Clore School Choirs and Singing Programme

Scoping paper – the current landscape of singing in schools, 2026

1. Summary

What this is
In early 2026 the Clore Duffield Foundation commissioned a scoping exercise into choirs and group singing in English state schools, to help trustees decide whether and how to invest. This paper sets out what we found.

How it was done
Between January and March 2026, Baz Chapman, the Foundation's programme consultant, reviewed the available data and research. He and Kate Bellamy, the Foundation's Director, spoke directly with over 30 people, including practitioners, classroom teachers and support staff, music leads in schools and academy trusts, Music Hub leaders, and national music, choral and arts organisations.

What came of it
The scoping paper went to trustees in March 2026. It led to the Clore School Choirs and Singing Programme, which opened for applications in September 2026. The programme will fund between five and ten projects, each for three years, with delivery starting in autumn 2027. This is an edited version of the paper trustees saw.

Why we're publishing it
We hope the findings will be useful to schools, music organisations and other funders thinking about work in this area. Certainly, there is more to do than one programme can cover.

Where it leads
The research raised the question at the centre of the programme: *what does it take to create school choirs and singing groups that are effective, inclusive and sustainable?* The funded projects will work on this question together over three years, and the Foundation will publish what they learn.

2. The current singing landscape

Choirs[1] have a deep heritage in our society. The value of singing in a dedicated, disciplined group is well established, with choirs presenting a distinct embodiment of musical excellence: listening, discipline, blend, ensemble and interpretation. For children and young people[2], a choir is one of the few places where they can experience being in something that is greater than the sum of its parts.

Against this backdrop, school choirs appear to have declined over the past decade. The best national data, from Music Hubs' annual returns to Arts Council England, points this way, although it relies on voluntary reporting and definitions that have changed over time, so it shows the direction of travel more reliably than the scale. England's main music education infrastructure is its network of 43 Music Education Hubs: local partnerships funded by the Department for Education through ACE, responsible for ensuring all children have access to music education. Hub funding has remained largely static since 2012, and Hubs' singing provision varies considerably. The decline in choirs has been compounded by a downgrading of arts and creativity in education, an erosion of teacher confidence, and the impact of the Covid pandemic.

Crucially, the workforce that sustains school singing, in all its forms, is under pressure from competing demands on school time and priorities, and from a lack of sufficient musical focus in teacher training. Schools are being asked to do more with less, and choir singing – which relies on confident, skilled adults – can be among the first elements to suffer. There is, however, excellent practice across the country, underpinned by energy, commitment and expertise from the professional music sector and its practitioners. This work has the capacity to grow – what it lacks is the sustained investment to do so.

There is an uneven picture of where singing does and does not happen. Gaps do not always follow predictable geographic or demographic patterns – they may be influenced by local leadership, strength of partnerships, and prioritisation by decision-makers. That said, in more rural areas of the country, particularly where demographics fall outside of funding-unlocking deprivation indices, the challenges of connection and transportation can prevent schools from accessing the singing and musical ecosystem.

The wider culture of singing in primary is reasonably healthy overall, but doesn't always translate into choirs. In secondary schools, the picture is more acute – choirs are rarer, harder to sustain, and the drop-off from primary is significant.

[1] For ease, we will use 'choir' to denote any musical singing or vocal group.
[2] Hereon described as 'young people' to denote primary and secondary ages.

A strong emerging theme is the importance of the culture of singing within a school. A choir doesn't thrive in isolation – it requires a school where singing is normal, visible and valued. The culture feeds the choir, and the choir lifts the culture. Sustainable investment therefore requires both in order to be effective.

Educational policy is starting to shift in favour of a broader curricular and extra-curricular offer, and there is growing interest in choirs through initiatives like *A Choir in Every School* (Music Teachers' Association) and *BBC Get Singing*. But these have yet to cut through to schools, and none is backed by sustained funding for delivery. Feedback from schools, practitioners, Music Education Hubs and other organisations suggests that targeted, sustained investment could make a substantial and lasting difference, so the timing is right for a fund which could turn this interest into lasting change, and set the standard for thriving school choirs.

