the research team was whether there was something different or special about participation in a music programme that might contribute to



enhanced wellbeing, over and above those which are achieved by other activities, such as gardening or dancing. Clift et al (2008, 2009, 2010) suggested that choral singing involves 'education and learning which keeps the mind active and counteracts decline of cognitive function'. Skingley and Bungay (2010) also found that among the benefits of singing was cognitive stimulation and learning.

Respondents in this research noted a number of specific ways in which the music itself had an influence on the perceived benefits of participation in the Programme. These included:

- emotional connection to the music itself
- participation in performances
- shared experiences of music-making

## Music and Emotion

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A range of sentiments were expressed by respondents about the effect the music had on them, including comments such as:

- *'music lifts you'*
- *'reasons for success have 'got to be about enjoyment'*
- *'completely forget about everything and just enjoy it'*
- *'it makes you happy, gives you joy and brings happiness'*
- *'I enjoyed it so much I decided straight away to continue',*
- *'it's a mood enhancer'*
- *'you feel brighter, you feel cheerful' and 'just from day one it was such a lot of fun and you have a lot of laughter'*
- *'I think most of all the enjoyment, the sharing of something'*
- *'the people who come along seem, well, they come to enjoy it'*
- *'well it's exhilarating and I feel safe and on that high glow for hours to come'*
- *'it puts me on a high'*
- *'it is more than just time for enjoyment, it can be a real life saver'*

Music-making was often described in emotional terms by respondents. We suggest that the music itself has a central role in lifting spirits and fostering enjoyment, creating laughter and allowing people to forget troubles and worries momentarily.

*'Each session provides laughter and an oasis of peace in the day, when people are released from pressures and the worries of life.'*

Such changes to our feelings and moods can contribute to enhanced emotional wellbeing. Some noted how the Programme could help those who were feeling low, depressed, or worrying about other aspects of everyday life.

*'I was suffering from depression before I came to the Silvers and had very low self-esteem and no confidence at all. I wouldn't say I was a confident person now either, it's quite an effort to do something like this. But I couldn't have done any of it without the Silvers and I couldn't keep going now without them.'*



One respondent with considerable health issues and caring duties felt that an hour and a half concentrating on singing was vitally important for her own wellbeing. Even when the music encouraged emotions that were not always upbeat or uplifting, they were regarded positively as they allowed people to experience a range of emotional registers, and perhaps reflect and draw on memories and interpersonal relationships.

*'If it's a sad song it might affect you. My sister lost her mum-in-law in November, and the Autumn Leaves with Silver Singers, I don't know why it just... That was very poignant. Every time I sang that I thought of her.'*

The music could also affect participants by allowing them to experience a sense of perfection which enriched their lives.

*'Sometimes you get those wonderful moments when something sounds just perfect.'*

These special moments could occur in group practices or in performances. These moments which introduced feelings of joy, fun or personal reflection were clearly influential to the continued participation within the Silver Programme. The feeling of being uplifted could often last well beyond the session itself:

*'When I come in after I've been singing, my wife can always tell what sort of a mood I'm in because if I'm in a good mood, it seems I sing when I come in the house. If I'm not in a particularly good mood, I keep fairly quiet. It's a mood enhancer, isn't it, I think? You've met your friends, you've had an enjoyable day.'*

Another respondent described how this feeling of being uplifted by the songs stayed with her, and she continued singing on the metro train home. The same respondent also described how listening to the male voices in her choirs brought particular joy, as it gave more variety to the sounds produced. For another respondent, having an emotional connection to the music, together with the beautiful sky she witnessed outside the venue, led her to relate religious significance to the experience.

## Performance and Emotion

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The feelings of being uplifted by music are perhaps heightened by taking part in performances. Whether they were performing at the Sage Gateshead building or a different venue, most respondents commented on the importance of performance as a goal to work towards. As well as providing a focus during practice, performances provided an opportunity to demonstrate their progress to family and friends.

*'I just thought that I was coming to a singing class. Then all of a sudden we've got a gig, and I said, "What's a gig?" (Laughter), you know. They explained that...I'm excited. Excited and 'Yes, we're going to do it brilliant [sic], you know.'*

Described by some as nerve-wracking and as a 'necessary evil', but by others as a highlight, the majority of respondents felt that performances were positive experiences which brought people together. Performing also encouraged respondents to aim for the highest possible standard because as one respondent suggested, "you want to perfect it". Despite the initial fears generally experienced, many were now so accustomed to the process, they described performing as 'a piece of cake'. When performances did not go so well, some respondents described feeling a little exposed and disappointed. However, when they did go well, respondents described feeling emotionally lifted by a mixture of excitement and relief. Receiving positive feedback from a successful performance was regarded as a valuable and rewarding experience:

*'It's wonderful when people come in and say 'Oh, that was really, really good. We really enjoyed it'. You get such a feeling of satisfaction, such a feeling of achievement'.*

The lack of certainty about how a performance will go creates this mixture of anticipation, anxiety and elation. It could take a while to 'come down' after performances – especially if the group has been working on the pieces a long time. The role and response of the tutors was seen as important in shaping positive experiences before, during and after performances. Ensuring sufficient preparation to reach the required standard was considered to be essential, reflecting a professional and respectful attitude to the group.

Experiencing emotional moments was not confined to performances, but these individual and collective experiences of achievement and satisfaction clearly contribute to perceived benefits and to enhanced feelings of success. It was generally agreed that having a goal to work towards was an important aspect of participation in the Programme, and this is an implicit aspect of disciplining oneself to improve or learn new skills. Invariably this means participation in performances, either at the Sage Gateshead or at another external venue. Most shared the view that it was usually an enjoyable experience and that these feelings of satisfaction and achievement were common.

## **Shared Musical Experience**

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The broad age range of participants (50 to 90-plus years) did not seem to be a significant factor to the way the Programme was experienced, though many felt that it was important that all participants are treated with respect by peers and tutors alike. One respondent suggested that the types of music on offer reflected the generation and stylistic preferences of participants, creating a generational effect which is likely to influence changes in the Silver Programme in the future.

The music was important not just because of its content and expressive effects, but because it was produced, experienced and remembered collectively. There was a commonly expressed feeling that the experience of taking part in communal activities fosters a sense of sharing and bonding. Emile Durkheim called this 'collective effervescence' (Ehrenreich 2006:14). Such collective activity and sharing may be

important for all ages, but perhaps becomes more so in later life as people loosen the formal community bonds they had established during paid employment. In this research, most respondents commented on the shared nature of the music-making and group activities in the Programme. Respondents argued that the groups were important because:

- some instruments are best played with other people
- it is the shared experience which creates the enjoyment
- learning with others is more enjoyable
- working as a group encourages greater commitment and responsibility
- working as a group encourages greater discipline and attention

Several commented that singing or playing instruments with others brought greater enjoyment.

