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Full Report

military wives Choirs ®

Open Arms

Access, barriers and incentives to participation in Military Wives Choirs

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Acknowledgements

Foreword

Whether supporting or serving, defence people and their families lie at the heart of our operational capability, and ensuring they are treated fairly and given the support they deserve is of the utmost importance to me.

I am therefore delighted that this report showcases the significance of the Military Wives Choirs in meeting the unique needs of women with a military connection. It shows that choir membership gives women a greater sense of self and community, which is crucial, particularly as they may move regularly due to postings or deal with long periods of separation due to deployments. It is clear from the report that music plays a key role in providing Military Wives Choirs members with increased confidence and fulfilment, along with improved physical and mental wellbeing, which is of particular importance. The good mental health and wellbeing of our people is paramount.

I can scarcely believe that the Military Wives Choirs have been in existence for just over 10 years when their place in the hearts and minds of Defence people and the British public as a whole feels perpetual. I look forward to working more closely with the charity as they implement the recommendations of this report and support ever more women in the military community.

Vice Admiral Phil Hally CB MBE
Chief of Defence People

Executive Summary

Background

The Military Wives Choirs is a community that comes together to celebrate a love of singing and a communal understanding that comes from its members' shared experiences of the Armed Forces. It welcomes all women whose lives are currently impacted by their military connection; the network supports each other and forms life-changing friendships that lead to new and uplifting experiences through singing.

Military life across the services has its challenges. Some families move regularly to a new posting, while for others, deployments mean long periods of separation. With choirs across the UK and overseas, many members join a new choir when they are posted, enabling them to become part of a familiar community built upon the joy of singing. Singing in a choir has been proven to increase wellbeing and improve mental and physical health. With no auditions and no pressure to perform, the Military Wives Choirs gives its members the opportunity to spend time with women that truly understand the challenges associated with military life.

The charity is now in its 11th year, following its formation in Catterick in 2010, where a choir for military wives and girlfriends was set up to provide peer support through singing whilst their partners were deployed in Afghanistan. Following a BBC documentary with Gareth Malone, *The Choir: Military Wives*, and a number of high-profile performances, the charity was incorporated in 2012 and, over subsequent years, expanded across the UK and on British military bases overseas, to become a network of 70 choirs with over 2000 members.

The Military Wives Choirs is musically inclusive and non-auditioned. Each choir is run musically by a freelance musical director and administratively by a volunteer committee drawn from choir members. The choirs are tri-service, with members from across the Royal Navy and Royal Marines, British Army, and Royal Air Force, and are open to all women with a military connection, not just wives. The choirs perform locally and nationally, in their military and civilian communities and on national media channels and concert platforms.

Previous Research

In 2015, an evaluation of the Military Wives Choirs was conducted by colleagues from the Sidney De Haan Research Centre for Arts and Health, Canterbury Christ Church University. This research predominately investigated the benefits experienced by Military Wives Choirs members because of their participation in the choirs. This research was able to demonstrate the positive health benefits, increased confidence, and improved sense of wellbeing and identity, amongst other important factors, of being a member of the Military Wives Choirs network.

Engaging with new members, enhancing membership, and particularly retention are very important factors for the Military Wives Choirs, and indeed for many choral groups, but these were not explored in the 2015 evaluation. Unfortunately, there is a dearth of research and

literature that explores these issues, especially in the context of choral groups established around military communities.

The Current Research

In light of the above, the Military Wives Choirs commissioned Anglia Ruskin University (ARU) to undertake further research work to explore the following research question: *What are the barriers and facilitators to accessing and engaging with the Military Wives Choirs for women in the military community?*

To address this question, we used a mixed-method approach:

1. A scoping review of the extant international literature pertaining to the barriers and facilitators of participation in community choirs.

2. The results of a survey of 468 current and past Military Wives Choirs members.

3. Themes developed from semi-structured interviews with 19 current and past Military Wives Choirs members.

Throughout the research, a co-production approach was applied to establish a very close working relationship with both the Choirs Support Team (CST) of the Military Wives Choirs and choir member representatives from the Military Wives Choirs' Regional Voices Group (RVG). This was important in the development and execution of the survey, the interpretation of the results, and the formulation of the recommendations.

Main Findings

Scoping Review

Twenty peer-reviewed papers were identified, focused on the barriers and facilitators to accessing community choirs. These papers identified the following motivations, facilitators, and barriers to access for adults' involvement in community choirs:

- *Motivations*: The singing itself; spirituality; social connection and belonging; shared culture and heritage; mental and physical wellbeing; personal development.

- *Facilitators:* Audition-free access to choirs; previous musical background; effective choir leadership.

- *Barriers:* Negative social experiences; financial considerations; lack of musical ability or confidence; time constraints; lack of awareness of, or access to, a local choir; musical challenges and appeal of repertoire.

The previous literature also highlighted a lack of diversity within community choirs.

Survey Findings

The survey sample was broadly representative of the Military Wives Choirs' membership: 76.1% of respondents identified as partners of currently serving or veteran UK Armed Forces personnel. The survey sample suggests that Military Wives Choirs members appear to be older, less diverse (based on nationality), more educated, and have fewer caring

responsibilities than the UK military spouse population. It is important to note that the Military Wives Choirs' membership criteria are broader than wives alone, but these respondents were in the minority. Analysis of the responses identified the following:

- *Joining a choir:* The most common reasons for joining and deciding to stay in a choir were to develop relationships and a sense of community/social inclusion, and for the enjoyment of music and singing. However, the improvement of emotional and physical wellbeing appears to be more important in deciding to stay in a choir.

- *Satisfaction:* Most respondents were satisfied with their experience in their respective choirs. However, most dissatisfaction was seen for centrally organised events, which appears to be related to a perception of these as being London- and southern England-centric.

- *Challenges:* The most commonly reported challenges associated with being in a choir were time constraints due to work and caring responsibilities. However, one in five also reported negative group dynamics and social experiences as a challenge.

- *Leaving a choir:* Those who had left a choir (two thirds) most commonly did so as a result of moving locations due to military postings. However, one in five of those who had left a choir reported that this was due to negative group dynamics and social experiences.

- *Why others may not join:* The most common reasons that respondents felt that eligible women may not join a choir were due to time constraints and a lack of awareness of eligibility.

- *Underrepresented groups*: Younger women (aged 18–29 years) and currently serving women were less represented in the survey responses and were more likely to report that:
  - Wellbeing was an important reason to join and stay in a choir;
  - Time constraints due to work represented a challenge and was a reason not to join a choir;
  - Awareness of eligibility was a key consideration for eligible women not joining a choir.

- Those who identified as, or connected to, 'Other rank' were more likely than those who identified as, or connected to, an 'Officers' rank to report:
  - Wellbeing and personal fulfilment as important reasons to join and stay in a choir;
  - Challenges associated with costs involved in being in a choir;
  - Awareness of eligibility as a key consideration for eligible women not joining a choir.

Interview Findings

Seven themes were identified through the qualitative analysis of the 19 semi-structured interviews:

- *Beyond a community choir:* This theme emphasises the importance of the Military Wives Choirs meeting the unique needs of the women in the military community. Participants felt that the boundaries of the eligibility criteria helped to preserve the choirs for women in the military community, and that this shared military background was a key factor for members. Furthermore, participants felt strongly that the challenges associated with military life should not represent a barrier to membership.

- *A sense of self and community*: This theme highlights the benefits of choir membership related to self-identity, wellbeing, and community. Participants saw the choirs as a space to be themselves and to increase their mood. Additionally, the choirs were seen as important in enabling social connections, friendships, and community.

- *The singing itself:* Personal development and empowerment through the enjoyment of singing were reported as motivating factors for involvement in the Military Wives Choirs network. This includes developing pride in their musical abilities and accomplishments and accessing once-in-a-lifetime opportunities to take part in performances and recordings.

- *Getting through the door:* This theme identifies the barriers and facilitators to eligible members getting to their first rehearsal. These include a lack of awareness of the Military Wives Choirs and anxieties around joining a new group. Being brought into a choir and accompanied to the first rehearsal by a friend helped ease this anxiety for some. Additionally, varying processes for joining across choirs may lead to some choirs feeling less welcoming than others.

- *The choirs are not for me:* This theme considers why certain women may feel like the Military Wives Choirs is not 'for' them. This includes a lack of awareness of eligibility, as some women may think it is just for 'wives', and the perception that choirs will be 'cliquey'. The physical accessibility of rehearsal and performance spaces was also raised, as well as pressure associated with challenging musical repertoire and performances.

- *Life gets in the way—inevitable barriers?:* This theme highlights barriers to involvement in the Military Wives Choirs network that seem inevitable and 'just a part of life', including time constraints due to work and caring responsibilities and personality clashes amongst members. The need to be flexible to ensure that the choirs can be accessed regardless of everyday responsibilities was seen as important.

- *Protecting the Military Wives Choirs' values*: This theme emphasises leadership's role in maintaining the Military Wives Choirs' core values. Participants felt that some choirs did not meet the values and ethos as consistently as others and that support with de-escalating negative social dynamics was required. Furthermore, it was raised

that some choirs and choir members may need access to financial support for childcare, travel costs, and running costs.

Recommendations

The recommendations are derived from a thorough understanding of the literature base and an analysis of the results of the primary research undertaken for this study. They fall into three broad categories:

1. Increasing awareness of the Military Wives Choirs and the eligibility criteria;
2. Enabling access and inclusivity;
3. Supporting current Military Wives Choirs members.

Increasing Awareness of the Military Wives Choirs and the Eligibility Criteria

The following recommendations aim to increase the diversity and inclusivity of Military Wives Choirs members by increasing awareness of the organisation itself and the benefits it offers, and by promoting the broad membership criteria for women in the military community.

1. Focus recruitment on underrepresented groups, including younger groups (under 40 years of age), currently serving women, and other membership categories (rather than wives/partners).
2. Implement strategies to raise awareness of the membership eligibility criteria.
   a. Consider a rebrand, as the current name 'Military Wives Choirs' does not represent all eligible members.
3. Highlight the positive impact of choral singing on emotional wellbeing and on building relationships and a community.
4. Emphasise the choirs being audition-free and not focused on musical ability, whilst also providing an opportunity to develop strong singing skills to attain high musical standards.
5. Become part of the national conversation regarding music and singing for wellbeing.
   a. Be recognised as a recommended organisation within the social prescribing agenda.

Enabling Access and Inclusivity

The following recommendations are suggested to find ways of enabling access to the choirs, supporting members to come along to their first rehearsal and maintain their membership.

1. Implement strategies to welcome new members. This may include implementing a buddy system and new member inductions.
2. Develop strategies to increase the inclusivity of centrally organised events and address barriers to involvement, particularly to those that are London-based for members living farther away.

3. Promote flexibility of rehearsals to tackle time constraints due to work and caring responsibilities. This may include flexibility in attendance policies and timing of rehearsals, offering additional or flexible rehearsal times, and allowing members to attend remotely.

4. Increase members' and committees' awareness of the Military Wives Choirs' childcare policy to support members with caring responsibilities.

5. Develop standards for ensuring rehearsal and performance spaces are physically accessible.

6. Improve the quality of teaching tracks and enable easier access to resources by providing training to members.

Supporting Current Military Wives Choirs Members

The following recommendations address the challenges that current members face, which can sometimes lead to members leaving a choir or not being able to enjoy the full benefits of being involved.

1. Implement strategies to ensure that choir leadership is proactive to challenges and concerns raised.

   a. Develop a system to maintain oversight of individual choirs to ensure that they are meeting the Military Wives Choirs' core values.

   b. Increase members' awareness of available support through their committee, the RVG, and the CST.

2. Implement methods to tackle negative group dynamics and poor leadership.

   a. Offer conflict resolution and leadership training for the CST, RVG, and committee members.

   b. Develop a standard of practice for choir leads and musical directors to emphasise the Military Wives Choirs' core values and use of core repertoire, focusing on wellbeing and minimising performance pressures.

3. Increase the diversity of leadership positions by breaking down barriers to underrepresented groups joining committees. This could include recruitment targeting committee positions and emphasising transferable employability skills.

   a. Implement ways to reward and recognise contributions from committee and RVG volunteers.

4. Implement the collection of more diversity data on membership.

5. Develop a routine outcomes monitoring framework, in collaboration with ARU, based on the findings of this research.

Limitations

It is important to note that, like all primary research, there are some limitations:

1. This research was not able to address the barriers experienced by the groups of women who have never accessed the Military Wives Choirs network before.

