



# *innovate* 2015-2016

Sing Out

Case Study written by Steven Smith

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## **Background to project**

Sing Out is a songwriting project for LGBT (lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender) young people aged 13-19. It works in partnership with the London Gay Men's Chorus (LGMC) and Mosaic LGBT Youth Service to provide a safe and supportive environment for young LGBT people to create new music. The project explores the issues faced by the young LGBT participants and addresses them by empowering them to express themselves creatively, improve musicianship and improve their wellbeing. The young people were supported to create and record a new piece of music and perform alongside the London Gay Men's Chorus.

The idea of the project came from Project Leader Steven Smith, who is a freelance musician and youth worker. Having worked within the LGBT youth charity sector in Scotland for over eight years, he had used music in workshop settings with young people to explore issues they are facing and found this to be a very successful process. Equality and creativity are his two main passions, and so working with both seemed like a natural next step. There is a lack of LGBT representation in music, particularly in the exploration of relationships and issues that young LGBT people face, and supporting young people to create something from their own stories is very powerful. He wanted to develop this model for a bigger songwriting project working with LGBT young people, and the opportunity arose to pitch this after joining the LGMC in January 2015 and hearing of their education work. Sound Connections' Innovate fund provided the perfect opportunity to start this project.

## **Partnership building**

The LGCM is celebrating its Jubilee year this year (2016), and created 25 goals for this. One of these is to *'create meaningful collaboration with a youth group'* and the LGMC had made a connection with Mosaic LGBT Youth Centre to run a music workshop. The partnership between the two of them was created but had not been explored further. Steven suggested that this could be the opportunity to work together for the Sing Out project. Both partners agreed to this going forward.

## **Consultation**

The first consultation was with the manager of Mosaic LGBT Youth Centre, Lukasz Konieczka, to discuss who the participants from Mosaic would be, and plans for the project. One original idea was to work with the young people to identify where there were certain instrumentalists missing within their own group and invite other young people who might play those instruments to join the project for recording and performance. These external young people wouldn't necessarily identify as LGBT. However, this was not suitable for Mosaic as they have a strict code of being a safe space for LGBT young people, and they felt this could break this security. From this first conversation, it was clear that the idea of a safe space was extremely important to the safeguarding of the young people in this project, and that this would feature in all sessions throughout. Developing musical skills with the young people present would be the focus, and any external musicians brought in would be chosen carefully by the project leaders.

The original consultation date for the project could not happen due to timetable clashes, so the first meeting with the young people was with Steven at Mosaic on the 8 July 2015. This was an opportunity for the young people to meet with Steven, officially launch the project, and assess interest for it. Ideas on what music is and the power it can hold, particularly in discussing important topics, were looked at, and there was a good interest from the group. It was agreed to have another taster session in September and then work out dates for the main sessions from there. From this first session, Steven got an idea of the types of music the young people were interested in and what issues were important to them. They were consulted on the idea of creating music together and this was given a thumbs up!

Simon Sharp, Artistic Director of the LGMC, joined Steven to co-deliver the taster session on the 30 September 2015. This introduced the group to improvisation, vocal work, creating new lyrics and performance. They were also consulted on the best dates for holding the main sessions which were then decided upon after checking everyone's availability. There was a good number of 20 young people in attendance and positive feedback from the taster session.



Taster session group photo



Singing new lyrics

### **Intended outcomes**

The intended outcomes for the Sing Out project were as follows:

1. Young people will increase their musicianship. This will include development of song writing skills, lyric writing, and music skills, with a particular focus on vocals and performance skills.
2. Young people will improve their wellbeing. They will feel more supported, accepted, included and will see improvements to their mental health and wellbeing because of this. The project also has the potential to improve the wellbeing of other LGBT young people through the creation of work which has positive messages of challenging stigma and discrimination, but it will be the wellbeing of the young people participating which we will be able to evaluate.
3. The LGMC will improve its engagement with the wider LGBT community. They will build stronger partnerships with youth and music organisations to support the creation of new music. It will also provide the opportunity for the lead facilitator to gain experience working with a larger group where young people can perform alongside the LGMC. Chorus members will also have the opportunity to learn new skills in leadership and working with young people by being supported to work with the young people and share their experiences/skills as relevant to the project.