*'Yes, it enhances it, making music with other people. Making music on your own is fine but it's a much wider, more refreshing activity if you're doing it with other people.'*

Several respondents expressed similar sentiments. One respondent went further to suggest that *'most of all, [it was] the enjoyment and the sharing of something'* that was important. A steel pan player agreed that playing with others was almost an essential element of the sense of satisfaction:

*'Well, I love to play the steel pans in a group. It's not an instrument that you get much satisfaction from playing on your own.'*

One respondent put this enjoyment of working with others down to feelings of shared commitment and shared experience. Another respondent commented that whilst he was not particularly attentive to the sounds created by those around him (e.g. basses or sopranos); he nevertheless enjoyed producing sound with other people. This sense of togetherness is explored further in the section on community and belonging. However, in this section, we wish to draw attention to the way music was a means of establishing a common bond, rather than through associational activities as such. One of the benefits of a shared experience is the ability to *'lose oneself'* momentarily. The engagement with the music and the levels of concentration required can transform one's sense of self:

*'I think when you're doing music...you are completely focused on learning that bit that you're going to sing, singing at that point, at the conductor. You lose yourself in it in a way that only sometimes do I find in other spheres. You lose yourself in a book; you lose yourself in maybe a lovely film or something.'*

Although one respondent argued that group singing was less satisfying as it constrained engagement with songs in their entirety, there was a general feeling that group music-making was a more enjoyable experience than making music on your own. Respondents commented that being with others in a learning situation helps people to maintain a focus and the discipline to practise and to feel that they are contributing in whatever small way to the whole, and is perhaps the common bond that keeps people in the Programme.

Academic and practice literature suggests that engaging in joint activities as part of a musical community can contribute to feelings of wellbeing. Within the research, we found that shared music experiences brought advantages such as an improved sense of belonging, sense of achievement, and heightened enjoyment of music. It also brought challenges such as greater responsibility and need for discipline and self-control. Combined, the advantages and challenges were regarded as beneficial.

## Community and Belonging

A large proportion of discussion engaged in by respondents focused on the emergence of community and a sense of belonging to the Programme, linking these aspects to feelings of enhanced wellbeing. As suggested by Benedict Anderson (1991), communities do not merely exist; they are repeatedly imagined and actively created. There is no particular requirement for a sense of community to arise from music participation per se, so these outcomes require some further exploration.

The emergence of community from music participation accords with a growing amount of academic literature which suggests that music-making in general, and choral singing in particular, increases social interaction and social connection (Hays and Minchiello 2005; Coffman and Adamek 2001; Wise et al 1992; Clift et al 2010; Bailey and Davidson 2005; Creech et al 2013). By increasing levels of social interaction, there are greater opportunities to develop friendships and close personal bonds. For example, Bailey and Davidson (2002) identified choirs to be a supportive environment for men in particular to 'develop their social skills and achieve collective goals'. Hays and Minchiello (2005) found that social interaction during active musical participation helped older adults feel connected to other older adults. They suggested that as older adults deal with loss, the importance of social connectedness increases. One participant in their study referred to music as 'social glue'. The community aspect of choral singing is particularly significant. A choir is a community of singers drawn from all walks of life, coming together to make a unified impact' (Clift et al 2010).

This section includes categories emerging from our research which relate to community and belonging such as:

- the welcome received upon joining
- the sense of belonging participants felt towards the Programme (both to the Programme as a whole and towards specific groups) which is created as people work together as a group to achieve a common purpose
- the supportive culture among participants and staff, evident in the number of friendships that had developed.

## Welcome and Making New Friends

There was a general feeling that joining the Silver Programme had been made easier by the welcome given by other group members. Respondents described how the friendly atmosphere enabled friendships to develop quickly.

*'It was just very friendly, that's what I liked about it. Everybody could relate, we were older and had the same thing in common.'*

Many advised that there is no need to worry about being alone when joining a group as there is always someone there to welcome you. People described feeling comfortable with their peer group because they had something in common and could relate to each other.

*'If you didn't have the certain person you knew to be with and your friend wasn't there, it doesn't matter because there's always someone else, there are always people that would welcome you with open arms'.*

Many respondents commented that they were able to replace or enhance work-based social networks and make new friends through the Programme. Some respondents described how the desire to build up their social network influenced their decision to join. Furthermore, making friends within the Programme could sometimes lead to social events beyond the Programme itself. The welcome given by tutors was also considered to be important to feelings of community belonging. Being greeted by a member of staff or someone assigned by the tutor to look after new members added significantly to feeling welcomed.

*'They all appeared to be very friendly but I think the difference with that group [the Rock Choir] was Gilly was leading that group and she is a very strong leader and she actually makes sure that anybody new is absorbed in some way, shape or form'.*

However, one respondent described how she did not initially feel welcomed upon joining a group, but was sufficiently motivated to stay in the Programme and eventually settled and made friends. Part of this initial concern related to knowing where to sit when first joining a group.

The opportunity to meet a wide variety of people from different backgrounds was valued by respondents. For some, the social life which can develop inside and outside the Programme was regarded as a means of overcoming or preventing loneliness and isolation in later life. These friendships were said to be particularly important for those with little or no family of their own.

## **Sense of Belonging**

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As proposed by Baumeister and Leary (1995), the desire for interpersonal attachment and sense of belonging is a fundamental human motivation. The vast majority of respondents described feeling part of a community and felt united by shared interests and a very strong sense of belonging. Feeling they were part of something important positively influenced their sense of self, which may have been adversely affected by retirement. Some described how this community gave them a place in life. Being a member of the Silver Programme provided an opportunity for respondents to be part of a large and positive community, to be involved in *'something big'*. Such feelings were so strongly expressed that we may suggest this

is an important element of self-identity and personal wellbeing, and in many ways, as important as the singing and music making:

*'It's nice to belong to something. Because if you feel you belong, it helps your self-esteem, it helps your emotions; it helps your physical and mental well-being. So it's very important to belong.'*

Positive and negative aspects of the sense of belonging mentioned by respondents included:

- Perceptions of welcome by the group
- Finding a suitable place to sit
- Cramped performance venues which are inadequate for the number of performers, leaving some uncomfortable or invisible
- Preparation and commitment levels within the group
- Personal anxiety and low self-esteem in group settings
- Size of some groups making experiences less personal
- Tutors knowing/not knowing individuals names

An important element of the Programme was the opportunity to socialise by having a coffee or a bite to eat together before or after the music session. Sage Gateshead's cafeteria, for instance, was much valued in this regard. Most often participants described feeling a strong sense of community when taking part as individuals in shared musical activities. A commonly-held view was that no-one needed to feel like an outsider or that they did not fit in. This observation was applied, not only to members of an individual group, but was reflective of the whole Silver Community. It was noted, however, that some groups were more accessible to inexperienced people than others, though the community was generally considered to project an all-encompassing attitude of inclusion.

The community was valued for different reasons by individuals, depending on their life circumstances. It was so important to some respondents that they described it as a lifeline. Many believed they would miss it, and one or two said they would be 'bereft' if they were no longer part of it. As the research team and some participants had observed, some people find it difficult to cope with the long break in the summer when all the weekly activities cease.

*'I've been to three summer schools and I can't say yet that I haven't had a good time because I've had a bloody good time and I've learned lots of things. Really, to be honest, I'd be bereft if I wasn't in the Silver Programme, it's going to kill me after the end of term.'*

The summer activities, special days and residential breaks organised every two years filled these gaps and were regarded as important to those who attended, further strengthening social bonds and feelings of belonging and the social life of the Programme.