2. The survey and interview samples may be biased towards those that have fewer external demands on their time, e.g., caring responsibilities, and as such, the results may not capture the experiences of all Military Wives Choirs members.

3. It was only possible to make demographic comparisons with the general current military spouse population, which does not cover the more diverse eligible membership of the Military Wives Choirs as a whole.

Open Arms: Access, Incentives, and Barriers to Recruitment in the Military Wives Choirs

Introduction

This report outlines the key findings of an investigation of the experiences of women in the military community when engaging with the Military Wives Choirs (MWC). The purpose of this research is to provide a better understanding of the membership of the MWC network, including the barriers and facilitators they face in accessing and engaging with (their) choirs. Recommendations for improving the inclusivity and diversity of membership and experiences of participating are presented. This project was jointly delivered by the Veterans and Families Institute for Military Social Research (VFI)[1] and the Cambridge Institute for Music Therapy Research (CIMTR)[2] at Anglia Ruskin University (ARU).

The Military Wives Choirs

The MWC began in 2010 with a single choir for military wives and girlfriends in Catterick, set up to provide peer support and the benefits of singing whilst their partners were deployed in Afghanistan. Following a BBC documentary with Gareth Malone, *The Choir: Military Wives*, and high-profile performances, including the Royal British Legion's Festival of Remembrance at the Royal Albert Hall in November 2011, significant fundraising enabled the establishment of further choirs around the UK and overseas. The charity as we know it today, the 'Military Wives Choirs', was founded by a group of members in 2012, as a subsidiary of SSAFA, the Armed Forces Charity.[3] Now, over 10 years later, the MWC has 70 choirs and over 2000 members, creating a supportive community of partners and family members of those serving in the UK Armed Forces.[4]

The MWC is tri-service and is open to any women over the age of 18 years with a military connection, including[5]:

- Wives, partners, fiancées, or co-habiting partners of serving members of the UK Armed Forces (including Reservists);
- Serving UK Armed Forces personnel (including Reservists);
- UK Armed Forces veterans (including Reservists);
- Immediate family members (mother, sister, or daughter) of serving members of the UK Armed Forces (including Reservists);
- Wives, partners, fiancées, or co-habiting partners of serving members of the non-UK Armed Forces on a UK posting;
- Wives, widows, partners, fiancées, or co-habiting partners of UK Armed Forces veterans (including Reservists);

- Women employed within the military community for an organisation that provides a direct service to serving military personnel and their families.

The MWC has an ethos of 'Sing, Share, Support'.[6] No audition or previous musical experience is required to take part. Each choir meets weekly to rehearse in their local area, led by their musical director, with a core repertoire of music shared across all choirs in the network. Choirs perform at local and national levels, taking part in both civilian and military community events and across media platforms, with over 900 public performances per year. Members can also volunteer to take up committee roles, for which training is provided.

The Benefits of Singing

The benefits of singing have recently been highlighted in reports published by the UK government[7] and the World Health Organization,[8] both of which investigated and recognised the role that the arts play in health and wellbeing. The reports recognised the importance of music and singing, highlighting benefits such as improved social cohesion and wellbeing, reduced levels of mental health symptoms, improvements in cognitive abilities, and a protective association with premature mortality.

The benefit of singing specifically in choirs has also been explored. In a survey of choir members across England, participants reported wellbeing benefits such as increased mood; a means to distract from stress and worry; decreased anxiety from encouraging deep and controlled breathing; social support and friendship; mental stimulation through continued learning; increased physical activity from attendance at rehearsals.[9] More recently, an international investigation of the perceived health benefits of singing in a choir in almost 1800 choristers also emphasised the positive impact on social connection, physical and physiological health, cognitive stimulation, mental health, and enjoyment.[10] Interestingly, both studies found that the benefits of singing were increased in female compared to male participants.

Choirs may provide opportunities for socialisation whilst engaging members in an activity that promotes emotional expression and learning new skills, and can be accessible to individuals with varying abilities.[11]

The Benefits and Challenges of Choral Singing in the Military Community

There is a paucity of research looking at the benefits of choral singing in the military community. The research that has been carried out focuses specifically on evaluating the work of the MWC.

An evaluation of the MWC was published in 2015,[12] investigating the benefits experienced by MWC members as a result of their participation in the choirs. This study surveyed choir members, committee members, and musical directors and interviewed a small sample of choir members and their partners. Participants reported a number of benefits from choir participation, including improved social connections and support, positive health benefits, increased confidence, an improved sense of wellbeing and identity, and the development of new skills. Interview participants also highlighted the impact of attending the choirs on their ability to cope with the stressors of military life and for de-stressing. However, some

participants also highlighted challenges associated with being part of the choirs. This included the impact of military rank on group dynamics, the attitudes and behaviours of other women within the choirs, experiences of cliques and favouritism, dissatisfaction with the musical repertoire, and the pressures associated with performances. This report made several recommendations for improvements to choir support, including reviewing guidance to reduce performance pressure, tackling what was termed 'internal politics' within choirs, addressing the impact of military rank on group dynamics, and additional musical training and support for learning (teaching) tracks.

The Current Study

Whilst previous research highlights the notable benefits and challenges of participating in a choir for women in the military community, we were unable to find any research specifically looking at the barriers and facilitators of accessing choirs for those in the military community. As such, research is needed to explore the factors that might help or hinder the development of inclusive and diverse choirs in this context, as well as to explore the ongoing impact of the challenges of choir participation outlined above.

Considering this, the current study utilised a mixed-method approach to explore these issues, outlining the following:

1. A scoping review of the extant international literature pertaining to the barriers and facilitators of participation in community choirs.

2. The results of a survey of 468 current and past MWC members.

3. Themes developed from semi-structured interviews with 19 current and past MWC members.

4. Recommendations for removing barriers to participation and improving the experience of choir membership.

Methods

This project explored the following overarching research question:

What are the barriers and facilitators to accessing and engaging with the Military Wives Choirs for women in the military community?

To address this research question, an explanatory sequential mixed-method approach was utilised, conducting the following:

1. An international scoping review of the literature.

2. An online survey of current and past members of the MWC network.

3. In-depth semi-structured interviews with a subsample of the survey participants.

An overview of each of these methods is provided below and is available in more depth in the Appendices. Ethical approval for the project was received from ARU's Cambridge School of Creative Industries School Research Ethics Panel in March 2022.

Scoping Review Methodology

We undertook a systematic scoping review of the international literature, following the methodology outlined by the Joanna Briggs Institute,[13,14] with the following review question:

What barriers and facilitators to accessing adult community choirs have been identified in previous literature?

Fourteen academic databases were searched using search terms that focused on the barriers and facilitators for adults participating in community choirs. Following the initial database search, titles and abstracts were screened for relevance to the research question. The remaining texts were read in full and the inclusion/exclusion criteria were applied to identify the final research papers for inclusion in the review. Twenty papers were included in the final review. Data were then extracted from these papers to identify the key barriers and facilitators to accessing community choirs in the literature and are summarised in the Findings section below.

The full scoping review protocol has been published with open access here and can be viewed in Appendix 1.

Online Survey Methodology

An online survey was collaboratively developed between academics at ARU and the MWC's Choirs Support Team (CST). Further face validity testing was undertaken with the MWC's Regional Voices Group (RVG), who acted as a proxy Experts-by-Experience (EbyE) group throughout the duration of the research project. The survey was built using the 'Online Surveys' (formally Bristol Online Surveys) platform.[15] The questions within the survey, developed and tested with the EbyE group, focused on the following areas:

- Involvement in the MWC network (i.e., membership, reasons for joining, experiences in choirs, reasons for leaving, and perspectives on barriers and facilitators to joining choirs);

- Previous musical experiences;

- Relationship to the military;

- Sociodemographics.

The full survey is available in Appendix 2.

Based on the size of the MWC's membership (approximately 1700 at the time of survey distribution), and to ensure that the analysis had sufficient statistical power, a target sample size of 314 participants was calculated to provide a representative overview of this population. The survey was disseminated by the CST to current and previous MWC members via their membership mailing list, newsletters, and social media platforms. The survey was also circulated via word of mouth by EbyE members to increase the sample of previous members. A final sample of 468 participants was achieved, with 431 current and 37 previous members of the MWC network, representing 23.5% of the MWC's current membership. We are therefore confident that the responses are statistically representative of the overall membership.

All data were downloaded from the Online Surveys website for analysis. Quantitative data were analysed descriptively, and the results are presented using percentages. Group differences in the responses were explored for some questions, including by age, military connection, and rank. Free-text qualitative data were analysed thematically and are presented by the identified themes, alongside illustrative quotes.

For an in-depth overview of the survey methods used, see Appendix 3.

Semi-structured Interview Method

Semi-structured interviews were carried out with a subsample of participants who completed the survey. Participants were able to express their interest in taking part in an interview and provide consent to be contacted upon completion of the survey. A total of 19 participants took part in the semi-structured interviews, which included 15 current and four previous members of the MWC network. The sample of current members was randomly selected from those who consented to be contacted for interview in the online survey. Due to a limited number of previous members consenting to take part in the interviews, a purposeful sample included all previous members who expressed an interest. Interviews took place virtually via Microsoft Teams and lasted approximately 45 minutes to one hour. The questions focused on understanding in more depth the following key issues identified from the survey:

- Reasons for joining the MWC network;

- Experiences in the MWC network and reasons for leaving;

- Previous musical experiences;

- Social experiences;

- Accessibility issues;

- Experiences of choir organisation.

The full interview guide can be found in Appendix 4.

The interviews were recorded and transcribed verbatim. Data were input into NVivo and analysed thematically following the Reflexive Thematic Analysis approach outlined by Braun and Clarke.[16,17] The data are presented by themes, with illustrative quotes.

For an in-depth overview of the interview methods, see Appendix 5.

Systematic Scoping Review of the Previous Literature

A systematic scoping review was undertaken to ascertain the factors related to access facilitators and barriers to adult community choirs that were identified in previous international literature. Fourteen databases were searched to identify literature from multidisciplinary perspectives. The search terms and inclusion criteria were developed to ensure the inclusion of articles that were focused on adult community choirs and that also addressed access. The criteria were broad in terms of the method or design of the included studies, and access did not have to be the main focus of the article, which allowed for the inclusion of a range of literature.

Included Studies

Error! Reference source not found. reports the article selection process, outlining the number of articles excluded and included for the literature review at each stage.

Figure 1. Study Selection Process
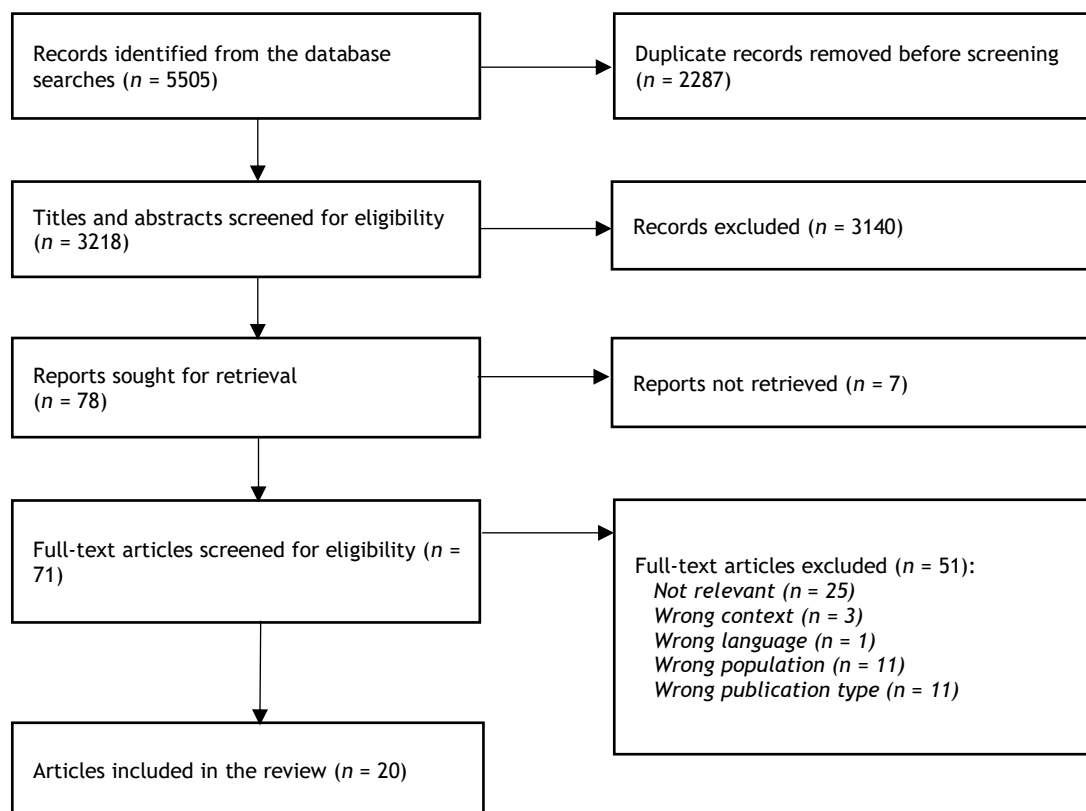
The database search identified a total of 3218 unique articles. These articles' titles and abstracts were screened against the inclusion and exclusion criteria by two reviewers, which resulted in the exclusion of 3140 articles. The full text of the remaining 78 articles was screened by two reviewers, which then resulted in exclusion of a further 58 articles. After screening, a total of 20 articles met the full inclusion criteria. A list of the included studies can be found in Appendix 6. Many of these articles were from the USA (8); however, there

were also articles from Australia (4), the UK (4), Canada (1), Iceland (1), and Norway (1). One of the included articles was a literature review that comprised international literature. The years of publication ranged from 2001 to 2022. The included articles focused on a variety of choir types, including both auditioned and audition-free community choirs, community singing groups, open university choirs, church choirs, and choirs specifically for men or women. All of the included literature reports were published articles, except for one book chapter, which was included because it reported primary research data relevant to the research question.

