

Responses to Working Group Interim Report on Recruitment and Retention.

Introduction

Attached are the written responses received. Thank you to all who responded. I have had to adjust very slightly some responses in order to preserve promised anonymity. The Working Group produced over forty pages of notes, which I reduced to nine pages. I was anxious that the finished item reflect the thoughts of all, not just those of its author.

There remained areas that were not touched upon at all, the obvious example being that of why it is we seem able to recruit women but not men.

I think I should make reference to the somewhat vexed issue of an upper age limit. This was my suggestion. Can I please make clear that I did not have in mind the peremptory dismissal of anyone over a certain age. An upper age limit could have applied only to future members.

My upper age limit suggestion had been on the one hand a recruiting tool to attract urgently needed younger people, but also an attempt at the same time to afford the opportunity for older, highly-valued members to join what would in effect have been a highly experienced third age choir rather than leave HCS altogether to sing elsewhere.

The reaction, when I made this proposal in 2016, not within the WG Report, but at the outset of the consultation process, was one of hostility. I did not therefore press the issue again as part of the WG discussions, and I do not pursue it now, albeit that I hold to my view that an upper age limit, coupled with the opportunity to remain within the HCS in a singing capacity after failing a voice reassessment, might hold advantages for all of us.

Speaking for myself I would much rather know that I would be leaving the main choir at a certain age, rather than fail reassessment. Age is the defining factor either way but my preferred option would afford me certainty and control.

Since the Interim Report was produced, and accepted by the Trustees, there have been developments. The website has been upgraded, the choir banners and membership publicity likewise. Our 'Learn to Sing' approach is being rolled out. We have put renewed effort into looking after new recruits.

At the new current rate of membership enquiries via the website we can anticipate perhaps 25 enquiries per annum. I expect this to rise further.

A recruitment drive amongst NHS staff and local public employees is planned. Furthermore we will be focussing specifically on male recruitment via social media as we rehearse for our summer concert.

I know that others who have not committed pen to paper have strong feelings as to what we should be doing to further the interests of HCS and recruitment in particular. The discussion of recruitment and retention issues touches upon all aspects of the choir. I intend to accept, for onward consideration by the Working Group, Committee and Trustees, any further written comments received by the end of February 2018, whereafter I think we must move on.

PRJ. 11 02 18.

Responses

"No beating about the bush, so here goes!

The following adjectives spring to mind when reading your report:

Dismissive, ageist, discriminatory, arrogant, judgemental and extremely verbose!

Not long ago all HCS members were asked in a questionnaire what they wanted from the choir. The vast majority, as I recall, wanted to be in an auditioned choir with a view to reaching the highest possible standards in our performances. What is proposed here is the antithesis of that.

I do not believe that it is possible to be in HCS without any previous musical knowledge or experience and I wouldn't want to be in a choir like that - otherwise I would have joined something like Rock-Up.

Of course there is need for change - any organisation is an evolving thing. I am absolutely in favour of broadening our repertoire, singing in different venues, splitting into smaller choirs within the main choir to sing in different ways, singing without an orchestra etc. but I am absolutely against making the choir into something totally different.

If the pursuit of high standards in music is equal to elitism, then you could accuse all our greatest orchestras, vocal ensembles and soloists of being elitist."

"I agree that HCS needs new members and also needs to retain both new and existing members.

When I first read your report I was quite perturbed by it. It made me feel very undervalued. It seemed to be saying that hard work and loyalty to the choir count for nothing.

When I joined the choir eleven years ago I had absolutely no experience of choral singing or singing in a large choir. It was up to me to practice at home, take singing lessons and join in Come and Sing days and the like. I didn't expect to be treated differently to long standing members.

I do agree with a lot of points in the report. Thank you for your efforts in writing it and for stating your case clearly.

I will just state the points with which I don't agree.

I do not agree with a maximum age limit. If someone passes their audition they have earned their place in the choir. In view of the shortage of choir members it seems ridiculous to tell someone who reaches a certain age that their presence is no longer required. Older members have a lot to give the choir.

I do not agree with reducing/waiving fees for all new members. I don't think our subscription is too high and it seems very unfair to have non-paying members.

I do not agree with paying local young professional singers to rehearse and perform with us.