## Supportive Culture and Structures

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Many people refer to the caring and inclusive ethos of the Programme that participants are loyal to each other and care for one another. There are many descriptions of the support that people have received while they are ill or experiencing difficult life circumstances, both from other participants and from staff. There was appreciation of the fact that there was the opportunity to give support as well as receive it, to be there for one another and even to be willing to act on behalf of the group.

This ethos did not develop by chance, but was regarded as an integral part of offering. The Programme Director had a background in community development and described how she was sensitive to the significant loneliness prevalent in society, particularly among older people. She described to us how she formed a small team of staff and volunteers who encourage participants to feel they are part of a community. She felt that new participants were quickly able to feel they were part of a large community and that their individual contribution was important. The inclusive approach from the leadership team was illustrated when one respondent described how she was accommodated as she required music sheets to be enlarged to make reading easier. Participants also acknowledged that the leader specifically arranged all the music to suit the older voice range and the various group sizes. Research by Greenwald and Saltzburg (1979) found that the functional vocal range in elderly persons lowers, drops and becomes more limited.

What began as an informal buddying up with new members was formalised with the creation of a distinct 'Buddy' system within the Silver Programme in 2011. Each music group now has someone who welcomes and supports new participants. Though there is a predominance of middle class former professionals within the Programme, the effects of coping with ageing and retirement can make individuals less confident than may be imagined. Some participants may have experienced a loss of professional status and social networks, which could lead to social isolation and uncertainty about the future and their place in society:

*'It's a strange thing because you come out of a job and you're maybe somewhere up there. Then suddenly to be thrust into this point when you need a buddy; and you're thinking, "Well no of course I wouldn't need a buddy I've got loads of self-confidence. I'll be fine"...But it's different'*

It was recognised by respondents that the staff and volunteers within the Silver Programme were striving to provide individual attention and pastoral care and support where required. It was noted that a number of tutors and Programme staff even attended the funerals of former participants.

As the Programme grew and more sessions were introduced, the leader appointed tutors who would have the same core values on which the Silver Programme was founded. It was felt this was integral to the success of the expanding Programme:

*'I value greatly the attitude of the tutors, because their talent is amazing and I really appreciate that they've got their own talents, but also their attitude to us,*



*that's not at all condescending... You could certainly see her hand in the mentoring of it.'*

The participatory structures of the Programme are regarded as part of this overall inclusive and valuing ethos. There are Silver Champions who take the registers, collect money and hand out music sheets:

*'I do tend to think it's (the ethos) permeated down from the top...here is just a friendliness and people taking the money or signing you in would make an effort to know your name.'*

Members of the Steering Group give feedback from each of the groups: Ambassadors take part in some aspects of the promotion and running of the Programme, such as being involved in management decisions, promoting the Programme to other organisations, attending conferences and engaging in research. Most respondents were aware of these opportunities and some were actively involved in some way:

*'Yes I have stuck up my hand occasionally. I think when you were appointed a Silver Ambassador. Gilly asked and I said I'd be prepared to do that, and there are plenty of opportunities.'*

Even though the Programme has increased in size, it is still described by some respondents as a very caring community, even as one big family.

*'You do get the feeling that Silvers care for one another. I suppose because we're all at a similar sort of stage or approaching a similar sort of stage in our lives when we need to know that there are people who are concerned for our difficulties.'*

One respondent noted that if some people were missing from sessions for more than a few weeks, concerns were expressed and people made enquiries and visits where required. This was seen as a positive indication of community belonging and commitment to others in the group.

## **Musical Skills and Personal Achievement**

It is not only through a sense of community belonging that an individual can generate positive feelings of wellbeing and satisfaction. Personal achievement and self-development are also important aspects of the outcomes of the Silver Programme. Whilst the sense of community belonging has been a continuing and valued feature of social structures and customs, the notion of the 'third age' (Laslett 1991) proposes that contemporary society is being freed from former constraints and responsibilities, and this greater freedom can be experienced fully following retirement. At this stage, individuals are able to map out a life plan for self-actualisation and fulfillment.

One means of self-actualisation and self-development is through learning. Field (2009) asserts that learning in adult life can encourage feelings of well-being. According to Hays and Minchiello (2005) learning music has the potential to 'stimulate imaginative thought and provide ways for people to be challenged'.

One respondent commented that, taking part in instrumental groups is particularly beneficial to feelings of well-being:

*'It gives you the status of being a musician, which is brilliant when you're older.'*

Similarly, in relation to learning music, Perkins and Williamson (2013) argue 'self-satisfaction through musical progress' contributes to wellbeing:

*'The simple act of participating in music and being able to do so in a meaningful manner where progress – however small – can be observed appears to be central to the positive experience of older adults'.*

Hallam et al (2013) conducted research upon the way music-making supports the 'social, emotional and cognitive wellbeing of older people'. Their research included a survey of participants involved in the Silver Programme at Sage Gateshead. In our research, we found that a range of elements was identified by respondents. These included:

- acquiring new skills and knowledge
- discipline and self-control
- being challenged
- increasing confidence

Specific issues included 'learning how to learn', controlling voice, improving concentration and focus, microphone technique, control of timing, understanding phrasing and being able to read music more quickly. These are discussed in the next sections.

## **Self-Development and Challenge**

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For many respondents taking part has been made more purposeful by working towards goals. These referred either to personal targets or collective goals such as taking part in performances. When these were achieved, respondents reported greater self-confidence. On the other hand, it was felt by some that a balance should be struck for those who value the fact that there is no pressure on individuals.

*'You don't want to feel that you're back at school'*

Despite the desire for personal challenge, taking part in the Programme was described by many as '*light-hearted*' and '*fun*'. Many noted that it did not matter if you got things wrong as the purpose was enjoyment and the experience of trying things out.

*'Everyone, the tutors, the people who come along, seem, well they come to enjoy it. Well things get a bit serious sometimes, but by and large you don't get people just sitting around grumbling all the time, which you get in some arenas. People seem to enjoy it'.*

It was noted by some that the fear of getting things wrong was reduced when taking part in group activities. One respondent compared the Silver Programme with experiences she had with her husband at an adult dance class elsewhere:

*'With the singing you don't feel as though you're letting anybody down if you've got an off day or your voice isn't so good, because there's so many that they make up for your failings.'*

The majority of respondents in our research did not consider themselves to have a particularly musical background at the outset. Many commented that they would have been put off joining had an audition been required. Nevertheless, respondents suggested that, as new members of the Programme, they held high expectations of the Programme standards. As one respondent, remarked:

*'People who have never sung in their lives before have a great opportunity to come to the highest level they can achieve'.*

Part of the attraction of the Programme was the way it encouraged individuals to pursue personal challenges at a variety of levels and across a variety of activities. Avenues for personal achievement may reduce in later life as formal education and work-based accreditation and promotion are less common. Achievements of these sorts raise self-esteem, and so finding outlets like the Silver Programme was highly valued. For one respondent, what was important was the opportunity to pursue something with every effort possible:

*'Well, for me, it matters. It might mean sweet nothing to some other people, but for me, I have to put my 110% in'.*

This was reflected by other respondents who suggested that the benefits depended upon the effort put into it. It was very important for most of the respondents that there was some element of challenge involved in the activities they were doing and that some of the work should be difficult enough so they would have to strive to learn something that it was:

*'...not just a question of going and sitting, and singing, and playing, or whatever. You feel you're working to a higher standard which is good. I really appreciate that'.*

As most people wished to learn and improve their standards, some respondents expressed frustration about being held back by those people in the group who didn't have those aspirations or those who had not yet reached the same standard. One respondent remarked that as groups are largely governed by the average level of ability, members sometimes became frustrated when others did not practise between sessions or did not try hard enough during sessions.