Many of the included studies did not explore access barriers or facilitators directly, often focusing on exploring the experiences of choir participation more broadly and the perceived benefits of being in a community choir. Some articles did focus on motivations and influential factors for choir participation. However, the included articles all addressed choir access either directly or indirectly. Table 1 presents the characteristics of the included studies.

Table 1. Characteristics of the Included Studies

Study	Country	Population	Type of choir(s)	Audition requirement	Sample size	Focus	Method
Batt-Rawden & Andersen[18]	Norway	Women	Choir or singing group	No	19	Women's perceptions of how singing in a choir impacts their health, wellbeing, and social inclusion	Focus groups, interviews
Boswell[19]	International	Adults	Community music ensembles	Not indicated	N/A	Factors influencing adult participation in community music ensembles	Literature review
Clift et al.[20]	UK	Women	Military Wives Choirs	No	637	Benefits of choirs for women in the military community	Survey
Einarsdottir & Gudmundsdottir[21]	Iceland	Adults	Amateur choirs	Not indicated	205	Motivations for singing in a choir as a leisure activity	Survey
Fung[22]	USA	Adults	Church choir	No	30	Experiences of members of a Chinese church choir	Interviews
Hendry et al.[23]	UK	Women	Community choir (solely female membership)	No	6	Wellbeing and quality-of-life benefits of community-based singing	Interviews
Jones[24]	USA	University students	Two university choirs (Western classical; a cappella, popular)	Yes	6	Motivation for and benefits of participation in traditional and non-traditional vocal ensembles	Interviews, written reflections, field observations
Joseph & Southcott[25]	Australia	Older adults	Community singing groups	No	22	Experiences of older people participating in community choirs	Focus groups
Joseph & Southcott[26]	Australia	Older adults	University of the 3rd Age Choir	No	5	Motivations for older people to join and stay in choirs and the perceived benefits	Interviews
Judd & Pooley[27]	Australia	Adults	Amateur or community choirs	Mixed	10	Psychological benefits of singing with others	Interviews

Kennedy[28]	Canada	Adults	Community choir	No	13	The teaching and learning process in a community choir	Interviews, field observations
Kramer et al.[29]	USA	Adults	University-based community choir (open to community members and students)	Not indicated	121	Aspects of voluntary membership generally, using a community choir as a case study	Survey
McCrary[30]	USA	University students	Two university choirs (Western classical; Gospel)	No	278	Reasons for lifelong participation in music	Survey
Parkinson[31]	UK	Adults	Community singing groups	Not indicated	686	Gender influences in the experiences of community singing in the UK	Survey
Powell[32]	Australia	Men	Semi-professional men's choir	Not indicated	13	Participants' identities and how these influence decisions about choirs	Survey, interviews, focus groups, video observation
Redman & Bugos[33]	USA	Adults	Community choirs	Yes	135	Motivational factors to join and maintain membership in a choir	Survey
Rohwer[34]	USA	Adults	Church choirs	Not indicated	22	Participation perceptions of church choir	Interviews
Rohwer & Rohwer[35]	UK (Wales)	Men	Welsh men's choirs	Not indicated	24	Choristers' perceptions of Welsh men's choir participation	Focus groups
Sichivitsa[36]	USA	University students	University choirs	Not indicated	154	Influential factors for non-music major university students' intentions to continue participating in music	Survey
Sichivitsa[37]	USA	University students	University choir	Not Indicated	130	Influential factors for non-music major university students' intentions to continue participating in music	Survey

Findings

The findings related to choir access from the identified literature are presented and discussed below.

Facilitators and Motivations

Many of the studies identified motivations and benefits for involvement in community choirs. This included reasons members were motivated to join in the first place, alongside incentives for continuing in a choir. The reasons members wanted to join a choir in the first place often included enjoyment of singing and previous musical background; to meet religious or spiritual needs; wanting to meet new people; for personal development. The key facilitators for individuals joining included the choirs being audition-free; encouragement from a friend who is in a choir; enjoying the style of music; having a shared cultural background with the group. The incentives for continuing in a choir often overlapped with the motivations for joining; however, some specific incentives for continuing included impact on mental and physical health; sense of belonging and identification with the group; effective choir leadership.

i. The Singing Itself

Enjoyment of singing itself has been identified as a strong motivator for adult participation in community choirs.[19,21,23,24,26,27,28,30,31,32,36,37] In particular, the enjoyment of singing with others,[31] and specifically singing in harmony: "[I am] eternally grateful for the vitamin H (harmony) I get from singing with you all" (participant cited in Kennedy[28(p195)]). It is recognised that being a member of a choir is a big commitment, and enjoyment of singing is key to joining and retaining membership.[34]

Within community choirs, the musical aesthetic, including musical quality, style, or genre, plays a role in choir membership. Aesthetic and musical quality may have increased importance for members with stronger musical backgrounds, as research by Redman and Bugos[33] with participants from an auditioned choir found that a lack of aesthetic or musical quality is the most frequently identified reason for quitting. However, Parkinson[31] found that the aesthetic value of the music is an important factor of the experience for community choir members generally; the benefits of choir singing are likely increased if members also enjoy the songs they are singing,[23] and enjoying the style or genre is a motivating factor.[30] The genre of music sung by the choir has also been found to impact the decision to join in the first place[27]; this initial decision may be based on an individual's personal preferences and their perception of whether they will fit in with the choir, but members may also seek out choirs that cater to specific genres of music.[31] Potential members may also join after attending a concert and enjoying the experience,[28,30] which is likely impacted by repertoire choice.

Finally, singing can become strongly linked to an individual's identity. In addition to increasing one's sense of self,[23,22] in a study of women choir members, Batt-Rawden and Andersen[18] found that singing itself can become a strong part of an individual's identity after joining a choir.

ii. Spirituality

Spirituality has also been identified as a motivation to engage in singing and community choirs.[30] In a study that interviewed members of a church choir, Fung[22] found that members attribute the positive emotions they have when singing to their increased sense of spirituality and feel that choir singing connects them closer to God. However, in a survey of members of amateur choirs in Iceland carried out by Einarsdottir and Gudmundsdottir,[21] participants generally disagreed that choir is a religious experience; however, this may be due to the connotations in the use of the word 'religion'.

Participants may experience spirituality in choir singing regardless of religious association, such as that which Kennedy[28(p191)] described as the meditative, peaceful feeling of choir singing, which is "a welcome antidote to the busyness of my everyday life". These spiritual experiences may be particularly borne out of singing in harmony with others.[31]

iii. Social Connection and Belonging

Social motivation, or the choir as a place to build social connections and friendships, is often raised as a reason members join and maintain membership in community choirs.[19,24,26,28,31,32,25] This social motivation may be just as important, or more so, than the music itself as an influencing factor for joining a community choir.[23] In particular, members moving to a new area may seek to join a community choir to build local connections.[28,30] The opportunity to build social connections may be particularly relevant to women, who have been found to be more motivated to join a choir to meet new people than men.[21,31] Younger adults (21–40-year-olds) are also more likely to want to meet new people through joining a choir.[21] The choir also provides members the opportunity to meet people they would have never otherwise met, thus widening their social circles.[25] Interestingly, in a comparison of non-auditioned traditional (Western classical) and non-traditional (a cappella) university choirs, Jones[24] found that although members of both choirs sought a musical and social experience, the members in the non-traditional choir reported social interaction as the main motivation for participation, whereas the traditional choir members were more focused on developing their musical skills.

The social network built within community choirs can contribute to a sense of belonging[31] and collective identity, particularly through having a need for a group effort in order to sing collectively.[30,22] This sense of group identity may be cultivated through the group's on-stage persona[32] and accomplishments.[23] A sense of identity with the choir as an organisation is also an important factor for remaining a member; Kramer et al.[29] suggested, therefore, the importance of maintaining consistent values and protocols for the choir organisation.

The importance of community choirs having a welcoming, friendly, and inclusive atmosphere has also been highlighted by previous research.[23,28] Einarsdottir and Gudmundsdottir[21] found that the social atmosphere is one of the strongest motivating factors, alongside personal enjoyment of singing, for being in a choir. The majority of participants felt that the social life within the choir is the most important factor of continued choir participation. Therefore, maintaining group cohesiveness is essential and may be strengthened through opportunities for social activities outside of choir.[23]

However, it is important to note that existing social connections also support choir membership. Often members of community music ensembles cite joining through encouragement from a friend who is already a member.[19,28,30,34] In a focus group study of a Welsh men's choir, choristers most commonly joined through a connection to another choir member.[35] This word-of-mouth advertisement of community choirs increases awareness of the choir and encourages involvement through already knowing an existing member.

iv. Shared Culture and Heritage

Studies have also found that motivation for joining and continuing membership in community choirs can be based on shared culture and heritage with other members.[35] Research conducted by Fung[22] explored a Chinese church choir in the USA, acknowledging the importance of the choir as a way of maintaining a shared heritage and culture for a minority group. Another study by Joseph and Southcott[25] held focus groups with five community choirs in Australia; three of these choirs were formed specifically due to shared cultural backgrounds, and the research found that the choirs offered a sense of cultural belonging that was identified as a facilitator for inclusion. Interestingly, the opportunity to share cultural values with their community was found to be a more likely motivating factor for men.[31]

The social connection within these choirs is formed through shared cultural backgrounds, and some members acknowledge this identification with the culture as the reason they joined. It may therefore be beneficial for community choirs to align with local cultural heritage.[35] However, in a study of a choir with a broader range of backgrounds, sharing an activity with 'like-minded' people was still raised[25]; in general, community choirs may build community cohesion through having or finding a shared culture or identity.[33]

v. Mental and Physical Wellbeing

The perceived health and wellbeing benefits of choir singing have been identified through previous research undertaken with choir members.[26,33,18,25,Error! Bookmark not defined.] These perceived benefits may be a motivating factor to join a choir, and are often a reason for members to maintain membership.