I think all new members should be treated equally. They should all be auditioned. This first audition need not be as formal as the normal choir voice assessments. However, after the first year the new members should all be re-auditioned.

I think the reason that so few choir members have responded is that it is a very long report and it is hard to know where to start with comments. It is very time consuming to organise one's thoughts on all these proposed changes."

"Well done in producing your excellent report on the problems and possible solutions facing HCS over recruitment and retention.

I have just one general comment to offer - sadly without any accompanying solution. It seems to me that, welcome though it is, an emphasis on recruiting at the school or university student level

cannot solve the underlying problem, because any such recruits are likely to be very transient and their availability will not always chime in with our concert schedules.

What we really need is more members in the core 25-55 age range. Experience in other organisations suggests that the most productive source of recruitment may be word-of-mouth amongst friends, work colleagues, etc. There must be a lot of people in that age bracket who either have had some modest experience of singing or could be persuaded by a friend to give it a try (given that the only absolute qualification is that they should be able to pitch a note). But sadly, because of HCS existing age structure, this may be hard to achieve. Taking myself as an example, almost all of my friends and close acquaintances are 70+. My children have never really lived in Harrogate, so I have no group of contacts here in the next generation down. There are probably many other members in similar situations, and as the average age moves up, there are fewer and fewer members actually in the 25-55 bracket who might be able to recruit within their direct peer group.

I don't know how you overcome this problem, but I would agree that contact with RUAS might be one sensible way forward. They may be cautious about any step which might reduce their membership (especially as it seems to be a commercial business), but we could sell the idea on the basis that we are complementary rather than competing. The Male Voice choir might be a similar target, though I think their age profile may be even more advanced than ours! The challenge in both cases is that their members don't have to be able to read music at all (and many of them can't), so we might need to combine any approach with the promise of a few basic lessons.

Not sure that this tells you anything that you don't know already!"

"We just wanted to thank you for all the hard work you put in on the R and R paper. It must have been extremely difficult to make any progress. We also wanted you to be aware that you might take some flack in September from some members who read it and feel hurt or offended by some of its content so wear your bulletproof vest (or stand next to Sally for protection).

Another, similar, choir are having exactly the same problems as HCS - falling attendances, no new members, many members 70 + even 80+ they have enough tenors but not second basses which is why their spring choral event is a joint one shared between the organisations. They were having a joint big open evening this autumn with lots of publicity. They have found like us that having a big name does not help as by the time they had paid the big name they had made a loss.

Anyway, accepting that this is a discussion document and not a policy statement I hope you will accept this feedback from us on the paper in the spirit it is intended:

Re 4.2. Is this true or has it developed into an urban myth? Undoubtedly there are a few miserable and antisocial members but the majority seem to mix and mingle rather well now. We should not sell ourselves short.

Re 5.1. Totally agree.

Re 5.5, also 7.28/9. As we are an auditioning choir why should we have an age limit? I would be sorry to lose older people and there are very few evening activities to which the elderly can go alone. If they can pass the audition then I think they should stay.

Re 5.11, see also 7.24. Agree that we need to consider our vision, our ethos and our "raison d'être". However we must not lose sight of the fact that we are a Choral Society and as such big classical works are what they do!

Re 7.4 et seq agree about the photograph. This point was made at AGM about 5 years ago - in vain. Put the youngsters at the front for media opportunities!!

Re 7.11/2. Puzzled by the statement we can attract schoolage members – not sure who could think this when the Halcyon has struggled to get a lot of members, probably less than 12 at their last showing despite the thousands that have been spent on it.

Re 7.15 – although sure that we could learn from them not sure we would want to sing RUAS material. However there other groups more closely aligned with us that we could pair up with instead, like a male voice choir, or a smaller group?

Hope this is constructive and helpful please feel free to come back to us to challenge and share it with others.”

“My thanks to you and your group for a great deal of effort and a well thought out document.

I was sorry to read that it had been the subject of some negative comments and I hope that these will not deter you or the committee / trustees from implementing the changes which are clearly needed.

Here are a few thoughts from me.

Paras 1-4 are accepted

5 has some good ideas which should be tried. No-one should have special seating positions.

I wonder if a new member coming in to hear us sing our items from memory might be rather daunted by that. Andrew has often done this, and it might make people think that it is beyond their capabilities. I remember how we all had misgivings about doing it when he introduced it to us.