The confidence gained by meeting the challenge to improve musical skills and learn new ones was evident in the accounts given by respondents. Many stressed the importance of being able to learn and develop these skills and gain confidence in the process. The challenges can take many forms, from learning to play a new instrument to singing complex choral music. It was important that people were able to observe some improvement in their own abilities. One respondent described her husband, a fellow participant as:

*‘absolutely obsessive about wanting to get better all the time.’*

Most were willing to give new things a try, and many expressed confidence in being able to embark on new challenges as they arose. Feeling part of the Programme as a whole, rather than belonging to individual elements of it may encourage this confident movement between activities:

*‘The longer you go on, the more you look for new challenges. Your confidence grows and you can take on more; things you never, ever would have dreamed of doing. You end up doing far more’.*

It is evident from the respondents’ accounts that there is a collective energy and a striving for high standards in the sessions. As the Programme Director commented, it was never her intention to deliver what would equate to ‘musical basket weaving’ for older people. One of the research team commented that from her own experience, the Programme had never been about ‘sing-alongs’ as you might find in other offers for older adults. A high degree of effort and challenge is required and assumed from the outset. This illustrates an important issue within the Silver Programme that the ethos encourages people of all backgrounds and abilities, but this can introduce tension with the desire of participants to see incremental improvements. Nevertheless respondents clearly appreciated and responded to the inclusive ethos of the Programme, which was one of its guiding principles.

## Discipline and Skill

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The development of musical skills can produce positive outcomes and benefits. Discipline was a strong feature emerging from this theme. Many acknowledged the cognitive effort required. Having to ‘*concentrate like fury*’ was reported to bring benefits such as improved memory and increased learning ability. All of the respondents stressed the importance of being able to learn at the weekly sessions. Not only does this mean an improvement in musical skills, but for some this meant ‘learning to learn’ again and improved cognitive function. The respondents suggested that involvement in musical activities makes you think and expands your mind. For some, the key skill arising from their participation was the self-control and discipline brought about by working within a group. One respondent found that the opportunity to play in a fairly disciplined group situation had helped enormously in reaching:

*‘...parts of the brain that had never been reached before; it’s fantastic.’*

Another, a former soloist, saw that her challenge was to subdue her voice in order for the choir to achieve ‘one voice’:

*'You learn to hold back. Because you want to be part – you're not just a soloist.'*

Trying to achieve this musical togetherness therefore increased skills and self-discipline in the process. A further consequence of collective music-making was the development of mutual commitment by and responsibility towards group members. This required each member to be committed to the group or choir that they belonged to, or risk letting other people down. Since participants expected everyone to play their part, people developed a sense of responsibility to other members to show due diligence and to get it right. This applied as much, if not more so to those playing instruments, as one rock guitarist, commented:

*'Well, I've got to get the timing right on this...the singers are expecting you to be in time.'*

Respondents reported that their own skills had advanced. A few participants said that they were aware that their voices had improved or that they were able to read music much more quickly. Several respondents noted how they were now considerably better than when they began, for example finding confidence with their own voice, and being able to utilise skills such as reading music, microphone technique or in understanding phrasing. This individual learning was made evident by recognisable improvements at group level, for example, within the Silver Breves (a choir singing classical music). The Programme also enabled some respondents to engage in further activities, such as songwriting and musical arrangement:

*'Even if it is just really basically something that was already in the song, I just take it a bit further'.*

Having gained in confidence whilst attending the Programme, a number of respondents suggested that they intended to learn new musical instruments, refresh old skills or learn to read music in the future.

## **Importance of the Tutor**

In this research, the importance of the tutor was highlighted in relation to tutors' leadership qualities, teaching style and musical ability. We present some of these issues in more detail in the following section.

## **Musical Ability**

All participants agree that it was important that the tutors leading the groups should be talented musicians. Most people felt that current tutors were extremely talented, and this talent and enthusiasm for music influenced the groups positively. One

respondent suggested that she wouldn't want to be taught by someone who isn't a musician.

*'If there wasn't a certain level of competence amongst the tutors, one simply wouldn't stay.'*

Some respondents felt the tutors' musical skill was a significant factor in attracting new participants through word of mouth. Their skill levels were viewed as important in helping participants reach high musical standards themselves. As one respondent remarked:

*'You realise they do know their job and whatever you are learning, it is going to be good.'*

Having continuity with tutors was also seen as relevant, and was regarded as a real strength of the Programme. The variety of skills and musical interests of different tutors was also welcomed. The young age of the tutors was seen by some as an influencing factor, both positively and negatively. Several respondents commented on the tutors' vibrancy and enthusiasm for music as being infectious, and made them feel youthful and enthusiastic themselves. One respondent suggested that regardless of a tutor's age, they should be, and generally were, *'sympathetic and in tune with what older people want to do'*. It was therefore important that tutors had an interest in people as well as possessing musical skills and knowledge. Other respondents remarked on their surprise at the way younger tutors were able to connect with older adults.

*'The leadership, the leaders, need to have an interest in, a liking for and patience with older people.'*

However, for some, there was concern that more experienced participants might undermine the authority of the tutor because of the age difference between them, and some tutors may feel uncomfortable challenging older people.

## **Leadership Qualities**

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Tutors can have a tremendous ability to influence others and shape experiences within a group setting. Bass (2006) in his work 'Transformational Leadership' suggested a number of characteristics are important:

- the ability to motivate others to do more than they originally intended and often more than they thought possible
- set more challenging expectations
- have more committed and satisfied followers
- empower followers and pay attention to individual needs and personal development
- inspire followers to commit to a shared goal

Good leaders can stimulate and expand others to use their abilities, and are individually considerate, offering support, mentoring and coaching. These issues are

explored in the next section in relation to the wider management structures and style. More specific to choral leadership, Chris Rowbury (2009) identified seven characteristics of good leadership. These include:

- the ability to ‘sweep’ the choir along with their enthusiasm
- showing excitement and vision for the group
- having a good sense of humour and a fun approach to rehearsals and performances
- being decisive in order to achieve
- having clarity of purpose so that they are clear with instructions and direction
- having musicality, possessing a ‘deep intuitive understanding of how music and harmony works
- being patient, as learning and perfecting performances takes time

In this research it was a generally held view that tutors require not only musical expertise but must also possess a range of other attributes such as enthusiasm, drive, commitment to the group, a non-judgmental attitude, and a liking for older people. Some people felt that the enthusiasm and patience of the tutor made them feel enthusiastic and able to overlook their own mistakes.

