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“Collaboration is key”: Inside the National Schools Singing Programme

14th February 2022



The [National Schools Singing Programme](#) was founded and is supported by the [Hamish Ogston Foundation](#) for all Catholic dioceses in the UK. Based on a model established in the Diocese of Leeds in 2003, it has developed a progression route in Music Education “without cliff edges”. Working with their Hub partner in Leeds has been key. We spoke to consultants Benjamin Saunders and Thomas Leech to learn more about the Programme’s development, implementation, and their plans for the future.

Could you tell us a little more about the National Schools Singing Programme (NSSP) – what might a young person’s entry point be and where could they end up?

The NSSP offers a coherent pathway from whole-class singing to further achievement. A child in a participating school typically receives weekly whole-class singing led by a diocesan choral director

during the school day. There is a guide curriculum to follow that supports the Model Music Curriculum, with planning and reporting on pupil outcomes. This is vital in ensuring head teachers are able to demonstrate progress amongst their pupils in the same way they must for maths and English.

For children who are interested in taking their singing further, there is a network of regional after-school choirs for junior and senior children. These after-school choirs can be a Cathedral choir or boys and girls choirs in a local town. Many of these regional choirs meet at the high school which is fed by the primary schools. By building the foundations on an industrial scale in primary education, the programme ensures that large numbers of boys as well as girls continue singing at secondary level – the male group is large enough that they don't feel like odd ones out! A recent study into the programme in Leeds asked a boy why he had stayed involved in choirs from the age of 7 to 18. His answer was simple: *'I didn't think leaving was an option and I wanted to be a tenor when my voice changed at secondary school.'*

In the Leeds model, singing in the after-school choirs is enriched through tours, concerts, cathedral services and BBC broadcasts. Much of this local enrichment stems from the international partnerships we enjoy with the University of Texas at El Paso, Notre Dame University and Vanderbilt University, alongside the education programmes of Gabrieli Roar and The Sixteen. Many of our singers have gone on to study Music in higher education, with a number returning to full-time jobs teaching in the programme. Our aim is to create a pathway to success without cliff edges for young people that can also lead to full-time career options.



How did you decide upon your approach?

We felt it was important to work within structures that already existed, rather than invent a new structure or top-down approach. For our organisation, this is Catholic state schools which come under a regional diocese. The shared identity amongst a family of schools has been very helpful in expanding the programme coupled with schools that work in clusters or multi-academy trusts.

The core of our work is with disadvantaged students and we always strive to offer a structural approach that is built on equality of opportunity.

Six years ago, we began a Keyboard Studies Programme in the Diocese of Leeds, building on the success of the Schools Singing Programme to add instrumental engagement for participating schools. Whilst this venture was initially concerned with producing young organists for parishes, it quickly became apparent that playing the organ was a long way down the road in a child's musical journey. The core of our work is with disadvantaged students and we always strive to offer a structural approach that is built on equality of opportunity. When speaking to state school head

teachers it became clear that some had reservations about the 'cliff edge' that students found with certain instruments, either because of their cost, size or related transition pathways.

We looked at the model for young children in Japan where every child is given a melodica to begin their musical journey and decided to do this on a larger scale. Six months into this programme, we have 830 children learning to read music whilst playing the melodica and head teachers are delighted with the instrument's low cost, durability and portability. We then offer pathways for children to begin lessons on related keyboard instruments. The diocese has been able to provide keyboards and organs for students to progress on so far producing 35 organ students.



We've developed a programme that's educationally excellent – our curriculum framework ensures incremental development, consistency in recapping and developing knowledge and skills, and introduces notation through musicianship through a two year scheme delivered within the singing sessions developed for us by Lucinda Geoghegan and the National Youth Choir of Scotland. Outstanding teaching is a priority – and we support our colleagues and those across the NSSP in developing essential teaching skills that they

may not have encountered or used in previous musical roles.

It was crucial to create a financially sustainable programme and this essentially works by each school paying into the diocese (the employer of a full-time choral director). Each diocese also makes a contribution to the cost and through the generosity of the Hamish Ogston Foundation, seed funding is offered so that the Foundation essentially takes the financial risk of beginning a new diocesan Schools Singing Programme for organisations that are by design or necessity essentially risk averse.

We hope that all the eligible 31 dioceses in the UK will start their own singing programmes.

In what way has working with Leeds Music Hub facilitated and supported the programme?

Collaboration is key and of the five LEAs we work across in our diocese, the approach of the Leeds Music Hub (Leeds Music Education Partnership) has been exemplary and transformational. Their partnership model is based not on fear of competition but on providing the widest possible opportunity across the city – with its immense diversity and challenging deprivation – through the distribution of their funding beyond the lead partner Artforms. As one of their partners the Diocese of Leeds provision is eligible for their generous cashback offer on provision (schools can claim 50% back from LMEP) as well as some core funding and a range of bursaries and innovative activity pots, supporting not only the weekly foundational whole-class singing but also add ons including performance projects with clusters of schools, and a Leeds Organ Day.

What do you hope happens with the National Schools Singing Programme in the future?

We hope that all the eligible 31 dioceses in the UK will start their own singing programmes. Already the majority of English ones have joined and we are very keen to support Wales, N. Ireland and Scotland as they develop their plans. We'll continue our roll out at a national level, to reach as many children in as financially sensible and sustainable a way as possible by schools working together with their diocese, given confidence that they are investing in generational



change through the seed funding from the Hamish Ogston Foundation. We plan to maintain a level of coherence to the national plan whilst keeping each diocesan programme autonomous and flexible to the needs of their schools. And we hope that in the future successful Schools Singing Programmes might be able to enrich their offer with an instrumental as in Leeds.

Find out more about the National Schools Singing Programme [here](#).

Find out more about the Hamish Ogston Foundation [here](#).

To learn more about how large numbers of children have benefitted from the true collaborative model of the Leeds Music Education Partnership, please [contact Thomas Leech](#).

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