We joined years back, because we wanted to sing Messiah and were thrown in at the deep end with another work for November. We struggled, but nearly everyone else was struggling too.

That slightly goes against your section 5.3. I can see the sense in 5.4 and 5.5, but find it rather worrying personally.

5.11. Sorry, but I am happier with the niche than the alternatives. I do recognise the need to change though.

5.12 to 5.14. Essential , especially for tenors and basses.

5.16. Not sure if it is needed. While not a Luddite I am happier with email and webpages than social media.

Section 7 has a lot of important points, I wonder how much the idea of an audition puts off potential new members. I don't know what they are asked to do; is it the same as we do every 3 years? If we are to talk to prospective new members then we need to know and be able to reassure them.

Do we tell them about the availability of midi files to help them learn their parts?

Finally I note that black shirts will be tried for men in the future. I have watched a few of the proms and the vast majority of choirs taking part were in black. If not black then DJs please, but not the bare white shirts which make us look ridiculous and only emphasise the shortage of men.

Good luck with furthering the work of the committee. If you want to follow up anything I have written then please note that we won't be at the rehearsals until 13th at the earliest as we continue our trip around do have emails from time to time though.”

“I strongly agree with your statement that there must be change and that doing nothing isn't an option. I have a stronger opinion about the following:

Section 5 - a very good idea about mentoring and additional tuition. I also like the ideas about only recruiting at certain times of the year to avoid scaring people away!

5.5 - I am strongly opposed to the age limit - there are young 75 year olds and old 30 year olds. If you can still sing, you should be in. An discriminatory choir is not one I would wish to be a member of.

5.7 I think the fees can be off-puttingly high and any attempt to lighten the load on younger people or those on lower incomes should be explored. Splitting the cost is also a good idea.

5.9 - not sure how this would help - singing with brilliant singers might put novices off!

5.10 - flexible auditioning, in fact flexibility in general is a good idea!

5.11 - essential I think. If we're singing things that I want to leave the country to avoid, imagine how a new member will feel! This isn't about dumbing down but perhaps it is about a little less Elgar!

5.14 - find out what the person wants in terms of contact, if people are happy, don't bombard them with calls to check concerns or they'll invent them! It has to be individual not one size fits all.

5.15 - good idea!

5.16 - An app is a good idea for younger members but could easily alienate older ones - find something for them too. I can help with this

5.17 & 18 - YES!

7. The new uniform is a great improvement here but we are what we are! More rehearsal photos or at socials would be a good idea.

I agree with all your comments about the two groups of singers and different approaches. Everyone I know who has been to Rock Up And Sing has commented on the boredom factor and many haven't stayed, suggesting that turnover is high - a different sort of recruitment problem to ours. Perhaps we should talk to Rhiannon about doing something together.

7.22 - Totally agree - I always feel that an open rehearsal at the start of a new piece is a really bad idea. No one is seeing us at our best!

7.23 - Good idea!

7.25, 26, 27, 28, 29 & 30 - ditto!

Happy to help where I can"

" Firstly I must say thank you to your whole working group for doing SO much! I appreciate just how long all of it takes. Thank you.

I have to say I was made very welcome by the people sitting next to me and around me. There were and are others, even in my voice part, who were not and are not friendly! I'm happy to help with anyone new to the choir.

I think all WG ideas on seating are v. good, especially having experienced singers behind. Yes, especial encouragement is needed to keep novice singers in the voice parts with lower numbers. I seem to remember at least one woman being in the tenors and then being there anymore!

I agree that a small reduction for the first year is a really good idea, as is the one to be able to pay in more instalments. I think paying for professional singers is not such a good idea!

I don't like the idea of not having a formal voice audition.

The idea of someone from the choir contacting a new member before and after acceptance into the choir I think is a good way of receiving feedback.

Trying to recruit students from schools, even they may only stay for a year or two I think is an excellent idea, as are the ideas to upgrade the website and have radio promotion for concerts. An organized session singing with RUAS could be fun and may lead to getting some new members.

A minor point on helping to retain members would be to tackle the irritating level of talking when Andrew is working with the choir."

“Many congratulations to you and your team for all your work in producing such a thorough, logical and stimulating report. It is absolutely right that these points should be aired however uncomfortable it makes us feel. I have very little to say as there are so many excellent observations. So what follows are just thoughts, not criticisms.