*‘She’s extremely cheerful and positive. She never gets grumpy and she gives lots of praise, even though we laugh and say she is just pretending!’*

Respondents talked of the way tutors brought people together. One respondent felt that it was important for the future of the Programme that tutors are retained and kept interested so there is continuity within groups, something which is appreciated by members. Such comments perhaps reflect the concerns for its future prevalent at the time the research was conducted, especially given the distinct organisational and mentoring role Gilly Love occupied within the structures at Sage Gateshead.

## **Rapport and Teaching Style**

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Perkins and Williamson (2013) explored the impact of music on wellbeing in older adulthood. They found that participants of their study appreciated supportive feedback from their tutors. The ability of tutors to provide a supportive and comfortable environment was regarded as central to participants’ ability to progress. In particular, ‘feeling good’ in lessons was an important element of learning. In this research, the leadership within the Programme was seen to support an active style of learning, as one respondent explained:

*‘I’m not very good at sitting and being talked to, I’ve done local history clubs and that sort of thing where you’re sitting listening to somebody. Alright you’re learning something, but I like to participate in something’.*

Some respondents commented on the way tutors helped new members to fit into the group, such as giving a warm greeting upon arrival for the first time, allowing people to find their level, giving people sufficient time to adjust. Many felt the tutors’ care and attention was over and above what might have been expected. Respondents



appreciated leaders and tutors getting to know and acknowledging individuals within groups and felt that process enhanced the experience of participation in the group, and made participants feel more valued:

*'I think it's quite important that you (they) know names of people.'*

A number of respondents noted how the Programme Director seemed to know every individual member, including their musical strengths and weaknesses. Receiving personal recognition or praise by tutors was highly valued. As the Programme has grown and new tutors have arrived, some felt this knowledge of individual members had waned. One respondent felt that as a result, *'you lose that enthusiasm because you don't feel as if what you are doing is (of) any consequence anymore.'*

It was acknowledged how effective tutors' teaching was, especially given that some did not have any training in teaching methods. A small number of participants felt that the open access policy of the Programme means that there can be widely different skill levels of the people within the groups. This can cause difficulties for the tutor to manage, to be able to choose material that will stimulate the more able but not over-stretch those with a lesser level of ability. It was felt that tutors need to have the ability to maintain authority and manage the group while relating to the participants in a cheerful, patient and encouraging way; many found that the use of humour by tutors was particularly appealing:

*'Even if they are not people who make jokes, they seem to be able to do something or say something that is quite funny.'*

People trust tutors to set a high standard, but to teach in such a way that new and possibly difficult music can be learned, contributing to a great sense of achievement and greater confidence. Constructive criticism was also appreciated, particularly if this was directed to the group as a whole and not to individuals. One or two suggested that they enjoyed being challenged by the Programme Director and tutors. Paradoxically, this was seen to demonstrate a healthy respect for older adults as individuals. As the Programme Director argued, it was important that older adults involved in the Programme were not treated in a patronising or condescending manner. When the tutors showed their frustration about the lack of progress, this was generally viewed in a positive way by participants, many of whom shared their frustrations. Such identifications with the tutor role demonstrate the shared commitment to achieving high standards.

## **Effective Management and Leadership**

Management and leadership is the subject of considerable academic and policy debate. There are a number of attributes suggested for good management and leadership in academic and grey literature (see McGregor-Burns 1978; BIS 2012; Bass 1985; Pielstick 1998). The notion of 'transforming leadership' was introduced by MacGregor-Burns (1978) who argued that a transforming approach can significantly alter the life of people within organisations. Based upon personality traits and an ability to make a change through example, transforming leaders articulate an energising vision and provide challenging goals. Bass (1985) extended this

argument by suggesting this kind of leadership can be measured in terms of its influence on followers. The followers of such a leader feel trust, admiration, loyalty and respect and are willing to work harder than originally expected. The leader transforms and motivates people through his or her idealised influence (referred to as charisma) intellectual stimulation and individual consideration. Pielstick (1998) identified seven themes which include: listening, building relationships and guiding implementation. He argued that good leaders provide opportunities for employees to learn and grow, whilst ‘transforming leaders’ also experiment and innovate. He suggested the single most referenced characteristics are self-confidence and charisma. He cited evidence to show that followers of charismatic leaders focus on the leader whereas followers of transforming leaders focus on the shared purpose or vision. In relation to charisma in choral leaders, Rowbury (2009, 2014) suggested these attributes cannot be taught or replicated, but reside within the interactions and synergies that are created between particular leaders and the choir members.

Respondents in this research did not suggest the management or leadership of the Silver Programme prompted their decision to join, yet many did note how these became influential factors which pulled them further in and improved their enjoyment of the Programme. Most also regarded the nature and quality of the leadership of the Silver Programme as significant to the success of the Programme. This applied to discussions about the Programme Director and to the approach taken by managers and administrators of the Programme. The leadership was described in terms of:

- charisma (sense of humour, positive vision, rapport)
- drive and vision (enthusiasm, values coming from top)
- musical knowledge/expertise
- management and organisational skills
- facilitating variety of offer
- being hardworking and committed
- being supportive and willing to listen
- encouraging participant involvement and feedback

## Personal Characteristics of the Programme Director

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The Programme Director, Gilly Love, demonstrated facets of a transformational leadership style. Several respondents noted how she encouraged this style in tutors of the Programme as part of the mentoring process. A number of respondents spoke of her as a ‘strong leader’ with a ‘level of authority’. One respondent reflected the Programme Director’s influence in terms of:

*‘Her enthusiasm and hard work and dedication, her ability to spread that enthusiasm and hard work and effort to make you feel you want to do it. She’s changed a lot of lives.’*

Most of the participants interviewed described being inspired or enthused by leaders within the Silver Programme. One participant spoke of the Programme Director as a ‘one-off’ who had left a lasting impression. She was instantly captivated by Gilly’s force of personality and compared her first interaction to:

*'...being hit by a sledgehammer. You would gladly walk across the equator if that's what she asked you to do, which is why I joined Silver Rappers without the least idea what rap was.'*

After her first session with the Programme Director, another respondent described thinking, *'Wow that was fantastic'* and from then on being hooked. Common observations about Gilly Love included:

- everybody wants to join her choir
- she is entertaining with a good sense of humour
- there is appreciation of her amusingly critical approach
- people feel the desire to work harder in her groups
- she has the ability to spread enthusiasm
- she has a noticeable passion for, and dedication to, the role
- she sets high standards and has high expectations

Gilly's charismatic leadership was felt to help increase participants' enjoyment of music and many suggested its influence had changed people's lives for the better. It also created a sense of not wanting to let the group leaders down. This charismatic style led some to reflect on the future of the Programme. As one respondent suggested, the influence of the existing Programme Director was *'a massively important aspect'* and it would be hard to find a replacement. There were prevailing fears about what might happen to the Programme after the departure of the Programme Director which raises questions about how such programmes, so heavily reliant upon charismatic personalities, can be sustained in their absence.