Batt-Rawden and Andersen[18] carried out focus groups with women who participated in community choirs; the women spoke about the positive mental and physical health benefits they experienced by participating in choir. When life became difficult, participants emphasised that the mental health benefits of singing were motivation to continue to attend rehearsals: "I tried to come to every rehearsal because I needed it" (participant cited in Batt-Rawden & Andersen[18(p144)]). This may be due to the ability for choir rehearsals and singing to provide relief from negative feelings[21] and offer a form of escapism[25] and stress relief.[30] Women are more likely to identify mood enhancement as a benefit of choir singing, potentially through opportunities for emotional expression, which may also support emotional resilience.[31]

Joining a choir as a weekly leisure activity provides members a sense of autonomy through having a time for themselves, specifically outside of work and family commitments.[23] Research shows that this is a stronger motivating factor for women, perhaps due to women taking on many household and childcare responsibilities, whereas men are more likely to

join a choir to compensate for an activity they could no longer participate in, such as a sport.[31] Students in an open university choir also identified the importance of the choir in providing an emotional and physical outlet and a space to achieve life balance.[24] In addition to weekly rehearsals, performance opportunities were also a motivating factor,[24] described as cathartic experiences.[25]

However, in addition to the mental health benefits as a motivation to continue attending rehearsals, this may also be a reason members join in the first place. Previous research suggests that members may decide to join after experiencing life-changing events,[19,23,31] where the choir can act as a "healing practice" (Kennedy[28(p190)]). Interestingly, women are also more likely to join a choir as a response to personal life challenges.[31]

Batt-Rawden and Andersen[18] suggested that the strong social connections built within community choirs can also protect against the negative health outcomes associated with loneliness and isolation. Hendry et al.[23] acknowledged that boosted self-esteem through choir membership, facilitated through group accomplishments, can also have health benefits. In addition to mental health benefits, choir members perceive choir singing to contribute to better breathing, cognition, and posture,[31,25] and can also support positive ageing.[22,25]

Previous research recommends singing be advocated for by emphasising the health benefits, similar to how exercise is advocated for through health promotion.[18]

vi. Musical Background

Previous music experience has also been identified as an important factor for joining a community choir.[27,30] A literature review found that a high proportion of adults participating in community music ensembles were involved in music ensembles in high school, and many had parental influence on their participation in music.[19] In a focus group study of choirs for older people, many members did not have any previous formal music education, but acknowledged that their childhoods often included music-making in the home.[25] Past musical experiences, whether within family life or school as a child, may be an important factor in music and singing becoming a part of one's identity.[32] Within two open university choirs, members expressed a desire to continue their musical education and learning from their school days, even though their primary area of study was not music.[24] Joseph and Southcott[26] found that all of the choir members they interviewed had childhood musical experiences, which they strongly valued, and this encouraged them to seek lifelong musical experiences. However, this desire to re-engage or maintain music involvement seems to be a stronger influential factor for men to join.[31]

A sense of the 'value of music' (i.e., music for personal growth, enjoyment, and learning) has been found to be the strongest predictor of music engagement intention for university students,[36,37] developed through parental support of music involvement, leading individuals to having confidence in their own musical ability and thus being motivated to continue in music. However, Sichivitsa[36] found that previous music experience does not in itself have a significant impact on intention to continue in music; this emphasises the importance of positive and supportive early musical experiences, as negative early experiences in music may disincentivise continued involvement. Importantly, although previous experience may be a motivating factor to become involved in a choir, there seems to be no difference

between enjoyment of choir singing between members with previous music education and those without.[21]

vii. Being Audition-Free

Members of community choirs recognise the importance of choirs being open to everyone, being audition-free, and emphasising that anyone can sing.[23,28,34,18] Previous research into non-auditioned community choirs shows that the value of the choir for members is not focused on reaching aesthetic perfection,[22] and that emphasis should be on accessibility and inclusivity over musical ability or ability to read music.[23] This creates an opportunity for members without previous music experiences or who have had negative experiences previously to engage in positive musical experiences. By being audition-free, community choirs can offer the opportunity to sing and can provide the non-musical benefits of singing for those who just like singing, "even if they [feel] they [do] not sing well" (Joseph & Southcott[25(p184)]). However, although members may initially join an audition-free choir, once they build confidence, they may go on to join an auditioned choir in the future.[22] The choir as a learning experience, as a place to learn to sing and find one's voice, is important to acknowledge, especially for those who have been told they cannot sing in the past.[28]

viii. Personal Development

Development or maintenance of musical skills can, for some, be a primary motivation for joining a choir.[24,31,33] Choir singing can provide an opportunity for lifelong learning[22] and, for older members, may allow members to realise a previously unfulfilled desire to learn to sing.[25] Hendry et al.[23] found that personal development, particularly learning new skills or seeking a new challenge, is a motivation for joining a choir. It has been found that women in particular are more motivated to join to improve their singing voices.[31] Members also join to try something new or unique, particularly if they have never been in a choir previously, but also if it is a novel genre that they have never sung before.[30] Joseph and Southcott[25] found that members may have previous musical experiences but have never had the opportunity to learn to read music. For these members, joining a choir gives them the opportunity to learn to read notation alongside learning aurally through listening.[28]

The role of the choir lead within a choir can impact the opportunity for learning; this was identified by Jones,[24] where a student-led choir was acknowledged as providing less opportunity for improving singing skills due to the untrained musical director's own lack of knowledge. The musical director's role has been identified as a key factor in catering for various backgrounds, preferences, and abilities of members, whilst also encouraging the choir to take on new challenges.[26]

The choir as a route to personal development can contribute to increased confidence and self-worth, particularly for women.[31] Singing may also positively impact self-esteem, particularly for those with less general education or musical education,[21] potentially through providing opportunities to meet and overcome new challenges.

viii. Leadership

The previous literature also highlights leadership, including both the musical director and other organisation leadership, as an important factor for continued choir involvement. Having a positive relationship with, and personally liking, the musical director can contribute

to members retaining their involvement in a choir.[30] Where choirs are part of a wider community organisation, this offers additional infrastructure support.[25] A study by Kramer et al.[29] identified the factors of volunteer membership using a community choir as a case study; they found that leadership communication increases the certainty of the members, which is associated with higher levels of satisfaction and identification with the organisation. This suggests the importance of having clear communication and ensuring members are aware of expectations and what is happening in the organisation, which not only increases satisfaction, but group identity with the choir as well.

Barriers

Although much of the previous literature has tended to focus on the motivations and benefits of choir membership, there are still key barriers to participation that were raised. Barriers to joining in the first place include lack of musical ability or confidence; time constraints; financial concerns; not liking the musical style or genre of the choir; lack of awareness of or access to community choirs. Aspects of the choir that disincentivised continuing include negative social experiences; time constraints; musical challenges. The previous literature also highlights ethnic and gender diversity concerns in community choirs, although specific barriers for certain groups have not been explicitly addressed.

i. Negative Social Experiences

Although research suggests that the social aspect is often what draws members to join choirs, research also shows that choir members can sometimes experience negative social dynamics and relationship conflicts within community choir settings.[23,20] This may be due to personality clashes amongst members, or power dynamics of the leadership within the choir. Hendry et al.[23] emphasised the importance of managing these negative dynamics, as otherwise, these tensions and bad experiences can undermine the psychological benefits that choir members often receive from choir. The authors suggested ensuring the choir lead has the ability to manage difficult social situations when they occur.

In addition to member conflicts, a lack of opportunities to socialise as a group can undermine the social benefits of choir involvement. For example, within a very large choir, members may feel the loss of more intimate social connections.[28] Another study highlighted that opportunities to socialise are an integral aspect of the community choir; however, having too many performances, budget limitations, and singers from a large geographic area may limit opportunities for socialising outside of rehearsal times.[35] Joseph and Southcott[26] found that the rehearsal space itself can present a barrier for socialising if there is not space available for socialising before and after rehearsals. As building a community and social networks is one of the key motivating factors for community choir membership, it is important that conflicts are managed and that members are offered opportunities to build relationships outside of rehearsals.

ii. Financial Considerations

Boswell[19] identified financial barriers to community music ensemble participation; although this was emphasised in terms of instrument needs, there may also be financial barriers associated with choirs, including travel costs, fees, and uniform costs. Budget has also been

found to be one of the most commonly cited challenges for church choir engagement.[34] Hendry et al.[23] suggested that community choir fees should be pay-as-you-go, which may also encourage intrinsic motivation to attend. Furthermore, the 'Gettin Higher Choir'[28] implements a very loose dress code in order to be more inclusive in terms of the uniform.

iii. Lack of Musical Ability or Confidence

Potential community choir members may not feel confident joining a choir based on how they perceive their own musical ability. This may be due to limited previous musical experiences, but it is also recognised in the literature that individuals may have had negative past experiences, and in particular will be hesitant to join a choir if they have been told they cannot sing.[28] Emphasising the importance of community choirs being audition-free, Boswell[19] identified that potential community choir members can be fearful of participating in auditions due to their lack of musical ability or confidence. The authors recognised that even individuals who have positive previous musical experiences and music training can also experience hesitancy in joining if they have had an extended hiatus from involvement in music; they may have a fear of their own diminished musical skills, which may impact them starting in music again.

iv. Time Constraints

Time constraints are often reported as a barrier to community ensemble participation for adults,[19,29] with lack of attendance being a common challenge.[34] This likely varies across members, depending on their outside family and work commitments. For example, older retired members may have more disposable time to engage in a choir,[25] whereas Judd and Pooley[27] found that periods of not engaging in a choir coincided with marriage and having children. However, research with male choir singers found that a hiatus between leaving school or university was due to other activities getting in the way, particularly athletics or social lives: "Stopped singing in my 20s as other typical activities were more important, e.g. football, tennis and beer" (participant cited in Powell[32(p63)]).

In a large community choir (of over 300 members), a multi-night rehearsal schedule is implemented to allow for members to attend one or more of three weekly rehearsals each week.[28] The members come together only for dress rehearsals and performances. However, this has budget implications and may not work as well for much smaller choirs. Kramer et al.[29] recognised that family and work commitments may be difficult to overcome, but identified that limited preparation time for performances or rehearsals can decrease satisfaction. Importantly, feeling well-rehearsed impacts the stress and anxiety levels related to performing.[33] Therefore, managing time constraints, including considering the difficulty of repertoire, utilising efficient rehearsal or practicing techniques, and finding ways to support members to attend rehearsals are important aspects in order to ensure that the stress of meeting the musical challenge does not impact the psychological benefits of being in a choir.

v. Lack of Awareness Of, or Access To, a Local Choir

Individuals may be interested in joining a community choir, but may lack access to a choir that is convenient for them to attend. Rohwer[34] found that proximity is recognised by members as a barrier to continuing in a church choir. In a study by Joseph and Southcott,[25]

it was found that one of the factors for joining a specific choir is the location of the rehearsal space; members join due to it being in a convenient location that fits within their daily routines, which also minimises their travel costs. However, it may also be that individuals are not aware of local community choir opportunities if they are not advertised well. Boswell[19] identified that not having access to a local ensemble is a key barrier to adult participation in community music ensembles, but also acknowledged that there may be a lack of awareness of local opportunities.

vi. Musical Challenges and Appeal of Repertoire

Previous research has identified musical challenges that may discourage members from continuing, which may be due to the repertoire being too challenging[28,25] and the pressure of performing.[20] Clift et al.[12] found that musical challenges can come about due to the approach of the musical director, where certain approaches might impact the perceived effectiveness of the rehearsal. The musical director also has a role in judging the challenge of the repertoire; for instance, if the pace of learning is too fast, it may become too challenging and members may become frustrated.[28,25] If the level of repertoire is too challenging, or there is limited preparation time for rehearsals, this may decrease satisfaction with the choir.[29] This is particularly relevant for non-auditioned choirs, where members may vary in their previous musical training, as members with more musical training may perceive less stress or anxiety related to learning and performing.[33]

In terms of musical style or genre, disliking the repertoire can also be demotivating or disincentivising for choir membership.[20] If the genre of music strongly conflicts with members' preferences or personal beliefs, this may also lead to them leaving the choir, such as use of religious or sacred songs for those who are not religious.[28] It is also important to recognise that members may have strong negative emotional memories triggered by certain songs, which can potentially be distressing.[23] Therefore, musical directors should consider the preferences of the membership and the aesthetic quality of the music when selecting repertoire.[33]

vii. Diversity

The previous literature highlights a gendered difference in choir make-up (more women than men), a generally older membership, and a lack of ethnic diversity in community choirs.[19,31,35] Boswell[19] carried out a literature review to identify the factors that influence adult participation in community music ensembles (including choirs, orchestras, and bands) to explore how lifelong involvement in music continues after school. Identifying literature related to the demographics of community music ensemble membership make-up, the author acknowledged that, "demographically speaking, the portrait of typical community music participants … could be described as older, white, college educated, and above average financial means" (p.58). Looking specifically at community choirs, the review recognised that there are consistently more women than men and that fewer younger members are joining choirs. Rohwer and Rohwer[35] also identified a lack of younger members and recognised that there is a need to find novel ways to recruit younger members, as word of mouth is not sufficient; they suggested utilising advertising and media campaigns. However, there is also a recognition of the importance of involving older members within community choirs, who remain active learners and can make a positive contribution.[22] Although the

previous literature has identified diversity concerns, specific barriers that could be impacting ethnic, age, and gender diversity within community choirs have not been addressed.

Summary of the Scoping Review Results

Overall, the scoping review identified the following motivations for adults being involved in community choirs, as well as facilitators and barriers to access:

- *Motivations:* The singing itself; spirituality; social connection and belonging; shared culture and heritage; mental and physical wellbeing; personal development.

- *Facilitators:* Audition-free; musical background; effective choir leadership.