### **What happened**

#### *22 November 2015 – First creative session*

This saw the biggest number of core participants and was a busy session of setting group agreements, getting to know each other and the volunteers from LGMC who supported this day also. The volunteers provided a vital role in the session, working with the young people to let them feel safe to share personal stories. They also acted as role-models to the young people. Showing LGBT adults from various professions who were also musical, sharing the struggles they have faced to get where they are today, was really powerful. The volunteers became very invested in the project also from this stage, which was fantastic. Steven created a session which mixed musical games and

singing with exploring issues and sharing stories relating to LGBT people. This formed a large amount of topics, words and phrases which would become the starting point for writing songs. Initial feedback from the young people in their baseline evaluations was positive but also re-affirmed the importance of making the sessions a really safe and supportive space:

Q. How do you feel being here today?

*"I enjoy being here and can't wait to be a part of the project"*

*"Comfortable and excited. Going to have fun."*

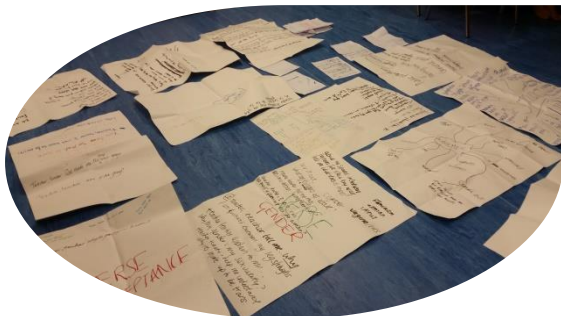
*"Nervous, there's a lot of people"*

The personal goal setting exercise included in this session also helped shape future sessions, such as including an 'open stage' moment where anyone could share or perform something with the rest of the group to work on confidence and performance skills, and continued development of singing and song-writing skills. When asked what they hoped to get out of the project, some responses from the young people included:

*"To be able to perform and to really have the confidence to sing in front of others"* (This young person went on to perform in the final performance!)

*"A better singing voice"*

*"To be more confident in myself and in making music. To have a great experience making music that's personal to the group at Mosaic."* (This young person was very shy at the first session, could not sing in front of others, and also found it hard to speak, but went on to sing on the recording and perform in the final performance).



Issues explored with group



Volunteers from LGMC

### *29 November 2015 – Second creative session*

This session had fewer participants due to other commitments that had come up, however the young people that did come along felt more comfortable to share and also perform some bits of music to the rest of the group which was really positive. This session focussed on going back to the stories and ideas gathered from last session, and starting to turn them into lyrics. They were then supported to begin to set this to music and by the end of the session had most of the ideas for their first song 'Teacher, Teacher'. The participants also started to create some other songs which they could then continue working on by themselves.

### *6 December 2015 – Third creative session*

The group continued to work on 'Teacher, Teacher', completing it as a finished song for Steven to take away and write parts for the Chorus and band, taking ideas from the group on the sound they wanted. They continued to share poetry and music with each other and also looked ahead to the recording in January and the performance in February.

*12 December 2015 – The Big Swing, LGMC 's Christmas show*

LGMC agreed to provide free tickets for Mosaic members to come and watch their Christmas show. Six young people were able to attend with youth workers and really enjoyed seeing the Chorus perform. It broadened their expectations of what a Chorus can do:

Young person: *“Loved the show at the Roundhouse, was amazing. You did great!”*

Manager of Mosaic LGBT Youth Centre: *“It was very well received. It was great fun and they were surprised by how entertaining it was - no offence, but young persons do not associate chorus with entertainment - glad we were able to challenge that.”*

*20 January 2016 – Drop-in songwriting session*

This session was not in original plan but was added to respond to the needs of the young people. Some young people had started to write other songs, but the group needed to focus on completing the song they would be performing. This was an opportunity for the young people to bring along anything they had been working on since November/December to work on in a drop-in songwriting session with Steven at Mosaic. One young person took this opportunity and brought along two songs they had been working on since they joined the project. It was a very productive session and the participant got a lot out of having that one-to-one time to work on their songwriting. A couple of other young people who had not been involved in the project originally also came and spoke to Steven about it, but unfortunately could not do the recording or performance in the end due to other commitments.

*23 January 2016 – Rehearsal session with LGMC volunteers*

Steven invited the four volunteers who had been involved in the creative sessions to sing on the final track with the young people. This was a rehearsal just for them to build up their confidence and get ready for recording, enabling them to do the same for the young people.

