

# Consulting Group on Age - Research data document pack

This document pack contains summaries and reflections treated as data for the Consulting Groups project (2022). The Consulting Groups project was part of UKRI-funded Future Leaders Fellowship (FLF) project Access Folk and developed by the FLF lead Prof. Fay Hield and Dr Esbjorn Wettermark at the University of Sheffield with project management from Dr Helen Grindley. This themed document pack is one of several related to the Consulting Groups project, all of which can be viewed and downloaded from The University of Sheffield's Online Research Data repository (ORDA).

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## **Access Folk - Reflection on Consulting Group for Age**

I attended 3 out of the 4 online meetings held. At the first meeting my impression was that the demographic of the group was a bit like a folk club, mainly older, at least one professional performer, a few club organisers, a representative of EFDSS and some people who regularly sing or play at their local sessions, clubs or singarounds. The younger people were few and far between....but welcomed effusively, just like a folk club. The numbers of attendees dwindled over the sessions.

Discussions focused on education, venues and organisations, and finance and are covered in the notes and issues.

I was sometimes left feeling that the focus was too much on structures - schools, clubs, festivals and performers and organisers - a bit stuck in the arguments about what is wrong with folk clubs. Maybe we could have focused on some more of the things that are good about folk clubs and singarounds, the importance of local venues as a place where people can sing or join in with singing and early career performers can get started. As venues are lost and club organisers retire, an important opportunity is lost too. The festival and concert hall circuit will provide for some performers. The underlying concern is that the audiences and organisers of folk clubs are generally older and therefore the future is uncertain. We didn't answer the question "does it matter if there are no folk clubs?"

I was surprised how little mention was made of choirs, either designated folk choirs or the use of folk repertoire by community choirs and youth choirs. This is often the way in which people actively experience folk song. Choirs can provide a valuable role in developing singing skills and confidence and the peer group with which to attend folk events..... And maybe get up and sing a song. A possible line of enquiry for the future?

There was a consensus that the older generation really wants to support and be welcoming to younger people and an awareness to avoid the "this is how it is done" attitude. But we made a number of assumptions about what younger people might want and what might be keeping them away but we have no real evidence. Just maybe some of them are doing things differently.

I also attended 2 of the gender consulting group and note the overlap on issues for safeguarding, appropriateness of repertoire, peer group attendance at events and the general ethos of venues and organisers.

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## **What are the issues to tackle around age and folk singing?**

### **Education**

- Although the presence of folk song and singing in the National Curriculum was acknowledged, there was little knowledge of how this is interpreted in schools now across the Key Stages.
- Many examples of project work and resources available for schools but evidence is needed about how these are used and what the longer term impact is.
- Access to information about the availability of and funding for school projects and workshops is not always easy. Music Hubs may be able to help with this.
- The need for quality and enthusiastic teachers and workshop leaders was acknowledged but no information about their training/education.
- Education is not just for children and young people but there seem to be few examples of places where adults can learn to improve their singing and gain confidence.

### **Venues and Organisations**

- The type of venue eg pubs or rooms above pubs can be a barrier. Children and young people not allowed in.
- Folk clubs can be very “welcoming” but this can be intimidating for younger people or people less confident about singing.
- Clubs/singarounds can be seen as cliquey, even when they think they are very friendly, which then becomes a barrier for new people of all ages.
- Younger people may have a preference for different repertoire, less purely traditional, maybe singing their own songs covering a range of topics.
- Younger people will come to folk events if there is a greater number of their peer group present. They won’t return if they see only older people.
- Festivals attract more young people and provide more targeted events and activities for them but without the continuity of attending a regular club or session.
- Live streaming has maybe reached/included a wider demographic but evidence for this is needed. We don’t know about the impact on current participation.
- Singarounds could be the best entry level place for new singers of all ages if they are hospitable

- The ethos of the venue and the organisers can help to build intergenerational networks that helps intergenerational interaction and bookings which will make sure they get a varied audience.
- Safeguarding is an issue when working with young people but not all organisations are fully aware and it can seem too difficult to deal with. Good training and materials are available.
- Need to share knowledge and experiences across the generations but to avoid the “we have always done it this way” attitude.

