Sage Gateshead

Newcastle University

CREATING MUSIC AND COMMUNITY:

AN EXPLORATION OF THE

SILVER
PROGRAMME

AT SAGE GATESHEAD 2014

CREATING MUSIC AND COMMUNITY

RESEARCHING THE SILVER PROGRAMME

Starting in 2010, a team of Silver Ambassadors came together to initiate research into the reasons for the success of the Silver Programme at Sage Gateshead. The research was undertaken in collaboration with the Centre for Urban and Regional Development Studies (CURDS) at Newcastle University, and funded from the Social Inclusion through the Digital Economy (SiDE) project. The aim of the research was two-fold: to understand the reasons for the success of the Programme; and to explore the perceived benefits of the Programme from the perspective of its participants. We undertook a small number of focus groups and interviews with participants of the programme, across the range of activities on offer within the Programme.
The research was completed in 2013 and the report of the findings was produced during 2014.

The full report is available at sagegateshead.com

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INTRODUCTION

From an initial small choir, the Silver Programme has grown significantly and now offers around 1,300 members a huge variety of musical opportunities. Many parts of the Programme are now heavily over-subscribed. On this basis, the Silver Programme can certainly be described as successful. Accounting for this popularity is more difficult. In this research, we spoke to participants about their experiences and asked them to reflect on the Programme - past, present and future. We highlight some of the key findings in the following pages.

RESEARCH FINDINGS

SUCCESS FACTORS

We found that the language used to describe the Programme was overwhelmingly positive, even affectionate. The factors presented below each contributed in some way to the success of the Programme; enabling it to grow and become as popular as it is today. These are presented in no particular order. We include some of the personal accounts of the participants who took part in the research to illustrate these factors.

Scope of the Programme: one of the key strengths of the Programme is its 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.

"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?"

Iconic building: a big initial pull was Sage Gateshead's building. Its striking appearance and high status as a music venue gave an added impetus to join. Participants of the Programme could mix with professional musicians, and converse with younger generations. The buzz of this venue was noted by many as something which continued to attract them:

"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 that I wish I'd done more music when I was young."

However, the pull of the building as a particular reason for participation was sometimes eclipsed by more prominent factors. For this reason, the move away from the Sage Gateshead building in recent years to smaller venues across the local area has not led to a reduction in popularity of the Programme. The diversification of venues was not regarded as problematic 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 sufficiently important to discourage participation in the Programme itself, which remains buoyant.

"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."

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.

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

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.

"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."

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.

"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."

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. 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."

Most wished to be pushed to the limits of their ability and felt it was important that tutors were themselves skilled musicians.
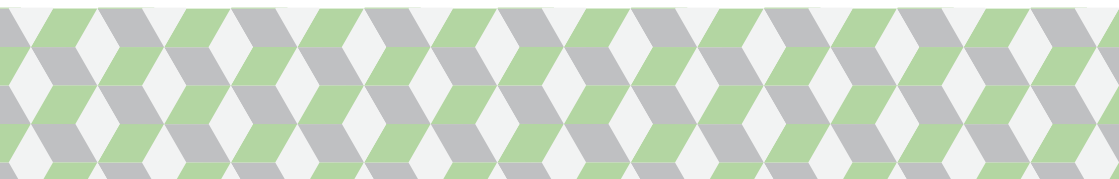
Attributes of the tutors: possessing musical skills and knowledge was considered to be essential. For most respondents, it was equally important that tutors were *'in tune'* with the older people.

"The leadership, the leaders, need to have an interest in, a liking for and patience with 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 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.

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

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.

"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."

Many respondents felt that Gilly's hard work, dedication and enthusiasm motivated others to make the effort and that she had changed a lot of lives for the better. 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

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.'*

Creating and disrupting 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 Well-being: physical health benefits were rarely articulated, with only a few respondents suggesting that music participation brought about definite physical improvements. 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 well being were more likely than physical benefits.

Mental Well-being: most respondents focused on the way participation supported mental well-being. This included the way learning encouraged mental stimulation, focus and concentration, as well as emotional well-being 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 well-being, as there may be fewer opportunities to be challenged in this way following retirement.

Engaging with music: all respondents reported benefits to well being 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 well being.

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 well-being, 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 continue to be provided in other venues.

RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN SUCCESS FACTORS AND REPORTED BENEFITS

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 well-being

- 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

- Kind and enthusiastic tutors who contribute to improved confidence among participants

CHANGES SINCE THE RESEARCH WAS CONDUCTED

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. Gateshead Old Town Hall has become the new main venue of the Silver Programme, so many of the positive characteristics of 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 the 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.

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.

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR POLICY AND PRACTICE

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.

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 a sufficiently skilled management team and music 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 well being' 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.

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