To give a sense of effective practice in the sector, these three examples, based on real-world work, illustrate different approaches to developing choirs in schools:

- Deep, multi-year school partnerships in a local authority area with teacher development embedded. Experienced artists from a vocal ensemble work alongside classroom teachers across classes in a group primary schools each year, delivering twice-monthly singing sessions, teacher training workshops, and in-school performances. A model of genuine co-learning over three years.
- Teacher development programme across a multi-academy trust, aimed to increase the confidence of classroom teachers to lead singing. Distinctively school-led, with teacher CPD provided by an expert choral leadership organisation, building a community of practice and developed skills through expert tuition and iterative, shared learning.
- Working through partnerships with Hubs and other music organisations in specific areas, a professional choral organisation develops the full pyramid, from grassroots schools work through to choir development and young leadership. Both teachers and young leaders are trained, and 'big sings' with professional musicians create powerful experiences.

3. What makes the difference

a. Who does it

Quality work and lasting change depends on people. Programmes, resources, culture and curriculum requirements all play a part, but the overwhelming feedback from conversations was that the workforce is key, and there are concerns about recruiting into the sector and clear development pathways.

In nearly every case there are two workforce elements in this context: **Expert practitioners** – bringing musical ambition, knowledge and skills into schools; and **school teachers and other staff**[3] – confident to lead singing between visits, and able to ensure that singing culture and activities are sustained. Often the best models create co-learning between these parties – a collaborative and developmental approach focused on the best possible activities and outcomes. This takes time, trust and sustained presence, and is not about one-off training days or resource packs, but continuing, iterative professional development that builds confidence and skill over time.

b. Understanding excellence

Musical excellence matters – ambition, musicality, progression – and it can be a school's most valuable outward-facing activity. But access and excellence are not in tension; school choirs work best when they are open to anyone who wants to sing, and when the breadth of participation drives, rather than dilutes, musical ambition. Excellence thus takes different forms in different contexts.

c. A model ecosystem

A school choir does not exist in isolation. Around it sits an ecosystem of support: the school's own culture and staff confidence; the local Music Hub, which may provide training, singing leaders or connections to other schools; expert practitioners and organisations who bring musical ambition and specialist skills; and progression routes – youth choirs, festivals, further study – that give young singers somewhere to go next. In the best places, these elements connect and reinforce each other.

d. Readiness matters

It may be tempting to invest in areas which have no infrastructure at all, to create profound change. This is risky. Without champions within schools who understand the value of group singing, a project is unlikely to succeed. However, the adage, ‘never doubt that a small group of thoughtful, committed citizens can change the world’ rings true. You need appetite and champions, but you don't necessarily need a fully resourced music department. The readiness is about people and will more than it is about existing provision.

e. What is really needed

What the sector says it does not need is more singing campaigns or more resources (except perhaps for specific resources to support workforce development in a project) – both already exist. What the sector needs is more sustained, high-quality, people-driven work which builds healthy singing ecosystems.

[3] Some of whom may themselves be expert singing leaders.

So the main recommendation for investing in choirs in schools is to invite interested parties to outline their own visions for choirs in their contexts – the need they see, the excellence they aspire to, and the change they believe they can sustain. When asked what they might do if they had the funds, every consultee was able to offer ideas which were exciting, transformational and rooted in communities. The appetite is there; the need is there; the expertise is there; what's missing in many cases is the investment to unlock it.

4. Where the scoping led

An obvious approach would have been a Foundation-branded scheme that directly sets up choirs in schools through expert organisations. The research pointed away from this. Expert input matters, but a choir is not a product that can be installed. To take root and last, it needs sustained school commitment, and staff who are confident and motivated to keep singing going. It also needs good working relationships between those staff and visiting practitioners, and connections to opportunities beyond the school.

The Clore School Choirs and Singing Programme was designed around this. It funds organisations with expertise in school singing to work over three years with groups of state-funded schools, with teachers and visiting practitioners developing alongside one another.

The funded projects will form a national cohort, meeting regularly over the three years to work on a single question: *what does it take to create school choirs and singing groups that are effective, inclusive and sustainable?* The Foundation will publish the learning as a resource for the sector.

No single programme can cover every need the research identified, and we hope these findings are useful to others working in this area.

We are grateful to everyone who contributed to the consultation.

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Key data sources informing this paper (in addition to consultations)

- Arts Council England Music Hub data dashboard (2012–2024)
- Teacher Tapp survey data on singing in schools (2025)
- Ofsted subject reports on music
- Dr Kristen Horner, doctoral research on Music Hub practice (University of Nottingham, 2024)
- National Schools Singing Programme data