## Vision and Drive

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Vision and drive were regarded as crucial factors to the success of the Programme. On numerous occasions, respondents remarked on the way these attributes of the Programme Director had driven the extent and quality of offer within the Programme. There were many comments about the contribution made by the Programme Director and the skills set that she possessed. This was summed up by one respondent:

*'I think Gilly's absolutely superb. I think she's got enormous vision, she's got drive, she's got great organisational skills, and I think just about everything that she's done has been terrific.'*

This generalised recognition and approval for the management style was reflected in a range of comments, which are summarised by the range of positive attributes described below:

- inclusive ethos permeating from the top
- listening approach to leadership
- infectious enthusiasm of leadership

- rapport and humour with participants
- mentoring of tutors reflected in positive attitudes to older people
- having musical knowledge and ability
- having the force and vigour to drive things on
- keeping tabs on everything
- enabling things to flourish
- willingness to take risks
- being sympathetic and in tune with older people

It was suggested by one respondent that, for the Leader of the Programme, having the necessary vision was more important than musical skills. Having a style of management which encouraged listening was regarded as vital. Leaders and tutors of the Programme were available to be contacted directly, and it was perceived that the Programme Director listened to participants, considered their views and would always be honest in her response to feedback. One respondent was pleased with the way his suggestions were managed:

*'I did write and make one or two suggestions, and whatever you suggest Gilly will take on board. She'll listen to your views and if she doesn't agree with your ideas she will tell you. That's all I want, if I have given a proposal. I want her to consider it and if she doesn't think it's right, she tells me why.'*

The majority of respondents we spoke to in this research had not made any complaints during their involvement in the Programme, but knew how to voice complaints should they arise. Some did suggest there was a lack of clarity about where to direct complaints in the first instance and where these go thereafter, but on the whole, most felt reporting feedback and complaints were handled effectively.

## **Effective Organisational Skills**

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Most respondents recognised and appreciated that the good organisational skills, competence and hard work of the leadership team were major factors in the development and success of the Silver Programme. A lot of this organisation was carried out by Gilly Love (Programme Director), herself, with the support of the Silver Team. With over one thousand people to support, and numerous groups and activities to coordinate, this is a substantial undertaking. The organisation of such a varied Programme is important as it now caters for such a large number of people and activities. The pervasive view seems to be that the success of the Programme is in no small part due to the fact that it is well organised and *'has always been well managed'*. This reflects the commitment from the top.

Respondents identified the following factors as being relevant to the organisation of the Programme:

- managing and developing the variety of programme activities
- managing changes of venue
- effective and respectful communication
- administration and coordination of events

- effective scheduling which takes account of older people's needs
- consideration of comfort of participants
- timely information on changes due to adverse weather etc
- ensuring an inclusive experience for new members

The variety of offer was widely seen as a result of the Programme Director's positive attitude that most things were possible and as a consequence of the hard work of the leadership team and tutors. The leadership team developed the Programme from the initial offer of a community choir to include a wide range of learning and participation opportunities in singing and instrumental groups. The variety of offer was identified as one of the strengths of the Programme, requiring good organisational skills as the Programme developed and expanded to its current size:

*'Yes it's grown and obviously the spreading of it to different venues, but in a way it comes down to the organisation and the management that we do feel part of a whole, the Silver Programme.'*

Most respondents appreciated that planning, hard work and commitment by the leadership team and tutors behind the scenes contributed greatly to the success of the Programme. There was a general appreciation for the way the needs of older people are borne in mind for such things as timing and public transport, or when organizing one-off events and residential trips. Session organisers take into account weather conditions and small but important details such as when participants can start using their bus passes. There is a special Silver phone line that can be used to find out if events have been cancelled due to bad weather conditions or to make enquiries. There was also praise for the variety of rehearsal and performance venues arranged by the Silver Team, in particular Julia Plastino, as Programme Coordinator, who ensured that everything ran smoothly. She was singled out by many respondents for her management and organisational skills.

The Silver Management Team was commended for its effective communication, which led people to feel valued as participants of the Programme. The Team also produces the Silver Bugle, the newsletter of the Silver Programme, to keep members up to date with new events, new groups and their timings. In addition, volunteers from the Programme compile and publish 'Silver News', a magazine reporting on past events and 'Silver' news in general.

The Silver Ambassadors and members of the Steering Groups help to keep the Programme members well informed. These groups also allow people to have a say in how the Programme is run.

Given that managing changes in times and venues can be problematic for some older people, it was regarded as important that management communicated any changes in a timely way. The research team, who are all Silver Ambassadors, was aware of mechanisms in place to inform participants in cases of changes of venue, tutor absence, bad weather or other unforeseen circumstances, but acknowledged that occasions did occur when mis-information was passed on. In general, it was felt that the scale of operations brought huge challenges to the effective organisation of the Silver Programme, and that these challenges were usually overcome to sustain the positive, inclusive offer to participants.

## CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The Silver Programme at Sage Gateshead has grown significantly in its eight year history. From an initial small choir, the Programme now offers around 1,300 members a huge variety of musical opportunities. Indeed, it has not been necessary to advertise for new members, and many parts of the Programme are heavily over-subscribed. By virtue of demand and participation levels, the Silver Programme can certainly be described as successful. Accounting for this popularity is more difficult. In this research, we spoke to participants of the Programme about their experiences, and asked them to reflect on the Programme - past, present and future. We found that the language used to describe the Programme was overwhelmingly positive, even affectionate.

This report has identified a number of issues about the way older adults experience music-participation as part of the Silver Programme. These impact on the reported and actual benefits as described by respondents, and upon the factors to which we attribute the Programme's success. The generalisability of our research is limited by the small sample size and the qualitative nature of the methodology. However, our findings raise a number of issues, and identify a number of potential benefits that can be explored further.

In the following sections we summarise the success factors of the Silver Programme and the reported benefits to participants. We note some examples where a relationship exists between factors of success and the benefits. We also provide an update on changes which have occurred since the research began which may impact upon these findings. The remaining elements provide an outline of some recommendations for policy and practice and recommendations for future research.

### Summary of Research Findings

#### Success Factors

We suggest all of the factors below contribute to the success of the Programme, enabling it to grow and be as popular as it is today. We present these factors in no particular order.

**Scope of the Programme:** one of the key strengths of the Programme is in the variety of offer. This allows greater potential for inclusion, flexibility and personal advancement for participants. However, some respondents felt there was a risk that should the Programme grow further, this may be detrimental to the sense of community, and may risk jeopardising the individual attention which is so valued.

**Iconic building:** a big initial pull to the Programme was the Sage Gateshead building. Its striking appearance and high status as a music venue were reported by some people as giving an added impetus to join. Taking part in the Programme was felt to be enhanced by the vibrant atmosphere created at Sage Gateshead, as participants could mix with professional musicians, and converse with younger generations. The buzz around this venue was noted by many respondents as something which continued to attract them to the Programme. However, as we discovered, the pull of the building as a particular reason for participation appears to be eclipsed by more prominent factors. For this reason, the move away from the Sage Gateshead building in recent years to other smaller venues across the local area has not led to a reduction in popularity of the Programme in terms of numbers. This diversification of venues was seen as unproblematic for some, whilst for others it was an indication of the possible marginalisation of the Silver Programme within the Sage Gateshead organisation. However, this was not felt to be sufficient to discourage participation in the Programme itself, which remains buoyant.