## **Finance**

- Cost of entry to events can be a barrier for old and young alike.
- Complex reasons stop funding being accessed especially by smaller organisations, lack of knowledge, fear of charity or losing independence, too complicated.
- Some evidence that bursaries for activities eg Halsway and Benslow have had limited success
- Bursaries are not enough on their own. Strategies are needed around continuing engagement.
- Funding needed for educationalists to deliver, teacher training, project development and organisation.

## **Further Notes**

*Choirs were only mentioned 3 times, one youth, one adult and in a general mention of repertoire for youth choirs.*

*Returnees and re-engagment mentioned once each, even though this may be a very common group.*

*Suggestion to look to other nations eg Scotland to see how folk is embedded there.*

# Esbjorn's analysis of the Age group

## Reflections

From the notes it is easy to see that the majority of participants are older and people who have long been part of the established folk song scene. I was a bit surprised by the many comments that related to the need for (but lack of) intergenerational understanding. Also relatively little interest in finding opportunities for older people compared to concerns for young participants. Many have noted that young people do attend certain events and venues but not others, much thoughts and reflections about this but as there are few young people in the group there were no real conclusions. The key points summarise the discussion but also highlight the need for a stronger youth voice to any further work in this area.

## Key points

Lack of involvement from youth and young adults, in particular, is seen as bigger issue than access and involvement for other age groups, including young children and middle aged and older people.

Venues and contexts where folk singing have been happening since the 1970s and 60s are seen as less attractive for younger people today.

Preferences with regards to repertoire, style and general aesthetic are different among young people today compared to those established in the 1960s and 70s folk song revival. Preferences among young people are potentially seen as more diverse today than they were then.

Little knowledge and many questions about the effects and current state of play for (English) folk singing in schools and early education.

Funding is mentioned as an issue to be able to run any project trying to make a difference, maybe in particular for projects run by smaller organisations.

Intergenerational knowledge exchange and understanding between generations is lacking within the wider folk scene. Much will to share experience and knowledge with younger people but also need to develop understandings and new skills among older participants in the folk scene.

Safeguarding is more important when working with children and young people today. However, Safeguarding policies are complex and can be difficult to handle for small

voluntary organisations that could otherwise be well placed to run intergenerational projects. Good practice and training exist (BBE and EFDSS in particular)

Some understanding that to engage more young people and young adults in the folk scene today, there is a need to consider that society looks different from how it did when many of the current folk song enthusiasts got involved with the folk scene. More understanding of gender, ethnicity, race etc. is needed.

## Issues

Many folk venues and organisations are not seen as accessible and inviting to young people. Reasons include lack of connection to contemporary styles and approaches in the folk scene, bad practice with regards to safeguarding and lack of openness towards gender and ethnic diversity.

There are few safe intergenerational places in the folk scene that that encourage knowledge exchange, understanding and collaboration.

Lack of funding and/or lack of knowledge in how to access funds to support projects for young people (as well as old people). Applying for funds can be too complex for smaller volunteer run organisations.

We don't know much about (English) folk singing in schools and if it influences participation later in life.

# Youth Focus Group on English Folk Singing

**12 October 2022, 5-6pm, online.**

The focus group was arranged in collaboration with EFDSS and followed their online safeguarding policy with two DBS checked adults facilitating the discussion, Sarah Jones from EFDSS and myself. Unfortunately, only two young people joined us for a discussion about Young People and Folk Singing, but they were both very engaged and contributed equally to the discussion. We talked a bit in general about their background and interest in folk singing as well as what they saw as issues for participation and what they think makes young people get involved in folk singing. The chosen themes were reflective of some of the thoughts about young people's engagement with Folk singing that was brought up in our Consulting Group on Age and Folk Singing.

## Experience of Folk singing

Both the young people had come across folk singing and folk songs in a variety of settings both informal (street performers or family occasions) as well as in dedicated venues (folk sessions and concert halls). They also listened to folk songs via records and streaming services.

Some of their favourite songs included songs that had lyrics with themes that appealed to them, such as the political song Johnny Miner, as well as songs which had a beautiful or rousing melody, for example The Bows of London Town and the shanty The Wellerman). Singers that they enjoyed listening to included both contemporary younger groups on the folk scene (The Askew Sisters) as well as singers from the 60s and 70s folk revival (Lal Waterson).

