



Singing for Health Network – template questions for case studies (800-1,000 words)

1. Tell us a bit about yourself and how you got into delivering Singing for Health (include any research/training you have undertaken)

A practising Opera Singer for 23 years, I have always had a keen interest in singing and music for health, and volunteered at hospitals and care home settings during my Bachelor and Master degrees in Music. My most fulfilling and inspired singing jobs have involved performing in small communities where opera is not readily accessible, unusual venues, inter -disciplinary arts projects and opera and health projects.

Through a series of lucky opportunities, I began to work in Singing for Dementia, firstly creating the role of 'Carer' in the first ever Medical/Operatic collaboratively composed Dementia Opera - The Lion's Face - with The Opera Group and Kings College London, and vocal facilitating on the Scottish Opera/Alzheimer's Scotland pilot Dementia project, 'The Memory Spinners'. This project took clients' and their companions' memories and words based on Main House operatic themes, transformed them into sung stories with music and movement, giving participants a whole new way of expressing themselves, through music, song and dance. Further training in Music and Dementia with Enterprise Music Scotland, led to me being offered a regular job as a Music Leader with Common Wheel, a Music and Mental Health Charity based at Gartnavel Royal Hospital in Glasgow. In a year (2017) concentrating on building my 'Singing For Health' work, I trained in Singing For Lung Health with the British Lung Foundation, and amongst, other things, worked with a mental health café on singing for wellbeing in a very deprived area of Glasgow.

2. Describe your Singing for Health work, what you offer, how you offer it and who it is for. (add how it is funded)

My work with Common Wheel has grown slowly and steadily over the space of five years, from co-facilitating a hospital assessment ward singing group, to now leading numerous sessions - in an advanced Dementia ward, singing groups in two care homes in Glasgow, and two funded schemes in other hospitals. All groups have either an Occupational Therapist present or an Activities Co-ordinator, and family members or friends are actively encouraged to participate. My sessions tend to be singing and percussion based, and I often find that a conversation initiated through instrumental and rhythmic interaction, leads to greater singing participation, and can, in time encourage better patterns of speech.

I currently run four different Singing For Lung Health groups, three of which come under the auspices of other organisations, taking some of the pressure off me, regards funding and certain amounts of time-consuming administration work. DAYR To Sing is a constituted group that I helped found, with the participants, and we have been lucky to secure pots of money from PB local council funding, and other community based funding. My West Kilbride Group was 3 years in the making, in conjunction with The Barony Centre, an arts hub central to social life in this small, Craft Town. We failed to secure funding in the first instance, but second time round secured 2 years' Community Investment funding for 'Sing Your Song' Breathing Group, and a primary school 'Singing for Growth' project. My other two SFLH groups began during the Covid pandemic, both virtually and through established Arts Organisations. One with Plantation Productions in Govan, Glasgow, as part of their Creative Steps To Better Mental Health programme, and another with St. Andrew's Voices, which grew organically out of online connections in trainings, webinars and workshops with the organisation's Artistic Director, Amanda MacLeod.

I also run a Singing for Parkinson's Group, based in Kilmarnock, and I trained with the SingToBeat Parkinson's programme at Snape Maltings, and two Mental Health/wellbeing singing groups - one for Platform in Easterhouse Glasgow, and one for South Ayrshire Council Housing -

both groups encourage interaction and social connection through group singing, to combat social isolation and depression.

3. Describe if and how you are working with Healthcare professionals – how did it happen? How are they involved? Can you share any useful tips about building a relationship with healthcare?

A slow burn, persistence is key. It took me nearly 3 years of attending meetings and rehabilitation classes, email exchanges, workshopping conferences and at health clinics, before I managed to get a Respiratory Consultant and a Pulmonary Rehab nurse to actively participate in a Singing For Breathing workshop. Only then, despite advocating my work, did they experience that 'lightbulb' moment of 'feeling' the physical and emotional effect of the practise! Now they regularly direct refer, in the experiential knowledge and confidence that this work is fun and helps breath management. Here, seeds were sown and roots have grown and spread to form developing links with other health professionals. Working from home during the pandemic has given me valuable time to nurture these links, possibly because CoVid has brought respiratory conditions – rehabilitation and self-management - to the fore. Running a virtual Singing For Parkinson's participatory workshop in the online Spheres of Singing Conference in May 2020, whilst stepping out of my comfort zone, into a new and scary virtual world of facilitation, it brought me connections which have proved invaluable, forging relations I might never have otherwise made with NHS staff wellbeing and ICU rehabilitation, locally and in Glasgow. Persistence is key.