- *Barriers:* Negative social experiences; financial considerations; lack of musical ability or confidence; time constraints; lack of awareness of, or access to, a local choir; musical challenges and appeal of repertoire.

The previous literature also highlighted a lack of diversity within community choirs.

Survey Results

An anonymous online survey was disseminated to current and past members of the MWC network to investigate the following:

- Current and past involvement in the MWC network;

- Reasons for joining;

- Experiences in choirs;

- Reasons for leaving;

- Perspectives on the barriers and facilitators to joining choirs;

- Previous musical experiences.

Participant Characteristics

A survey sample of 468 participants was achieved, with 431 current and 37 previous members of the MWC network. This represents 23.5% of the MWC's current membership and is notably higher than the target sample size of 314. As such, this sample can be considered representative of the MWC's membership. A comprehensive table outlining the sociodemographic characteristics of the sample can be found in Appendix 7.

Most participants were aged between 40 and 59 years (58.0%), White (99.6%), British (95.9%), and heterosexual (88.2%). This makes the sample, on average, slightly older than the general UK military spouse population (as reported in the FAMCAS 2022[38]), of whom over 75.0% were under the age of 45 years. Furthermore, the general military spouse population is more likely to report a non-UK nationality than our sample (12.0%).

Almost two thirds of the sample reported owning their own home (62.4%), with the majority living in England (77.6%), most commonly in a rural area (45.9%). This is representative of the general UK military spouse population, in which 60.0% report owning their own home and 82.0% report living in England.

Most of the sample reported being educated to degree level or above (68.0%) and were employed full-time (36.5%) or part-time (27.1%), with under half of the sample holding a volunteering position (43.9%). However, the majority of the sample were in a job that would not allow them to transfer to a new location (57.2%). These data suggest that the sample were more highly educated than the military spouse population in general, of which 50.0% report being educated to degree level or above. However, the general spouse population are more likely to be in employment (81.0%) than our sample.

Over a quarter of the sample reported a long-standing disability or illness (27.9%), but most respondents did not have accessibility issues (86.5%). Most of the sample did not have children aged 17 years or under (57.3%) or adult dependents (75.8%). This differs to the general population of military spouses in the UK, of which the majority have at least one child under the age of 17 years (54.0%).

Relationship to the Military

Table 2 shows the military connection reported by respondents, compared to the membership of the MWC network. The majority of respondents were the wife, partner, or fiancée of a currently serving member of the UK Armed Forces (UKAF) (51.7%), which is slightly lower than the proportion of MWC members that fall into this category (63.3%). However, almost a quarter were the wife, partner, or fiancée of a UK Armed Forces veteran (24.4%, compared to 15.7% of the MWC's membership). Furthermore, almost a quarter of the sample reported that they were a UK Armed Forces veteran themselves (22.4%, compared to 15.4% of the MWC's membership).

Table 2. Military Connection of the Respondents

	Proportion of respondents	Proportion of the MWC's membership
Wife, partner, fiancée, or co-habiting partner of a serving member of the UK Armed Forces (including Reservists)	51.7%	63.6%
Wife, widow, partner, fiancée, or co-habiting partner of a UK Armed Forces veteran (including Reservists)	24.4%	15.7%
Serving UK Armed Forces personnel (including Reservists)	2.8%	3.7%
UK Armed Forces veteran (including Reservists)	22.4%	15.4%
Mother of a serving member of the UK Armed Forces (including Reservists)	7.7%	10.8%
Sister of a serving member of the UK Armed Forces (including Reservists)	1.7%	
Daughter of a serving member of the UK Armed Forces (including Reservists)	1.5%	
Woman employed within the military community	7.5%	5.9%
Other	9.6%	4.3%

Note. For this question, participants could select all that apply, meaning that the proportions do not add up to 100%. Abbreviations: MWC, Military Wives Choirs.

Table 3 shows the service branch, role, and rank breakdown of the military connections reported by respondents. Comparative data are shown for the service branch connection of the MWC's membership for comparison. Participants who were current or previous members of the UKAF were most commonly connected to the Royal Air Force (38.6%), whereas those who were relatives of current or previous members of the UKAF were most commonly connected to the British Army (43.4%). Respondents were most commonly Regular

personnel/veterans (87.0%) or relatives of Regular personnel/veterans (95.9%), as opposed to Reservists. Other ranks were most common in both groups, but this was proportionately higher in current/previous members of the UKAF compared to relatives of current or previous members of the UKAF (71.0% vs. 58.5%, respectively).

Table 3. Breakdown of Respondents' Military Connection by Branch, Role, and Rank

	Current/previous member of the UKAF	Relative of current/previous member of the UKAF*	MWC's membership
	Proportion (%)		
Service branch			
British Army	32.4%	43.4%	43.8%
Royal Air Force	38.6%	34.9%	31.3%
Royal Navy	24.6%	18.7%	18.8%
Royal Marines	-	2.4%	2.4%
Other	4.4%	0.6%	3.7%
Role			
Regular	87.0%	95.9%	
Reservist	13.0%	4.1%	
Rank			
Officer	33.0%	41.5%	
Other rank	71.0%	58.5%	

* Participants could report more than one relative who was a current/former member of the UK Armed Forces. Abbreviations: UKAF, UK Armed Forces.

For those currently serving or related to someone who is currently serving,

Figure 1 shows respondents' distance from their or their serving relative's military base. Almost two thirds of this sample reported living within 14 miles of their or their serving relative's military base. However, 14.9% reported living a significant distance from their or their serving relative's base (over 105 miles).

Figure 1. Distance From Own/Serving Relative's Military Base
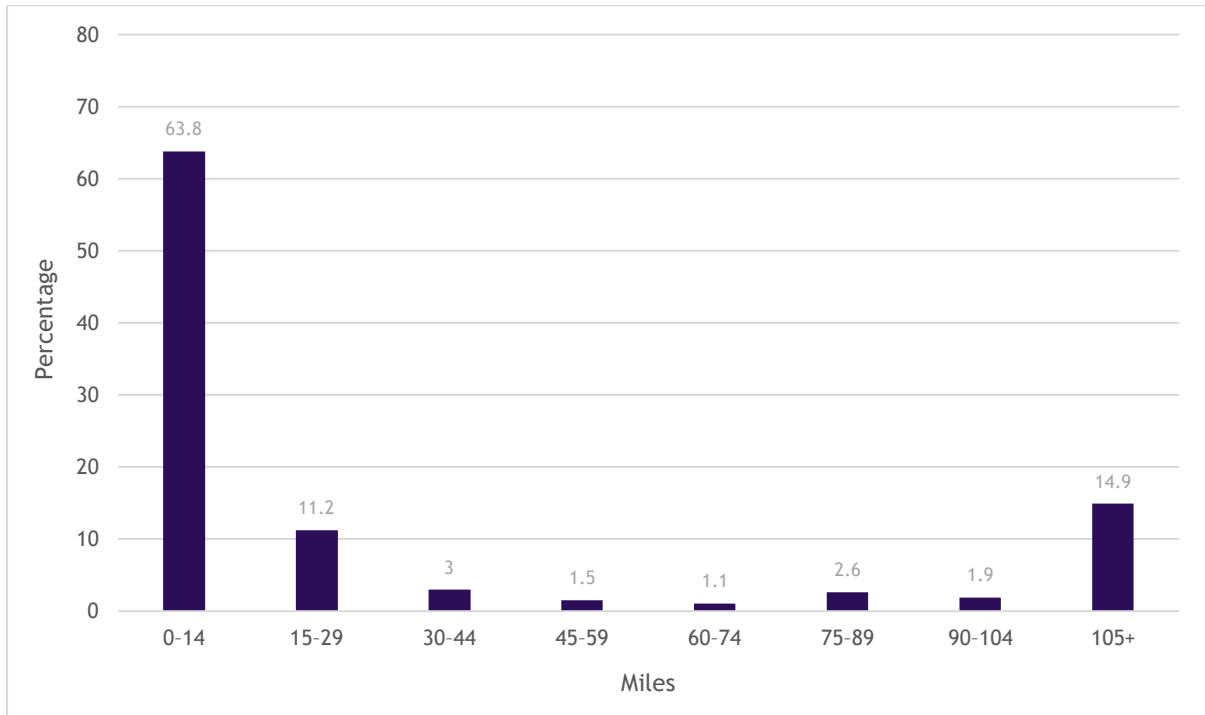
Figure 2 shows respondents' distance to the nearest military base in general. The majority of respondents reported living within 14 miles of their nearest military base (85.4%).

Figure 2. Distance From Nearest Military Base
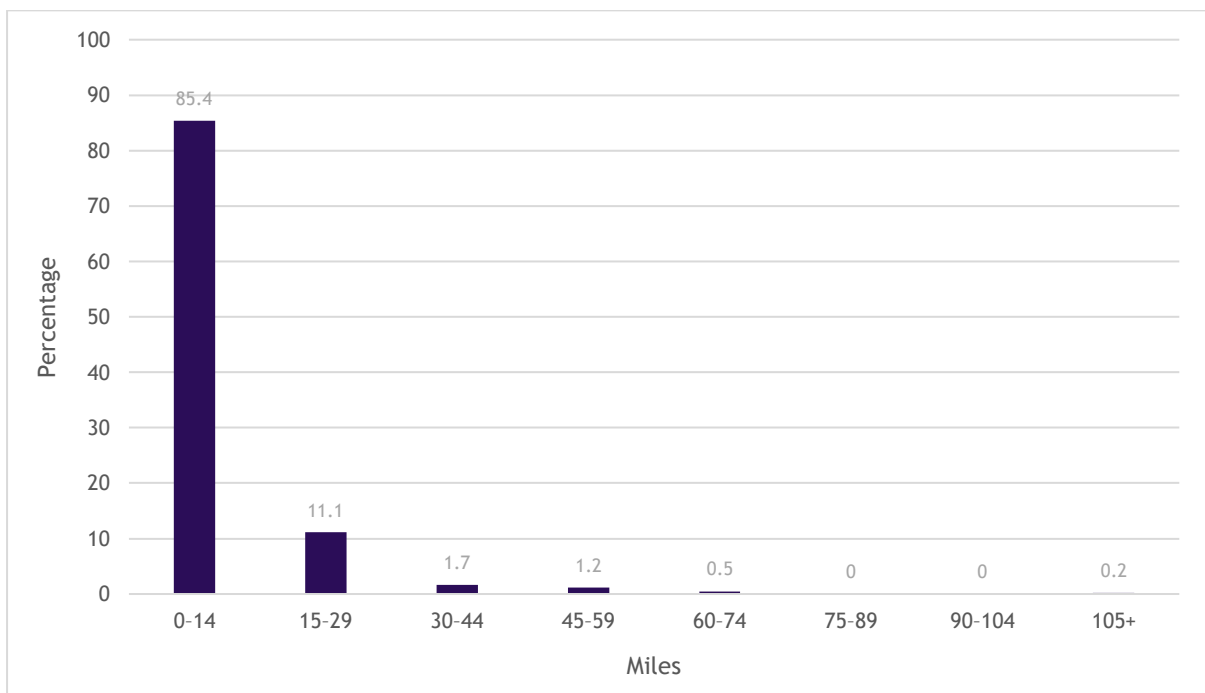
Membership and Involvement in Choirs

Table 4 shows respondents' membership and involvement in the MWC network. Of those that were current members of the MWC network (*n* = 431), the large majority reported that they were members of one choir (98.6%). Two thirds of all respondents had only ever been a member of one choir (69.6%). There was a broad spread across respondents regarding number of years involved in the MWC network; however, over a quarter of the sample (26.4%) had been involved with the MWC for between 9 and 10 years. Most respondents had joined the MWC network between the ages of 30–49 years (56.0%). Around two thirds of the sample were currently and/or had previously been a member of a MWC committee (65.2%) and had been involved in a centrally organised event, such as a concert or Committees' Day (65.0%). The most common way in which respondents had heard about the MWC was through word of mouth (57.9%), followed by media (i.e., TV or radio; 31.8%).

Table 4. Membership and Involvement in the Choir(s)

	Proportion (%)
How many choirs are you currently a member of?*	
1	98.6%
2	1.4%
3	0.2%
4	-
5+	0.2%
How many choirs have you ever been a member of?	
1	69.6%
2	14.3%
3	9.6%
4	4.1%
5+	2.4%
How many years have, or had, you been involved in the MWC?	
Less than 1 year	9.9%
1–2 years	10.5%

3-4 years	19.0%
5-6 years	18.6%
7-8 years	15.5%
9-10 years	26.4%

What age were you when you joined your first choir?