## Thoughts about Folk Singing and Folk Songs

Asked to talk about folk singing and songs more generally, what they mean to them, who sings folk songs today, and if it is true that young people are not interested in them, the participants came up with a number of reflections:

- “I like the fantastic tunes... and they are easy to remember.”
- “I think about keeping a tradition alive and the whole social aspect of singing, small gigs and community which is different from a lot of other singing styles.”
- “I am interested in the activism and politics of folk songs.”
- “There are not really enough people singing folks songs today.”

- “It is a small community of people who sing folk songs today. It can sometimes be a bit exclusive, and feel like it is either only old men or young women, all mostly white. But it could be other people as well.”
- “Many young people do like folk singing, but it is not fashionable.”
- “There is a lack of role models, i.e not many cool 20 year olds! It can also be difficult to get into folk if you haven't family connections or heard it in other contexts.”
- “If you are already in a folk bubble it might seem like a lot of young people are interested but outside of that it might be almost no one.”

## **Learning and singing folk songs**

We talked about where they had learnt folk songs and in what contexts they sing the songs themselves. For learning songs they mentioned the following settings and contexts as most important:

- Workshops and courses (for example, Monday Folk Singers course at Cecil Sharp House).
- Youth Folk Ensembles where songs are taught along with instrumental music or learnt informally from peers during residencies, such as London Youth Folk Ensemble and the National Youth Folk Ensemble.
- Learning from recordings, including Spotify and other streaming services.
- Although one person notes that they have folk singers in their family they haven't really learnt songs directly from them, but sometimes picked up a song from their albums they have recorded.
- “I like it when I can absorb a song through immersion. When you hear a song a lot around you and then you pick it up eventually. I think it can be harder to learn them in a group workshop over a shorter time.”

Reflecting on where they like to sing folk songs, they had different preferences which included:

- “In choirs and large groups with others”
- “I like singing with groups on a stage, at festivals and things like that.”
- “I prefer more informal smaller settings, open mics or folk sessions are nice and less intimidating than big stages.”

## **What do you think would make more young people interested in folk singing?**



This question led to a number of different reflections from the participants, both drawing on personal experiences and thinking about what might make young people get in contact with folk singing.

- “I want free taster sessions for folk ensembles and workshops for young people to hear folk singing and try it.”
- “We need more mainstream role models in the folk scene, not only the same hardcore folkies. Among my non folkie friends, groups like Talisk have still managed to get an audience outside of the main folk community.”
- “I share playlists for folkie beginners to my friends who are into music, it can be less intimidating than a whole album with one artist.”
- “Word of mouth is also important, if someone has had a positive experience they will tell others about it.”
- “Hearing folk music on radio and other popular music channels would make more young people get into contact with folk singing.”

## Analysis

Although we only had 2 young people involved in the focus group, they did represent different experiences of the folk scene and a geographical spread with one based in London and the other in Cumbria. The young people were both known to the adult facilitators which made the conversation flow easily. A larger group of young people would have given a more nuanced response to our questions but nevertheless we came up with a number of key points that seem especially relevant for a youth perspective on folk singing in England.

- We should remember that there are quite a few young people involved with folk music but we might not see them if we are not part of the same groupings.
- Although there is a common perception of folk singing as unfashionable, the style and themes of folk songs and music still engages young people.
- Having a positive experience of engaging with the folk scene is important! Young people want to feel that there is a space for them and that there are role models to emulate who are of a similar age as them.
- We need young role models that reach outside of the typical folk circles. Engaging with those performers that manage to get a wider appeal could be a way of getting more young people involved.
- Young people engage closely with recorded material and online streaming services (YouTube, Spotify etc.) is likely where most will come across folk singing today. Folk playlists on streaming services might be more familiar for a young beginner and can help to introduce young people to a variety of groups and styles in a way that a full length album might not.

- With a lack of everyday connections where young people can hear and get in contact with folk singing, formal ensembles and projects play an important part, but people need to also have ways into these which seems attractive and affordable to them.

Analysis and notes by Esbjorn Wettermark, 14 October 2022