**Comfort and accessibility:** whilst the prestige of the Sage Gateshead building was initially important to many, most respondents argued that the comfort and accessibility of venues were key factors influencing their participation. Ensuring venues are warm and accessible by public transport are important considerations.

**Lack of audition:** there is no requirement to audition to join the Silver Programme. Most argued that an audition would have prevented them from joining as many lacked initial confidence in their musical ability. The inclusivity of the Programme was strongly approved of, though some felt it created problems for long-standing members' progress.

**Welcome:** most respondents commented on the positive welcome they received upon joining, which eased their transition into group settings. For some, initial fears centred on finding one's place in the group. This was evident in a physical sense for some who did not know or were anxious about where to sit. The Buddy system has now been introduced, which may alleviate these issues.

**Timing:** the management of the Silver Programme was praised for its attention to the timing of sessions to take account of the needs and preferences of older people. Ensuring activities take place within the period of use for bus passes, and avoiding activities in late evening were appreciated. Some felt that clustering their activities into whole days was an enjoyable and practical way to participate.

**Price:** all respondents felt the pricing structures were fair and affordable. We were unable to identify through our research if older people on low incomes are impeded for reasons of cost.

**Overcoming barriers to participation:** ongoing and emerging health issues were sometimes a barrier to regular participation in the Programme. For others, it was caring responsibilities which limited their capacity to regularly attend activities. This alerts us to the particularities of music programmes aimed at older adults, and the need to be flexible enough to accommodate changing health and caring circumstances. It appears that the Silver Programme is largely successful at keeping in touch with those who drop out from time to time, and reserving a space for their return.



**Supportive structures:** for some, the opportunity to utilise one's abilities to support the wider Silver community was welcomed. The voluntary structures within the Programme are an important mechanism for contributing and giving something back. The Buddy system in particular was regularly cited as an important factor helping new members settle into groups. A number of respondents identified concerns about the future of the Programme in terms of how future growth might impact on the sense of cohesion. Some were concerned that a larger Silver Programme may distract organisers from promoting the strong community element currently embedded within the Programme and move towards a more consumer, adult-learning approach. However, despite these fears, all respondents in this research argued that a strong community currently existed, due in large part to the participatory structures put in place by the former Programme Director. This has ensured that a large membership does not lead to the '*invisibility of individuals*'.

**High musical standards:** it was clear that respondents wanted to achieve high musical standards and were not content with participation for its own sake. They wished to be pushed to the limits of their ability, and felt it was important that tutors were themselves skilled musicians.

**Attributes of the tutors:** possessing musical skills and knowledge was considered to be essential. For most respondents, it was equally important that tutors and were 'in tune' with the older people. It was suggested that the Programme Director had mentored tutors in a way which encouraged these attributes. Some felt that their interactions with tutors brought greater personal resilience. It was also important to respondents that tutors gave honest feedback to the group and were aware when mistakes were being made so that standards could be improved. They also noted how tutors often employed humour within the groups, which was generally viewed positively. The majority of respondents felt encouraged by tutors and other participants and had increased confidence as a result of their participation, encouraging them to embark upon new challenges.

**Transformational leadership:** it was common for respondents to refer to the charismatic style of the former Programme Director, Gilly Love in positive terms. Many felt this gave them added impetus and desire to progress, and that she had created a management and organisational structure that was effective and supportive of its participants' needs. The confidence arising from such a charismatic presence was considerably dented upon her departure, highlighting the difficulty in replicating or replacing such a driving force.

## **Reported Benefits**

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**Involvement following retirement from paid employment:** For nearly all respondents, retirement was the prompt to joining the Programme. For some it allowed the opportunity to pursue a passion for music, for others it was an opportunity to get out of the house, and for some, it prompted the creation of what we may call an 'encore career'.

**Disrupting and creating everyday routines:** following retirement, it was important for some respondents to find a clear structure and routine to the week and joining the Programme helped this. It also enabled people to break from the mundane routines of everyday life and engage in creative and stimulating activities, perhaps for the first time.

**Self-development and learning:** a key benefit to the Programme is the opportunity to learn new things and expand one's horizons as there is always 'something around the corner'. Learning through the Silver Programme was regarded by respondents as providing cognitive development and mental challenge, which fuelled ambitions. Taking advantage of new possibilities for self-development may be particularly pertinent for older adults, whose expectations of ageing and for the future, might be influenced by their life-course experiences to date, their health and other current circumstances. The discipline and challenge of music-making was reported to increase confidence, build personal resilience and raise aspirations.

**Physical Wellbeing:** physical health benefits were rarely articulated, with only a few respondents suggesting that music participation brought about definite physical improvements. Some suggested that there were physical and mental benefits to music participation of the kind offered by the Silver Programme. Physical benefits identified included exercising vocal cords and lungs thereby assisting breathing, as well as more general benefits, such as increased mobility from getting to the venue and taking part in the sessions. Some, however, noted that having a reason to get out of the house and negotiate the Programme venues increased mobility, as any arts or leisure activity might do. The majority of participants suggested that benefits to mental wellbeing were more likely than physical benefits.

**Mental Wellbeing:** most respondents focused on the way participation supported mental wellbeing. This included the way learning encouraged mental stimulation, focus and concentration, as well as emotional wellbeing brought about by the music and by the sense of belonging to the Silver community. Several respondents reported having a renewed sense of purpose, belonging and anticipation of the future which allayed feelings of despondency and depression. Furthermore, the opportunity to develop personal resilience by learning from tutor feedback was regarded as positive and life-enriching. We suggest that possessing and acquiring this level of resilience may contribute to mental wellbeing, as there may be fewer opportunities to be challenged in this way following retirement.

**Engaging with music:** all respondents reported benefits to wellbeing as a consequence of their music participation. Most commented on how the music itself lifted their mood, stimulated the mind and gave them an opportunity to experience a complex array of emotions, not always positive, but nevertheless leaving them feeling enriched. Participating in performances enhanced these emotions, bringing anxiety, excitement and a sense of satisfaction and achievement. The shared nature of the experience added to these positive effects on wellbeing.

**Being part of a vibrant city:** the Sage Gateshead building was a big pull for some people. Its location within the Newcastle-Gateshead cultural quarter allowed some respondents to feel part of a cosmopolitan culture and lifestyle that was different to

their home environment. It also encouraged greater use of the city's cultural, leisure and retail facilities before and after Programme activities.

**Increased socialising opportunities:** a valued aspect of the experience of taking part in the Silver Programme is the opportunity to socialise with others. The community created by the Programme engendered a sense of belonging for participants, which not only meant new friendships, but improved social interactions more generally. The sense that others cared about their wellbeing, providing support in times of illness contributed to this feeling of belonging. Whether impromptu meetings in the Sage Gateshead cafeteria before and after sessions, or through specially organised events, the opportunity to mix with other participants, and to mix with younger generations, was appreciated. It is therefore important that these opportunities are supported in other venues.