4. Share some of the impacts of your work on participants.

The key impact has been to help participants self-manage their breathlessness. Many have found that the classes and the social interaction and friendships made, improve their overall health and wellbeing too. Some have found increased lung capacity, and increased lung strength to fight infection.

'...As well as improving my breathing for singing,... (exercises) help me when wearing a mask, feeling anxious or just doing everyday activities.'

'Since coming along to your virtual sessions, I've learned so much about how important the connection between breath, body and voice is...'

'The pleasure and enjoyment of attending your classes always gives me a sense of joy. Your breathing and singing techniques....help always to build up my confidence...'

'The confidence in singing through your exercising has been of great help to my everyday life.'

'As I suffer from low mood and breathing difficulties Rachel's classes lift my spirit. Rachel has taught me great breathing exercises that I use in my everyday life...'

'..My Breathing Technique has greatly improved. When I'm short of breath after say making bed, I have now learned with new methods how to restore my breathing.'

'For me it's been the socialising even during the virtual sessions. Very important for my mental health...'

'Rachel, quite apart from the excellent breathing assistance you give us along with a way to socialise, your sunny smile and welcome are instrumental in forgetting about lockdown for a while...'

'It's fun, it's sociable... meeting old and new friends... and it helps our breathing ...by giving me something to focus on and keeping me active...'

'I practise the breathing everywhere – even waiting for the lights to change.'

'My respiratory system felt it had a wake-up call. Lots of fun too.'

The concentration required to sing efficiently on the breath, is a great de-stresser in itself because it stops one thinking about every day worries, particularly during this pandemic. Connecting in this activity

and socially with others who experience similar health conditions though, helps people feel less isolated. Once strangers now friends, we understand how each other is feeling and empathise through lived experience, bringing back a sense of self-worth and belonging. The virtual social connection, has proved vital for many in my groups during the pandemic, who live alone and have been shielding for weeks on end.

5. Anything else you would like to share which might help other Singing for Health Practitioners. What are your top tips, things you have learnt along the way?!

Don't be afraid to fail or show your own vulnerability. I think my clients appreciate when I am honest in this way, as it breaks down that tutor /pupil barrier. Train, CPD, skill-share, watch and observe colleagues.

6. What do you think are the essential skills and attributes of a Singing for Health leader?

I find it helps to be personable, organised, but adaptable in the moment. I always plan a session, but quite often that plan goes straight out of the window when entering the class and sensing the client mood and physical well-being. Recognising this online can prove troublesome, so I often use my own mood and physical health as a gauge for planning session content. Honesty is helpful – I am feeling low and fatigued too, so how can we combat this through the practise? I love that we are encouraged to give ourselves 'permission to fail' in this practise - like one big rehearsal period in the performing world, forming, shaping and growing new ideas, combining them with tried and tested ones, always reflecting afterwards to improve future practise. This work is about making and nurturing deeper connections with people who are very vulnerable on varying and complex levels, so being able to bring humour to the sessions – even laugh at oneself – can create a more relaxed environment, inviting more fulfilling and fruitful participation. Being able to read the room, responding to individual needs, is a great skill, and one that grows with practise and experience. Watching and observing colleagues at work is also vital to improving one's own skills.

As we venture cautiously and tentatively out of this pandemic, I think music and health will become much more intrinsically linked as we learn more about the lasting health effects of Long Covid on respiratory, physical and mental health. We are at the forefront of this work because we are out there doing it, but often working alone or in small groups, with little or no PR machine, and no validation of a big brand or organisation to bring attention to the work in the wider field of healthcare. This is why The Singing For Health Network is so vitally important, in bringing research and practise in both medical and musical fields, together to collaborate, skill-share, and help validate this vital work.