*31 January 2016 – Rehearsal session ahead of recording*

This was held at Mosaic LGBT Youth Centre to rehearse alongside the LGMC volunteers for the recording session. Parts were also split up among the young people present, with some young people initially too shy to sing in vocal warm-ups at the start of the project taking the lead very confidently!

Young person: *“At the beginning of the project I was kind of hesitant about singing on my own, and by the end of it I was soloing two verses – that escalated pretty quickly! So yeah, it’s definitely brought out my confidence!”*

*7 February 2016 – Recording session*

The recording of ‘Teacher, Teacher’ took place at The Roundhouse. In the end, four young people, Steven and Kathryn Sleigh (lead youth worker from Mosaic), and four LGMC volunteers sang on the track, accompanied by a drummer, keyboard player, bass player and saxophonist. Although the numbers of young people were slightly lower than hoped, this was just due to clashing commitments and not being able to move recording sessions easily. However, it was expected that more people would be involved in the writing of the song than the recording and performance, and those that were able to record did a fantastic job!

Young person: *“It was mind-blowing, watching the song grow from sitting thinking about it cramped together on couches at the youth space to it being recorded professionally.”*

LGMC volunteer: *“Being here, hearing it in full with all the music, different instruments and different levels, has been great for us because we get to hear the final product! And it’s great to see the kids getting excited being in the recording studio.”*



LGMC volunteer: *“The buzz and excitement of the young people was unreal as they entered the recording studios at the Camden Roundhouse to professionally record their very own track! In all the excitement of the sound desks, microphones, a stunning band and the glamour of a studio, the fact that this was all about what they wanted to say and making sure they were heard was something none of us could help but be moved by.”*



Steven and LGMC volunteers in the studio



Kathryn, young people and volunteers rehearsing at the studio

#### *8 February 2016 – Rehearsal with LGMC*

The young people were invited to attend a regular rehearsal with the LGMC to get a taste of what these are like but also to watch them learn the parts for the performance of ‘Teacher, Teacher’. This provided a first performance opportunity for the young people where they could sing the song to the Chorus, which they did with great success and receiving positive feedback from the guys. They also heard the Chorus sing a song by Elbow called ‘One Day Like This’ which they were to learn to sing in the performance alongside them. It was a really positive evening for the young people who found it really exciting to hear such a large group of singers singing the song they had written. They were really excited for the upcoming performance.

#### *24 February 2016 – Rehearsal and performance at Mosaic*

The young people met with Steven, Kathryn and one of the LGMC volunteers to rehearse the song together during usual Mosaic youth group time. One new young person joined at this stage and quickly learned the piece and joined in well. The group then performed the song to the rest of the young people who attended Mosaic but weren’t involved in the Sing Out project. Lots of them then agreed to come and support them at the performance, which was great.

#### *28 February 2016 – Rehearsal*

Final full rehearsal with Simon, volunteers and saxophonists joining also.



Rehearsal with Steven, Simon, volunteers and musicians

### *29 February 2016 – Performance*

This was the final performance night where young people showcased their song ‘Teacher, Teacher’ joined by the LGMC and full band. They also showed the documentary made about the project which framed it for the audience and then joined the LGMC in singing the Elbow song as a finale, before officially launching the single to be downloadable online. This performance brought everything together and the young people were visibly thrilled to be performing and joining forces with the LGMC in front of a supportive audience of community members, family and friends.

*Young person: “It was amazing, a real show and we could express ourselves. It gave finality to the project but in the best way, showing all we had done.”*

*LGMC volunteer: “An amazing performance given by the young people with the backing of the London Gay Men’s Chorus to an audience of family, friends, funders and charities. How the tears were held back so much, I don’t know but to say I was proud of the young people and how far they’ve come with the support and encouragement of Steven and Mosaic would sell it short.”*

*Audience member: “A marvellous and moving evening and a wonderful example of the power of music and of the work of Mosaic and LGMC.”*



Wrapping up with the film crew after performance

### **Challenges**

There were some challenges in the project also which gave the opportunity for learning for future work.