### **Relationship between success factors and reported benefits**

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In some instances, we identified a strong relationship between the success factors of the Programme and the perceived benefits. These include:

- an inclusive ethos within management rationale which contributes to a sense of community, which enhances mental wellbeing
- association with the Sage Gateshead building and organisation which contributes to a renewed self-identity
- the variety of offer which enables personal growth and continued exploration of self
- charismatic leadership which encourages a sense of belonging among participants
- skilled and enthusiastic tutors who contribute to improved confidence among participants

### **Changes since the research was conducted**

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Since the research was carried out, there have been a number of changes to the Silver Programme. As previously mentioned, the departure of the Programme Director has created a degree of uncertainty about the future of the Silver Programme within Sage Gateshead. At the time of writing, there has been no appointment made, though a post has been advertised which incorporates responsibility for the Adult Programme as well as the Silver Programme. This may alter the scope and relative position of the Silver Programme in relation to Sage Gateshead's Learning and Participation Programme as a whole.

Further changes include the creation by management of a traffic light system to direct new members to appropriate groups. It is not yet known what impact this will have in terms of coherence of groups over time or in terms of inclusivity. The Gateshead Old Town Hall has become the new main venue of the Silver Programme, so many of the positive characteristics of the Sage Gateshead as a venue that were identified by respondents may not be experienced by newer members, except in a secondary way by association with the status attached to

Sage Gateshead organisation. New groups have recently been established, such as a new rock choir and a soul music choir. Folk and bluegrass groups have also been added.

An outreach initiative has been developed by participants from an idea by one of the Programme members, whose parents were both living with Alzheimer's. A small performance group of ukulele players, called Silver Stars, visits day care-centres and care homes, encouraging those who are unable to access the Silver Programme to sing and enjoy music. The group now also takes music to Women's Institutes and other women's groups and church groups, promoting the activities of the Silver Programme and raising money for Alzheimer's research. Meanwhile the Programme Director took up the idea and the Silver Lining initiative was formed, which expanded on the work of Silver Stars, by not only providing outreach to older people living with dementia in care settings, but also by teaching care staff to play ukuleles in order to further the residents' enjoyment of music. Funding and staffing constraints may jeopardise the continuation of the Silver Lining project.

There are also plans to implement a system of paying fees termly or half termly, in advance, rather than by the session. This could prove to be unmanageable for some participants and may lead to a drop in the numbers of people attending the Programme. However, Silver Angels have provided a limited contingency fund to offer confidential financial support to participants who have difficulty in paying the fees in advance.

In light of these changes, it is important to reflect on the existing success factors and benefits to participants, and the relationships between these in order to continue to create them in the future.

At the time the research concluded, there had been no appointment of a replacement leader.

## **Recommendations for Policy and Practice**

This section is aimed at organisations seeking to develop programmes for music participation for older adults, presenting some issues which will need to be explored further to ensure similar success to that experienced by the Silver Programme at Sage Gateshead can be realised.

One of the ongoing challenges for the Programme is sustaining and finding more creative ways to develop the offer to participants, whilst paying its own way. There was concern among participants to balance the inclusive aims of the Programme whilst ensuring the learning experience continued to be appropriately challenging.

The size of the Silver Programme may warrant further thought for those seeking to replicate its success. It has grown considerably since it began, and this has enabled a greater diversity and flexibility of offer for participants, which is greatly appreciated. However, this growth has been accompanied by concerns that if this is to continue

into the future, the size and scale of the Programme may damage the sense of community that has been developed thus far.

Related to this concern was the departure of Gilly Love as Programme Director. She was regarded as instrumental to the creation of a sense of community within the Programme, in contrast to other adult education programmes at Sage Gateshead and elsewhere. We would recommend a replacement is found who is equally driven to ensure older people are supported to create sustaining communities so that individuals are valued within the groups, by the tutors and by the organisation as a whole.

We recommend that local policymakers and partner organisations to Sage Gateshead consider issues pertinent to the continued success of the Silver Programme and programmes of a similar nature. In particular, the ability to recruit and retain sufficiently skilled tutors with the right aptitude for working with older adults will be important for sustaining this and similar programmes in the future. We recommend working in partnership with university music degree programmes to establish or strengthen existing modules with a 'music for wellbeing' approach. Adequate funding streams for training and development of music tutors should be sought by local policymakers in order to build capacity and develop the employability of music graduates for this purpose.

## **Recommendations for Future Research**

This research was restricted to those individuals who were current and active members of the Silver Programme. As a result, we were not able to explore the experiences of those who dropped out of the Programme, or understand the circumstances which led to these decisions. This may illuminate areas for development and improvement of the Programme in the future.

For reasons of time, we were not able to explore the experiences of the tutors of the Programme. This would be a valuable contribution to this research, as it would give a different perspective, present some of the challenges as well as some of the opportunities involved in this type of music participation and adult learning. Since the future of the Silver Programme as it currently exists will be in large part dependent on the ability to attract sufficiently qualified tutors with the right approach to teaching older adults, pursuing this line of enquiry may be of interest to music Programme organisers as well as to music degree Programme Directors interested in making their modules relevant to the demands that may be placed upon music graduates interested in working with older adults.

It would be useful to explore the outreach Programme within the Silver Programme, known as 'Silver Lining'. This has been described by the former Programme Director as the 'third age supporting the fourth age', where Silver Programme staff and volunteer participants visit care homes and supported living facilities to bring the music to these spaces of care. It would be interesting to consider the benefits and challenges involved in this 'third age to fourth age' caring and creative practice. It would also be interesting to examine the skills required of tutors and volunteers in

order to support active engagement in musical programmes of this kind. A further question is whether the benefits of participation identified in this report translate across these different spaces and generational cohorts.

From the point of view of the university researcher, it would also be interesting to consider how far digital technologies may be utilised, now and in the future to extend and enhance the spaces of creativity and possibility for music-participation. Could digital technologies successfully mediate and overcome the spatial and social distances between the core Silver Programme activities and such outreach activities? If digital technologies were employed to connect, collaborate and share experiences of music participation (see Finney and Burnard 2007; Hargittai and Walejko 2008), it would be important to explore how far they might realise similar benefits to those experienced by members of the Silver Programme as a whole.

Beyond the interest in the benefits of music-participation, we may wish to reflect on some of the benefits derived from the Programme overall, which may inform greater understanding of ageing well. A significant area for future research could be the notion of an 'encore career' where personal development and the acquisition of responsibility are made possible within the structures of a wider organisation. This would move us away from a focus on activities per se, to identifying and promoting meaningful ways for older adults to engage within communities and organisations.

## APPENDICES

### Appendix 1: Programme Director:

The Programme Director of the Silver Programme, Gilly Love, has been working with older people in a community-arts setting in some form for many years. She was involved in the Hampstead based 'Ivy League' in the 1970s, founded and directed Bedfordshire's 'Time on Our Hands Project', and has also worked for over five years with music and dance in warden assisted accommodation. She received a Silver Medal award at the Queen's Anniversary Trust awards in 1993. After working as a teacher for over ten years, and working in the Youth sector, Adult Education and Community Arts, Gilly became Principal Arts Officer for Bedford Borough Council. She moved to the North East of England in 1999 and quickly became involved in developments for the new Music Centre, and was involved with Sage Gateshead until her departure in December 2012. Gilly was nominated by Silver Programme members for a Palace Award and, in the 2012 Honours List, received an MBE for 'Services to Music in the Community', based on her work with the Silver Programme.



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