



# Creative People & Places

## Case Study: Developing a Community-led Choir in Hounslow

### Summary

In 2014, **Creative People & Places Hounslow** established Hounslow Community Choir in response to community requests for regular arts groups in the borough. After ten years of growing the group, they have become an independent, community-led Choir as of January 2025. This detailed case study outlines the development of this group, the challenges faced in supporting them to independence and the factors that ultimately led to their success.

### Introduction

*Creative People & Places Hounslow* is part of Arts Council England's national investment in engaging new audiences in the arts in parts of the country where involvement in creativity and culture is significantly below the national average.

Our 10-year vision for the Creative People and Places programme is that, together, we will build a confident, colourful, creative Hounslow.

In 2014, in response to requests from families whose children had lessons through Hounslow Music Service for adult lessons, CPP Hounslow established Hounslow Community Choir. The Choir is for adult residents of Hounslow and is membership based, with members paying a subsidised termly fee. The longer term aim was for the group to become an independent, sustainable, community-led choir.

### Success Factors for establishing a community Choir

The choir rehearsed at Hounslow Music Service, moving with them in 2017 to their new building, until numbers grew to such an extent that they needed a larger rehearsal venue. The increase of their membership has to do with a few key factors:

- A top quality, experienced, Musical Director
- Varied repertoire and styles of music: a range of music was selected for the choir by the MD that would appeal to varied levels and interests. This repertoire has grown and adapted over the years but always focused on providing accessible entry points for new members
- Open to beginners with no audition needed: this has been key to ensuring the choir feels open and prioritises community and connection over experience or skill level

- Low, accessible fees
- Central, easy to reach location for rehearsals
- Came out of community consultation, with local people making it clear they wanted a community choir
- A focus on community and connections fostered by the choir members themselves. Key members ensured the group had a welcoming and supportive atmosphere in sessions and through a group WhatsApp channel

The above factors enabled the Choir to become established and grow its membership.

## **Challenges**

As for many community groups, the COVID-19 pandemic had a big impact on choir membership and therefore their ability to progress towards becoming a sustainable, independent group. The group were unable to meet in person and membership numbers dropped. However, a few core members continued to meet online and returned to meeting when the restrictions were lifted.

*'The highlight of our time with CPP is that they established a choir and kept it going even through times when the numbers fell, after returning following the pandemic. CPP was instrumental in promoting and growing the choir especially post pandemic. Being able to work with the individuals at CPP and building a strong relationship with them kept alive the hope of the future of the choir.'*

- Apinder Sidhu, Hounslow Community Choir Chair

This had an impact on choir membership as well as their timeline towards independence which relied on a sustainable membership level. It highlighted the importance of managing expectations and ensuring clear communication of what the choir committee needed in place to confirm their sustainability.

## **Success factors for supporting the Choir to independence**

The longer term aim for the choir was always to become an independent, community-led group. This would ensure the sustainability of the choir and increase community ownership over this valuable creative asset. In discussion with the Choir committee, the below factors have been identified as key to supporting the choir to this point.

- A very stable core group of members who joined the choir early on and were happy to take on the responsibility of becoming the Choir committee. The choir held an AGM in November 2023 to vote in a Committee which meant they could now make decisions representative of the entire choir membership and move steadily towards independence.

*'The key factors for successfully becoming independent has been the passion of a group of members that have driven the idea of independence forward. When in 2022 a small group of the choir were asked if there was an appetite to keep the choir going after Arts Council funding came to an end, there was a strong desire to keep the choir going and a focus on the longevity and sustainability of the choir. This led on to a group forming the committee and working towards independence.'*

- Apinder Sidhu, Hounslow Community Choir Chair

- Gaining a regular membership of at least 40 people. The main financial consideration for the choir was based on ensuring the group had enough members to cover their costs through fees. This was supported by promotion and marketing by CPP, performances and word of mouth.
- Performing in concerts and community spaces across the borough and beyond has increased the Choir's visibility and connections in the borough which both grew the confidence of members, encouraged more people to join and occasionally provided income for the choir
- Trust - relationships between CPP Hounslow and the choir were key. These were built over time, both supporting the choir to establish and grow membership and then to support the committee to develop plans for independence and beyond
- A gradual shift in responsibility for coordination from CPP Hounslow to Hounslow Community Choir Committee. This included the Community Arts Worker passing over tasks, responsibilities and information in manageable amounts, over time
- Training and skills sharing, both by the Community Arts Worker and external experts in financial planning, legal structures and policies to ensure the committee were able to make decisions over their finances and structure in the longer term. This took place over a number of years, building confidence and skills at a slow pace
- Developing a shared timeline together to ensure the plan for independence worked for the choir as well as CPP Hounslow

*'As with any move towards independence the challenge is always funding and budgets. We looked closely at our budgets and also received guidance from an external finance consultant, this helped a lot to get focused on key areas of funding the choir'*

- Apinder Sidhu, Hounslow Community Choir Chair

## **Funding success!**

Once the Choir were on track to become independent and their structure, constitution and finances were secure they began applying for funding to contribute to their income post-independence. A few months before independence the choir applied for funding from the National Lottery and were successful. This has provided even more certainty for their sustainability and has been testament to the work put into ensuring they were a functioning and thriving community group.

## **Learnings to take forward**

A key learning to take forward is the importance of developing leadership within the choir. Forming a committee early on in the independence process ensures that there are committed, interested members who can take on responsibilities and represent the wider group. They also play a key role in fostering a welcoming, supportive space for new members to join.

Secondly, building and sustaining trust between CPP Hounslow and the Choir ensured that they felt supported on their journey towards independence as well as their development as a choir. CPP Hounslow remained committed to the success and sustainability of the choir throughout.

Finally, it was important to work with the choir at their pace on this journey. Allowing time to set realistic goals, co-create the independence plan and managing expectations were important catalysts to achieve this.

**The Creative People & Places Hounslow Team, March 2025**