18-29 years	12.0%
30-39 years	27.4%
40-49 years	28.6%
50-59 years	19.7%
60-69 years	9.8%
70-79 years	2.6%
80+ years	-

Have you ever held a role on a committee group?

Yes, currently	26.6%
Yes, previously	28.3%
Yes, previously and currently	10.3%
No	34.3%
Prefer not to answer	0.6%

Have you been involved in a centrally organised event?

Yes	65.0%
No	32.5%
Unsure	2.4%
Prefer not to answer	0.2%

How did you first hear about the MWC?[a]

Word of mouth	57.9%
Social Media	18.8%
Newsletter	1.7%

Media (i.e., radio or TV)	31.8%
Other	12.8%

* This question only considers those that are current members of the MWC network (*n* = 431).

a Note that for this question, participants could select all that apply, meaning that the proportions do not add up to 100%.

For those who selected 'Other' in regard to how they heard about the MWC, respondents were asked to specify. Free-text responses (*n* = 58) fell into the following categories:

- MWC performance at an event or concert (*n* = 18; 4.0% of respondents);

- Local poster or flyer (*n* = 14; 3.0% of respondents);

- Friends or family in one of the choirs (*n* = 11; 2.0% of respondents);

- Part of the original choir or TV programme (*n* = 6; 1.0% of respondents);

- Googled or accessed information on the MWC's website (*n* = 6; 1.0% of respondents);

- Advert in a newspaper (*n* = 3; <1.0% of respondents).

Setting Up Choirs

Table 5 shows respondents' involvement in setting up a new choir in the MWC network. The majority had not been involved in setting up a choir (81.6%), and over half were not interested in taking on this role (57.0%). Of those who had been involved in setting up a choir (*n* = 36), just 8.3% had experienced no challenges or barriers to doing so, with respondents most commonly experiencing a lot of barriers and finding the experience 'Fairly challenging' (38.9%).

Table 5. Involvement in Setting up Choirs

	Proportion (%)
Have you been involved in setting up a new choir in the MWC network?	
Yes, I have helped set up a choir	7.0%
Yes, I have helped set up multiple choirs	0.9%
No, but I would be interested in helping to set up a choir	24.6%
No, I have no interest in helping to set up a choir	57.0%
Prefer not to say	10.5%
If you have been involved, how challenging did you find it?	
Not challenging at all (no barriers)	8.3%

A little bit challenging (some barriers, easy to overcome)	30.6%
Fairly challenging (quite a few barriers, able to overcome)	38.9%
Very challenging (a lot of barriers, difficult to overcome)	19.4%
Extremely challenging (a lot of barriers, not able to overcome)	2.8%

Figure 3 shows what support respondents felt was required to help individuals set up choirs. This suggests that most respondents felt that all suggestions were required. However, the most endorsed response was 'Information about the logistics of starting and sustaining a choir' (82.7%). 'Awareness of the option to set up a new choir' was the least endorsed option, chosen by just over half of respondents (58.5%), suggesting that many are already aware of this option.

Respondents who had set up a choir were asked if they would like to expand on their experience. For those who chose to respond to this (*n* = 14), the responses covered the following:

- Difficulties setting up choirs overseas or in remote locations;
- Difficulties with finances and financial processes;
- Difficulties finding a musical director;
- Lack of information or resources to advise on setting up a choir;
- Ease of setting up a choir with the CST's support.

Figure 3. Support Required to Set Up a New Choir in the MWC Network
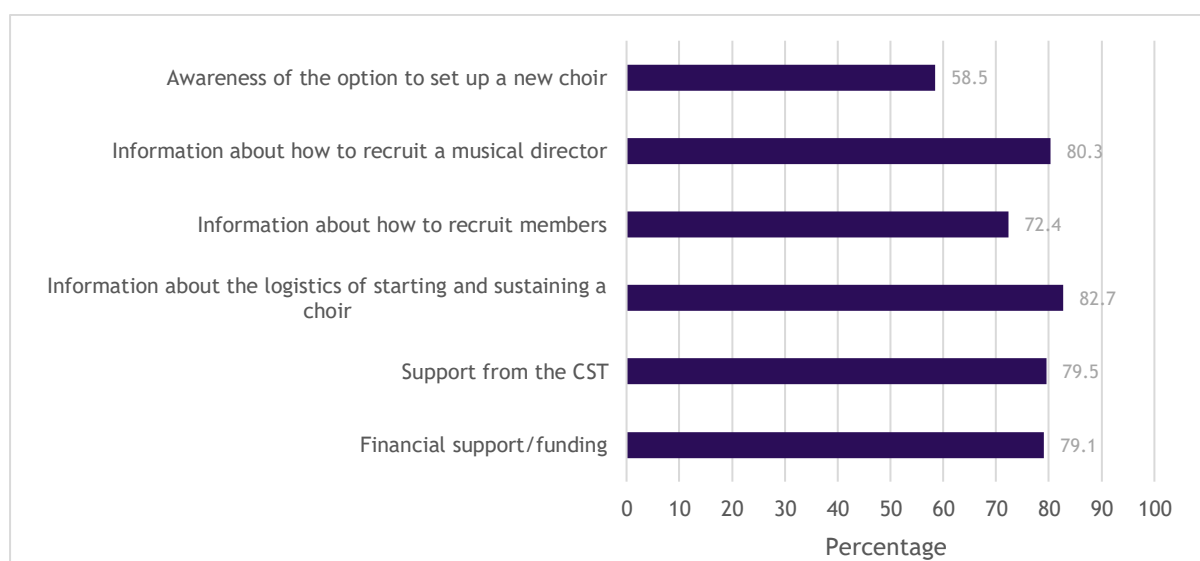
Note. For this question, participants could select all that apply, meaning that the proportions do not add up to 100%. Abbreviations: CST, Choirs Support Team.

Prior Musical Experience

Table 6 shows respondents' prior experience of being in a choir and prior musical experience. Most of the sample (81.1%) had prior experience of singing in a choir before joining the MWC network, most commonly as a child (44.4%). However, just over half (52.9%) had no formal musical training. For those that did have formal musical training (46.5%), this was most commonly five to nine years of training (41.1%).

Those who had formal musical training were asked to specify the instrument they were trained on, or whether this was voice training. Of those who responded to this question (*n* = 212), these responses fell into the categories outlined below (note that participants could specify musical training with multiple instruments), with 'Voice' being the most common response.

- Voice (*n* = 98);
- Keyboard instrument (*n* = 94);
- Woodwind instrument (*n* = 87);
- String instrument (*n* = 47);
- Brass instrument (*n* = 29);
- Percussion instrument (*n* = 3).

Two thirds of the sample (64.0%) had learned to read music, most commonly prior to joining the MWC network (54.8%). However, just over half of the sample (51.0%) were either 'Not confident at all' or 'Slightly confident' in reading music, compared to just over a third of the sample who were 'Fairly confident' or 'Completely confident' (36.7%).

Table 6. Prior Experience of Choirs and Music

	Proportion (%)
Prior to joining the MWC network, had you ever sung in a choir?	
Yes, as a child	44.4%
Yes, as an adult	5.1%
Yes, as a child and an adult	31.6%
No	18.6%
Prefer not to answer	0.2%
Prior to joining the MWC network, did you ever receive formal musical training?	
Yes, school lessons	14.8%
Yes, private lessons	9.9%

Yes, school and private lessons	21.8%
No	52.9%
Prefer not to answer	0.6%

If yes, for how many years?	
0-4 years	29.9%
5-9 years	41.1%
10-14 years	14.5%
15+ years	14.5%

Have you learned to read music?	
Yes, prior to joining the MWC network	54.8%
Yes, since joining the MWC network	9.2%
No	35.3%
Prefer not to say	0.6%

How confident are you in reading music?	
Not confident at all	26.4%
Slightly confident	24.2%
Somewhat confident	12.7%
Fairly confident	20.0%
Completely confident	16.7%

Access to Social Support

Table 7 shows respondents' distance from close friends and family. This suggests that the majority of participants have close family and friends in the same country, but requiring a fair amount of travel (51.9%). Almost a quarter reported having close friends and family that are local (23.7%); however, one in 10 respondents reported that close friends and family are very far away, requiring significant travel (9.6%).

Table 7. Distance From Close Friends and Family

My close family and friends are…	Proportion (%)
Local (i.e., walking distance or a short drive)	23.7%
Fairly nearby (i.e., travelling for under one hour)	21.8%
In the same country, but a fair distance (i.e., travelling for one to five hours)	51.9%
In the same or a nearby country, but quite far away (i.e., travelling for 6–10 hours or taking a short flight)	20.5%
Very far away or in an overseas country (i.e., travelling by long-haul flight)	9.6%

Note. For this question, participants could select all that apply, meaning that the proportions do not add up to 100%.

For those respondents who completed all three questions for the three-item Oslo Social Support Scale (*n* = 462), a mean score of 9.8 out of 14 was calculated. Scores on this scale that fall between 9 and 11 suggest moderate social support, suggesting that MWC members on average have moderate social support. This is comparable to the population norms developed for this measure (10.1–10.2).[39]

Figure 4 shows the proportion of respondents falling within each category of social support. Whilst respondents most commonly fell into the 'Moderate social support' category (44.3%), almost a third of the sample scored in the category of 'Poor social support' (29.9%).

Figure 4. Proportion of Respondents in Each Category of the Oslo Social Support Scale-3 (OSSS-3)
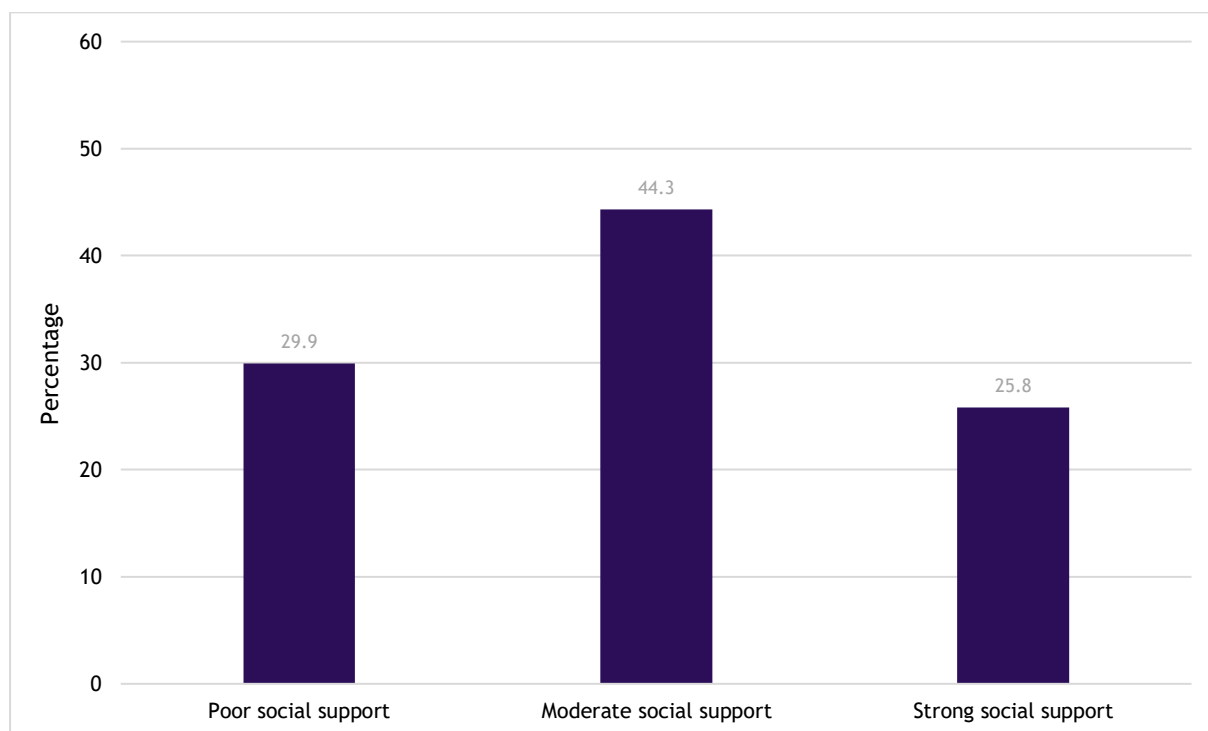
Reasons for Joining and Staying in a Choir

Figure 5 andFigure 6 illustrate respondents' ratings of how important reasons for joining and staying in choirs were for them. The most important reasons for joining a choir appear to be 'The music/singing itself', 'Social inclusion and community', and 'Relationships', with 78.5%, 75.4% and 76.6%, respectively, reporting that these are 'Very important' or 'Extremely important' reasons. The same reasons appear to be important in deciding to stay in a choir (80.8%, 77.1%, and 84.1%, respectively).