General Points

These may be outside the WG's remit:

- (i) I get the impression there are quite a few choir members who cannot read music (and don't advertise the fact) but manage just as well as other who do
- (ii) there is no mention of the suggestion to sing in smaller venues
- (iii) it is important that we all do home-work and not just rely on the Wednesday rehearsal

Textual Points

Section 5

Para 5 Like others I would not support an age limit. I think ability is the key factor. I understand that men even older than me can sing properly for some time. We should not assume that the young are flexible and the old resist to change. A music teacher told me that the reverse was in fact the case. With more young and able people coming on stream it would be unwise for the older to become complacent, if that really is the case. The threat of a regular audition certainly concentrates my mind as does the presence of better singers around me at rehearsals.

Paras 6 & 7 Unsure about reducing/waiving fees. A payment gives you a stake in the organisation. Are people really put off solely because of the fees?

Para 11 Do you mean Beati? This certainly does a huge range of music.

Section 7

Paras 15 & 26. I can already hear a collective shudder at the mere mention of RUAS. Two points. First. We already suffer with a pick and mix approach by some members. I believe for the joint Missa Solemnis concert choir numbers actually attending the concert were in the "eighties". If we are joining with RUAS, or any other choir, then members must commit. Second. We need Music Director(s) that are prepared to work with fellow MDs.”

“As regards recruitment and retention of members (tenors) I can only say that I recently attended a Wetherby CS concert and they seem to have more tenors than we do - and Wetherby is a much smaller place than Harrogate. So what are we doing wrong? Many years ago Wetherby was a much smaller society than Harrogate.

As regards retention, maybe we are unfriendly. This obviously could be rectified - with a bit of effort!

As regards new members being put off by choice of repertoire, I for one would be very upset if we start 'dumbing down'. N.B. Wetherby CS are performing a Bach Magnificat NOT JS and a Vivaldi Dixit Dominus this term neither of which works I have ever encountered. I would be very interested in singing both works because this is one of the reasons I joined a choir many, many years ago. As regards ticket sales, my view is that the choir (myself included) just do not make enough effort to sell tickets - I could be wrong!”

“Some thoughts on this topic. Sorry they are close to your deadline.

I think that many prospective members might be put off by the prospect of an audition soon after coming to the society. All but very experienced and trained singers must feel more than a little trepidation. I do not think I coped well despite having sung in choral and operatic societies over many years. Perhaps a first audition could be based on the work the society is preparing, after the prospective member has had a couple of months to trial us and learn some of the music?

Rehearsals should start on time, and the break, including any announcements or other interruptions, should have a defined short length. We rarely start on time and can be up to ten minutes late. The tea/coffee break was a welcome change but it has a tendency to drift too long. Being less than businesslike in rehearsals is not likely to impress new members, and does discourage existing members.

Informal "getting to know us" social occasions might help with retention - pub after rehearsal, cafe on morning after rehearsal - with small number of "volunteers " from existing members organised to attend, preferably including some who had already met the potential recruits at rehearsal.

Those in the area already familiar with choral music will know about our excellent musical director and deputy, and the excellent orchestras and soloists we sing with, but perhaps those new to the area or new to singing need to be made aware of our privileges.

Perhaps I have been told and should know, but do we contact all potential recruits very soon after their first appearance to ask what they thought of us and provide encouragement and reassurance?

Please can we stop mention of age limits? If the society wants rid of me please can it do it on grounds of singing poorly."

Ruth has sent on your plea for ideas re recruiting new members. I have only two ideas. One is to spend some money on advertising for new members in local papers or on local radio or by way of leaflets delivered through the post or with newspapers. This may seem rather obvious but has it been tried? Secondly have there been efforts to recruit students at Harrogate college? With so much competition in Harrogate for singers it is a going to be a difficult task but I agree we cannot go on as before. In the end may we have to consider an amalgamation with another choir??"

"Thank you for your work and that of the other WG members on the interim report.

It is clear that a huge amount of serious consideration has gone into it as well as genuine efforts to come up with creative ways of addressing the issues.

There is nothing I would disagree with.

One recommendation I would support in particular (and would willingly help to staff) is a publicity stand that could be taken to local events."