### *Timeframe*

Although it was good to consult with the young people on when to hold the sessions, the original plan of holding it all during a holiday week was not a popular choice. However, in the end the spread of dates presented problems in terms of keeping the momentum going and also some young people dropping out due to other commitments. A shorter period of time for all aspects of the project could be easier to manage and help keep up commitment if it was decided upon and supported by the youth service from outset. They could also help support the commitment of the young people, emphasising their responsibility alongside the opportunity they are offered. The first planned session

was actually on the 8 November but had to be cancelled when only three young people turned up. The youth service then stepped in to reinforce the commitment to the project resulting in the 14 participants who turned up two weeks later. The spread of dates also meant that some original agreements of support or delegated tasks made by both partners at the start of the project became lost due to other commitments in their busy schedules. Having the project focussed over one or two weeks would help with this in the future and would also ensure that the Project Leader did not have to spend as much time in communication and adapting plans.

#### *Clarity on roles and responsibilities*

During the taster session, there was not clarity on who the lead youth workers were from Mosaic and how they were going to support the project. A discussion with the service after this led to having Kathryn as the lead worker throughout the project which really helped with continuity. There was also not as much discipline in behaviour as expected from the LGMC, so Steven worked with the young people and the youth worker to create a group agreement at the first creative session.

#### *Budgeting for time*

The original budget outlined less hours for the Project Leader than actually were given. There was also an underestimated budget for the recording and filming which were main aspects of the project, but luckily other resources were able to be given for free.

#### *Recruiting musicians*

The musicians for the recording and performance were hoped to be some of the young people themselves, however due to other commitments, many of these young people couldn't make the actual dates. This meant getting in external musicians for free as this had not been accounted for in the budget. Some musicians also ended up dropping out at the last minute, and two different bands were required for recording and performance due to date clashes. In future projects, a solution would be to agree on dates with musicians at the start of the project and have a budget for them. If young people are able to take on the performance, the musicians could work with them as tutors/mentors instead. An agreement would also be put in place that they cannot drop out without finding a suitable replacement.

### **Meeting outcomes**

1. *Young people will increase their musicianship. This will include development of song writing skills, lyric writing, music skills with a particular focus on vocals and performance skills.*

#### Evidence

Young people were asked to complete baseline, midpoint and endpoint evaluation forms. 13 completed the baseline however due to some not being able to attend at different points throughout the project only five of these can cite any kind of change as they completed midpoint or endpoint evaluations. Young people were asked questions about their musicianship to assess a change in skill level or learning. A summary of this shows that overall, the project met this outcome:

- "How musical are you?" – Three young people reported increases, one remained the same, one decreased. This decrease could be to having rated themselves high at the start of the project, and they did evidence learning by having a higher endpoint score than midpoint.
- "How are your songwriting skills?" – All five young people reported increases and this was the highest rate of increase overall of all areas assessed in evaluation (minimum 10% increase, maximum 40%). This is further evidenced in comments left by the young people:  
*"It's great that we've already written a song that everyone has performed"*  
*"Amazing how the songs have progressed within the time we've got"*  
*"The Sing Out project was amazing, I loved every process from writing the lyrics to coming up with a beat and singing the song in stage. Although I didn't get to record my*



*singing for the single itself, I could only imagine how awesome that would've been. We need this project again, it really showed everyone's talent"*

- "How are your lyric writing skills?" – Three young people reported increases, one remained the same, one decreased. This decrease could again be to rating themselves highly at the start and this young person did struggle more with the lyric writing elements but excelled in performance where they both sang solo on the recording and at the live performance.
- "How is your singing?" – Four young people reported increases, one remained the same.
- "How confident are you in performing?" – Three young people reported increases, two remained the same.

It was originally planned to ask young people to keep practice/reflection diaries, however this did not take place as it was an added resource cost which was used for filming/recording instead and would have taken up valuable session time. Further evidence was gathered in interviews with the young people in the documentary film.

2. *Young people will improve their wellbeing. They will feel more supported, accepted, included and will see improvements to their mental health and wellbeing because of this. The project also has the potential to improve the wellbeing of other LGBT young people through the creation of work which has positive messages of challenging stigma and discrimination, but it will be the wellbeing of the young people participating which we will be able to evaluate.*

#### Evidence

This was harder to gain an accurate picture of as many young people scored themselves highly at the start and did not change, and many young people had been attending Mosaic LGBT Youth Centre for a while so felt safe, accepted and supported in that environment. This does show however that it was very positive that the sessions took place in the same environment with the support of youth workers from Mosaic. The quotes from young people give more insight into positive changes for them which show that this outcome was met:

*"I am ready for a chance and to increase my confidence"*

*"Comfortable and excited. Going to have fun"*

*"I feel pretty good, very excited to do this project!"*

*"I feel comfortable and happy"*

*"Excited to be a part of something"*

*"Relaxed/looking forward to it"*

*"Confident"*

*"I enjoy being here and can't wait to be a part of the project"*

*"Very good, relaxed and excited/ready to go"*

*"I loved being a part of everything that I got to be a part of. Made more friends along the way and got to express myself through what I love doing... singing"*

*"Confident, proud"*

One young person in the documentary also summed up how they felt about taking part and the atmosphere that was created:

*"Everyone's all sort of equal, no-one's judging. Everyone's listening to what you're saying, how you're feeling. It's a safe environment."*

The fact that all young people were able to take part in the initial workshop and share personal stories that became part of the song, could only have happened because they felt safe, supported and included. Any fears or nervous feelings were addressed through keeping a group agreement and ensuring that all workers and volunteers were checking in with young people and feeding back concerns at the end of each session where relevant.

The song created and the accompanying film hold a very strong, positive message for change about LGBT education in schools. This will be a great tool to use alongside workshops around LGBT issues and will have a wider positive impact on other LGBT young people.

3. *The London Gay Men's Chorus will improve its engagement with the wider LGBT community. They will build stronger partnerships with youth and music organisations to support the creation of new music. It will also provide the opportunity for the lead facilitator to gain experience working with a larger group when young people can perform alongside the LGMC. Chorus members will also have the opportunity to learn new skills in leadership and working with young people by being supported to work with the young people and share their experiences/skills as relevant to the project.*

#### Evidence

The performance evidenced the meeting of this outcome with LGMC having worked with the young people to sing their song and then in turn share their music and perform together. A very strong partnership with Mosaic has now been built and will continue. The performance also created an opportunity to showcase and network with other community groups and charities in attendance, which included Sound Connections, Stonewall, Barnardos, and Open Doors London (older LGBT group). As mentioned, the volunteers from the Chorus became a very valuable resource for the project and in turn learned new skills, knowledge and engaged well with the process:

*"It's been awesome just to get into a proper recording studio and have a bit of fun and to hear what these guys have been working on and also hear a bit of what we can do ourselves, it's a great opportunity."*

*"It's been a nice journey to see how it started and how it has all ended. To see them with so much passion and confidence, it was really inspiring."*

*"I got involved in the project to try and rekindle a bit of interest I had when I was younger in youth work and it's bore some incredible fruit. I was really schooled by some of these young people."*

*"I think it's really important to share our experiences and help young people come to terms with what can be quite a big thing to overcome, and doing that with music is perfect."*

For further detail on evaluation, see evaluation database.

Young people also set personal goals at the start of session one which fed into the session plans and how the team worked with the young people throughout the rest of the project. See goals summary for further detail.

The documentary film and performance also provides further quotes from young people, volunteers and project workers on how we met the outcomes and how the project progressed.

The data collection form of young people was modified to better represent the young people this project worked with. It now includes sexual orientation and also has a third gender option 'non-binary gender'. It is a recommendation that the funders adapt their forms to include these options if working with young people aged 16 and above, so to ensure that all minority groups are captured.

#### **Unexpected outcomes**

During this project, Mosaic LGBT Youth Centre lost its funding from the council. They are currently registering as a charity and looking at how they can continue to provide their service. The single has

unexpectedly become a very important tool for fundraising and awareness-raising for Mosaic to help in its fight to stay open.

The song created by the young people is going to be developed into a workshop resource for schools on LGBT awareness, led by Steven and the young people at Mosaic.

The young people saw the Chorus in a different light, and it challenged what they thought choirs and choruses were all about – much more entertaining and exciting than they thought!

The film production company who created the documentary, Raw Pictures, have really engaged with the project and want to work to promote it as much as they can. They are currently exploring options to create further documentary work with Steven and his Sing Out model.

### **Outputs**

Single recorded and online for downloads 'Teacher, Teacher' -

<https://singoutproject.bandcamp.com/releases>

Performance of their song with LGMC and also singing one song from LGMC's repertoire captured on film. A documentary and performance film will be available to view online.

### **What's next?**

Young people were given connections to Wired4Music for further music opportunities. There is also interest in continuing a music project with Mosaic, depending on funding, which Steven is looking into. He has also been elected to the role of Youth and Education Trustee on the LGMC Steering Committee, so will continue to pursue the plan of setting up an LGBT youth chorus. Steven will also look into how to use the Sing Out model to work with other LGBT groups.