Overall, 'Relationships' was rated the most important reason for deciding to stay in a choir (84.1%). However, alternative reasons appear to increase in importance to a larger extent when respondents are deciding to stay in a choir. Indeed, the proportion of respondents selecting 'Very important' or 'Extremely important' increased by 9.3% for 'Improving and/or maintaining emotional wellbeing', by 10.0% for 'Improving and/or maintaining physical wellbeing', and by 12.0% for 'Personal development and fulfilment' when making the decision to stay in a choir, compared to joining a choir. This suggests that whilst these reasons may be less important in joining a choir, they may become more important over time.

Figure 5. Reasons for Joining a Choir
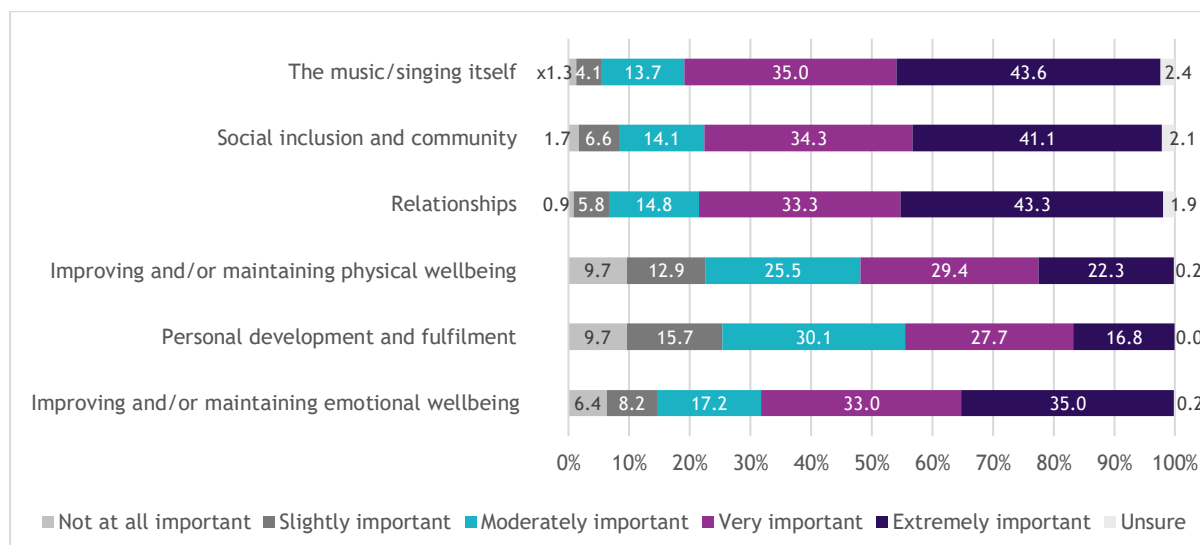
Figure 6. Reasons for Deciding to Stay in a Choir

	Not at all important	Slightly important	Moderately important	Very important	Extremely important	Unsure
The music/singing itself	1.3	3.4	13.1	30.3	50.5	1.3
Social inclusion and community	1.1	6	13.5	34.5	43.1	1.7
Relationships	0.4	4.1	9.9	32.1	52	1.5
Improving and/or maintaining physical wellbeing	5.8	10.5	21.4	34.9	26.8	0.6
Personal development and fulfilment	5.6	9.2	27.9	35.4	21.2	0.6
Improving and/or maintaining emotional wellbeing	2.4	6	13.9	32.3	45	0.4

Group Differences in the Reasons to Join and Stay in a Choir

Analysis focused primarily on differences within underrepresented groups, such as those in the lower age ranges, currently serving and veteran women, and women employed in the military community. We also explored differences by rank. To ensure brevity, only notable differences are reported.

Age group: For those in the youngest age band (18–29 years, an underrepresented group) 'Improving and/or maintaining emotional wellbeing' (81.1%), and 'Relationships' (81.1%) were notably more likely to be reported as 'Very important' or 'Extremely important' regarding joining a choir, compared to the overall respondent group (68.0% and 78.0%, respectively). Meanwhile, 'The music/singing itself' (56.3%), 'Improving and/or maintaining physical wellbeing' (37.5%), and 'Personal development and fulfilment' (31.3%) were less likely to be reported as important compared to the overall group (78.5%, 51.5%, and 44.5%, respectively). For this group, 'Relationships' and 'Improving and/or maintaining emotional wellbeing' remained the most important reasons for staying in a choir (81.3% for both), a pattern seen in the overall respondent group.

Military connection: Trends amongst the different membership categories were broadly in line with the overall group. However, differences were seen within current servicewomen (an underrepresented group) compared to the overall group. Current servicewomen were less likely to rate almost all reasons for joining a choir as 'Very important' or 'Extremely important' than the overall group (ranging from 1.5% to 20.8% less likely), except for 'Improving and/or maintaining emotional wellbeing' (69.2%, compared to 68.0%), which was the most highly rated reason for joining for this group. However, they were notably more likely to rate 'Improving and/or maintaining physical wellbeing' (76.9%) and 'Personal development and fulfilment' (69.2%) as 'Very important' or 'Extremely important' for deciding to stay in a choir than the overall group (61.7% and 56.6%, respectively).

Rank: In regard to joining a choir, the biggest difference in rating as 'Very important' or 'Extremely important' for rank was found in 'Personal development and fulfilment' (officers: 35.4%; other ranks: 50.0%) and 'Improving and/or maintaining physical wellbeing' (officers:

45.5%; other ranks: 55.6%), with these reasons rated more highly by those identifying with 'Other rank'. The same was found for deciding to stay in a choir, although the ratings for these reasons increased for both groups ('Personal development and fulfilment'—officers: 50.8%, other ranks: 61.5%; 'Improving and/or maintaining physical wellbeing'—officers: 56.4%, other ranks: 64.8%).

Reasons for Joining a Choir—Free-Text Analysis

Respondents were given the opportunity to expand on any aspects of the choirs that acted as important reasons for joining or deciding to stay in the MWC network. Free-text responses were coded and sorted into themes.

Several themes were established by coding respondents' free-text responses to being asked to expand on their reasons for joining a choir (n = 174).

1. Seeking shared experience:

   Respondents discussed searching for the company of others who were going through similar experiences to them (i.e., other women in the military community) and understood the military culture. Several respondents also mentioned wanting the company of *'like-minded people'*. For these respondents, the MWC provided them the opportunity to socialise with others in the military community who they felt understood them and what they might be going through.

   "I wanted to join a group that not only gave me a chance to access singing in a group, but also full of women who really understood what it is like to have a husband serve in a war zone. I needed that group understanding of what it is like to be a military wife!"

   "I wanted to find people who understood what I was going through and had things in common with me."

2. Loneliness and making new friends:

   For many respondents, joining the MWC network represented an opportunity to make new friends, particularly for those that had recently moved to a new area or posting. Several respondents also mentioned feelings of loneliness being associated with military life, especially for those that lived away from military bases. For these individuals, being part of the MWC network helped to tackle their loneliness.

   "I moved into a new city and knew nobody and then my partner deployed."

   "My circumstance changed completely when I went overseas with my husband due to his work. I went from working full time, having family, friends close by, to be very isolated while my husband was at work. Joining the choir was a godsend!"

3. Developing a sense of community and belonging:

In addition to seeking new friends, respondents discussed seeking a sense of belonging within a supportive and understanding community. In particular, and in line with the 'Shared experience' theme outlined above, the link to the military community was important to respondents as a factor in joining a military-connected choir.

"I wanted to feel a part of the military community and benefit from the support the choir offered."

"I had given up my career and moved away from friends and family when I got married, I was a bit lost and I wanted to feel part of something"

4. Identity and time for oneself:

Several respondents felt that being part of the MWC network allowed them time for themselves and a '*safe place*' to be themselves. Respondents highlighted the multiple other aspects of their identity that they felt they had to fulfil, such as being a mother or wife, with the MWC allowing them time to explore themselves and who they were outside of these roles. Several respondents also highlighted the fact that the MWC provided an opportunity for women to socialise that was not associated with children or living on a military base, and was outside of working hours.

"To maintain individuality, being part of choir is just mine, not defined by my husband and family."

"I needed something just for me—not because I was a mother or a wife. It was an escape into the world of music."

5. Enjoyment of music and singing:

Lastly, many respondents highlighted their love of music and singing as an important factor in joining the MWC network. It was also seen as an opportunity to build confidence in singing, and the fact that no auditions were required to join was seen as a key benefit enabling access for those that might lack confidence in singing.

"Have always been a musician, playing in brass bands, the choir was an avenue to continue my enjoyment of music and the social side of musical ensembles."

"I've always enjoyed singing but didn't ever feel good enough for a choir, or confident enough. I knew that the MWC didn't require auditions and a friend was going along, so I went with her to see if I would like it/be able to do it."

Reasons for Staying in a Choir—Free-Text Analysis

Themes were developed by coding respondents' free-text responses to being asked to expand on their reasons for staying in a choir (*n* = 123). Respondents continued to mention factors associated with the 'Shared experience', 'Sense of community', and 'Identity' themes discussed above. However, in deciding to stay in a choir, the following themes were also highlighted by respondents:

1. Friendships and support:

Respondents most commonly highlighted the friendships they had made and the support that they received through being part of the MWC network. Several respondents also referred to their fellow choir members as *'family'* that they could rely on to support them when going through difficult times.

"It feels like I'm part of another family that understand and appreciate the difficulties that come with being married to someone in the Armed Forces. I would never have made friends with these people if it wasn't for the choir."

"It surprised me how much everyone would become like my sisters having never had many close female friends in the past."

2. Wellbeing:

Respondents reported improvements in their wellbeing as a result of being in a choir, both due to the support they received from other members and the positive impact of music/singing on their emotional wellbeing.

"Often at times the choir has been my lifeline. If I'm feeling sad or low, I know my choir ladies will always be there for support. I always go away from rehearsal feeling happy and alive."

"The positive impact that choir has on my mental health cannot be overstated. Choir is my safe space and the time in the week where I feel calm, I can escape from my anxieties and finish the rehearsal feeling reenergised."

3. Supporting others

Respondents discussed *'paying it forward'* and providing support to younger or newer members of the choir, in light of the support they had received from being part of a choir.

"I make really sure that new members especially and also existing members feel welcome and valued. This goes for everyone in our choir, and other choirs we come into contact with. It's important."

"Enjoy sharing and support of each member."

4. Personal/musical development:

Development of musical ability was important to some members, as well as continued enjoyment of the singing itself.

"Personal encouragement from others and self-belief, I could improve my voice and sing on stage!"

"My singing ability has grown and grown under the guidance of an MD [musical director] with proper warm ups etc."

5. Choir culture:

Finally, whilst discussing factors that were important in deciding to stay in a choir, a number of respondents also mentioned difficulties they had experienced associated

with the culture of the choirs and the negative impact this can have. This was related to choirs being *'cliquey'* or *'toxic'*, not feeling welcomed or valued, and struggling to make friends. For some, this led them to consider leaving their choir.

"I have found some of the choir "politics" difficult. Very forceful characters detract from the experience."

"Unfortunately, the nature of the military communities is that they have a moving population and sometimes you get in people [that] sour the mix. Currently my choir is suffering from being an officers' wives club, and is getting toxic."

Satisfaction with Aspects of the Choirs

Figure 7 shows respondents' satisfaction with various aspects of the organisation of the choirs. Satisfaction appears to be high with most aspects of choir organisation, with no more than 7.0% 'Not at all satisfied' with any aspects of choir organisation. Aspects that respondents appear to be least satisfied with include centrally organised events (for which 14.8% were not at all satisfied or only slightly satisfied), core musical repertoire (genre and style; for which 8.8% were not at all satisfied or only slightly satisfied), and the CST (for which 8.8% were not at all satisfied or only slightly satisfied).

Group Differences in Satisfaction with Aspects of the Choirs

Analysis focused primarily on differences within underrepresented groups, such as those in the lower age ranges, women who were currently serving, and women employed in the military community. We also explored differences by rank. To ensure brevity, only notable differences are reported.

Age differences: Respondents in the youngest age group (18–29 years) similarly showed the most dissatisfaction with core musical repertoire (both genre and style, for which 18.8% were not at all satisfied or only slightly satisfied) and centrally organised events (for which 12.5% were not at all satisfied or only slightly satisfied). However, they also showed higher dissatisfaction for local musical repertoire (both genre and style, for which 12.5% were not at all satisfied or only slightly satisfied). For those in the 30–39-year age group, centrally organised events again showed the most dissatisfaction (for which 11.5% were not at all satisfied or only slightly satisfied). However, this was followed by rehearsal times, the CST, and the MWC's ethos (for all of which 10.3% were not at all satisfied or only slightly satisfied).

Military connection: Currently serving women showed high satisfaction with most aspects of the choirs. They showed the least satisfaction with core repertoire (both genre and style, for which 15.4% were not at all satisfied or only slightly satisfied), with no other aspects above 8.0%. Women employed in the military community were least satisfied with centrally organised events (23.5% not at all satisfied or only slightly satisfied), followed by the CST and membership subscriptions (for both of which 11.4% not at all satisfied or only slightly satisfied).

Rank: Both officers and other ranks showed the least satisfaction with centrally organised events (15.7% and 12.3%, respectively, were not at all satisfied or only slightly satisfied). However, for officers, this was followed by the CST (9.0% not at all satisfied or only slightly

satisfied), whereas for the other ranks, this was followed by core repertoire (both genre and style, for which 11.0% not at all satisfied or only slightly satisfied). No other aspects were above 8.0% 'Not at all satisfied' or 'Slightly satisfied' for either group.

Figure 7. Satisfaction with Aspects of Choir Organisation

Aspect	Not at all satisfied	Slightly satisfied	Moderately satisfied	Very satisfied	Completely satisfied	Unsure
The MWC's ethos of 'Sing, Share, Support'	2.0	3.3	9.1	32.8	47.8	5.00
The MWC's brand	2.2	4.2	17.8	41.2	30.7	3.9
Membership costs ('subs')	2.2	2.9	8.8	39.0	43.0	4.2
Events/performances (local)	1.8	2.9	14.9	37.0	38.6	4.7
Events/performances (centrally organised)	6.9	7.9	26.9	31.7	20.1	6.5
CST	2.5	6.3	16.1	35.4	27.0	12.7
Committee	2.0	3.5	12.1	33.7	45.4	3.3
Rehearsal time	1.3	2.0	10.9	39.4	44.4	2.0
Rehearsal location	1.7	3.1	12.6	31.4	49.0	2.2
Musical director	1.3	3.5	10.6	23.7	57.7	3.1
The musical repertoire (local)—genre and style	1.5	5.0	24.6	47.9	19.9	1.1
The musical repertoire (local)—level of difficulty	1.3	3.2	20.9	52.5	21.2	0.9
The musical repertoire (core)—genre and style	1.9	6.9	38.7	38.4	13.0	1.1
The musical repertoire (core)—level of difficulty	0.6	3.9	31.8	46.4	16.4	0.9

Satisfaction with Aspects of the Choirs—Free-Text Analysis

Themes were developed by coding respondents' free-text responses to being asked to expand on their satisfaction with the organisation of aspects of the choirs (*n* = 118). Respondents most commonly expanded on some of the issues highlighted as having the least levels of satisfaction above, including centrally organised events and core musical repertoire. Additionally, key themes related to difficulties with practical aspects of attending choir, such as the timing and location of choir rehearsals, concern around the inclusivity of the MWC's brand, feeling that the 'Support' aspect of the MWC's ethos was missing, and issues with committees and choir leadership.

1. Difficulties with centrally organised events:

Respondents reported concern that centrally organised events were not inclusive of choirs outside of southern regions and were very 'London-centric'. This led to feelings of being left out or overlooked for inclusion in performances and events, as well as difficulties in attending centrally organised events.

"Centrally organised events need to be evenly distributed—it's always the same faces/choirs you see at these events especially London events".

"It's always felt a little hit like the same choirs get the higher-profile performances as they are closer to where a lot of them are… This has always felt unfair to those choirs that don't have high-profile performances in their region. It leads to slumps in moral [sic] as they are consistently overlooked."

"Scottish choirs are ALWAYS disadvantaged in all central team events due to costs and time expected to travel."

Additionally, it was felt by some that the coordination of these events was sometimes poor, with not enough time to rehearse or organise attendance.

"Centralised events recently have been very poorly organised. Not releasing important information early enough for people to make important decisions about attending."

2. Dissatisfaction with core repertoire:

Respondents also reported dissatisfaction with the core repertoire, with some reporting variation or dissatisfaction in difficulty (i.e., too easy or too difficult) and others reporting that the music was not to their taste.

"I realise that it's difficult to choose core repertoire that is accessible for all choirs… The recent songs released by [the CST] have been disappointing in their complexity and some of the arrangements are a bit boring."

"The core repertoire is a mixed bag, some is beautiful, some is awful, some is easy and some much harder."

3. Practical difficulties with attending choir:

Respondents discussed difficulties with attending choir rehearsals, including the location and timing of sessions, and some linking this to a lack of childcare support precluding them from attending.

"Timings and locations have now made it impossible to be part of [the choir], so I am on a break so to speak from a … choir."

"Very satisfied with our choir and rehearsal space in general but the fact that we cannot bring children along means that I miss out a lot of the time as my husband is away a lot."

4. Lack of the 'support' aspect of the MWC's ethos:

A number of respondents reported experiencing a lack of support or feeling as though this aspect of the 'Sing, Share, Support' ethos was 'disappearing'. However, there was suggestion by one respondent that this aspect of the ethos was often misinterpreted as formal welfare support, rather than community support.

"There are certain personalities which have meant that 'Sing, Share, Support' is not evenly applied. Sing yes, Share a little, and Support (welfare), left by the wayside."

"Apparently we don't offer support so I'm unsure what the ethos actually means now sadly."

"It does feel we (the MWC as a whole) have lost our way slightly and we are about the brand and not the support anymore."

5. Inclusivity of the MWC's brand:

Some respondents felt that the MWC's brand could be 'off-putting' for some in joining, with the focus on military wives, highlighting a lack of acknowledgement of serving and veteran women and family members. Others also highlighted a lack of engagement from younger military wives and partners. One respondent also commented on the exclusion of members of the LGBTQ community that resulted from the use of terminology such as 'wives'.

"A possible block to people joining is the idea that the choirs are only for 'wives' and not other female family [members], serving female personnel etc."

"Sometimes I wonder if it is not enticing enough for young military wives when it can be full of a lot of older ladies!"

6. Issues with choir committees and leadership:

Respondents reported varying issues with choir committees and leadership, including feeling as though committees were very 'cliquey', that committee members held positions for too long, and a lack of communication from committees to members. Additionally, interpersonal difficulties with individual committee leaders were reported.

"I'd like to see more organisation and explanations from the … committee, e.g., any updates before we start to sing, a quick Q&A."

"There needs to be an appointed member on the committee, possibly the membership person, who is responsible for making immediate contact with a choir member if they have raised a concern about the committee's actions."

"I joined just before lockdown. The choir lead at this point was not interested in me, however the change of choir lead has really enriched my experience with choir."

Challenges of Being in a Choir

Figure 8 shows the proportion of respondents reporting different challenges associated with being in a choir. The most reported challenge was time constraints, related to both work (36.5%) and childcare/caring responsibilities (32.1%). One in five respondents (20.9%) also reported that their own musical ability was a challenge, and 13.5% reported that the musical repertoire was not to their taste. Additionally, 18.1% reported that negative group dynamics/social experiences were a challenge. The remaining challenges were reported by one in 10 participants or less.

Figure 8. Challenges of Being in a Choir
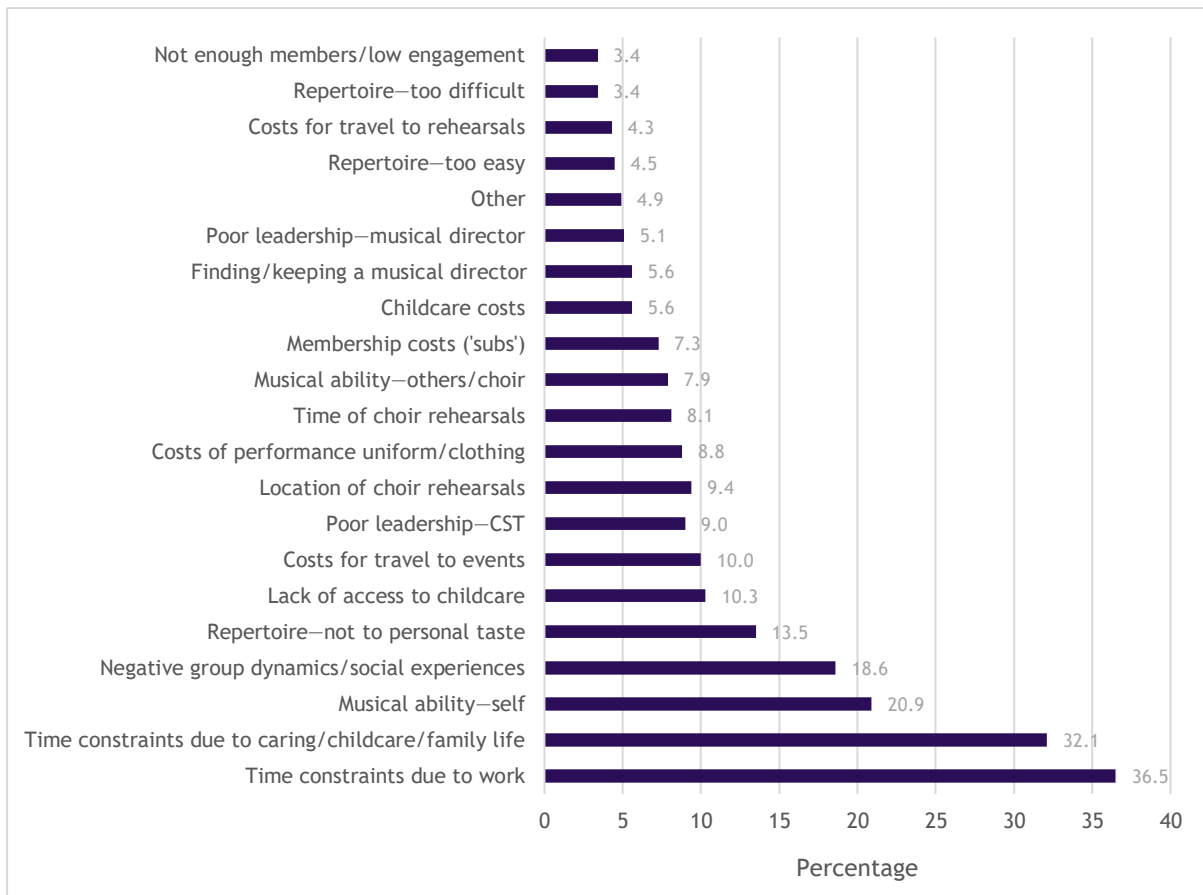
Note. For this question, participants could select all that apply, meaning that the proportions do not add up to 100%.

For respondents who chose 'Other' (*n* = 23) in response to this question, they were asked to specify why. The free-text responses highlighted multiple challenges, including:

- Personal health issues;

- Interpersonal issues between choir members;

- Lack of access to events (both lack of local events and access to centrally organised events);

- Lack of support from other choir members and committee members;

- Difficulties with choir organisation, e.g., vacant posts;

- Practical difficulties with attending rehearsals, e.g., location and mobility.

Group Differences in Challenges

Analysis focused primarily on differences within underrepresented groups, such as those in the lower age ranges, women who were currently serving, and women employed in the military community. We also explored differences by rank.

Age group: Similarly to the overall group, the most reported challenge in the youngest age group (18-29 years) was 'Time constraints due to work'. However, the proportion reporting this in this group was almost double that of the overall group (62.5% compared to 36.5%). The following most reported challenges in this group were the 'Costs of travel to rehearsals', 'Musical ability—self', and 'Not enough members/low engagement', all reported by 25.0% of respondents in this group. Interestingly, 30-39-year-olds most commonly reported 'Time constraints due to caring' as a challenge (53.8%), followed by 'Time constraints due to work' (40.0%) and 'Lack of access to childcare' (29.5%).

Military connection: Similarly to the overall group, women who were currently serving most commonly reported 'Time constraints due to work' as a challenge (38.5%). This was followed by 'Repertoire—not to personal taste' and 'Musical ability—self', both at 30.8%. However, women employed in the military community most commonly reported 'Time constraints due to caring' and 'Not enough members/low engagement' as challenges (31.4%), followed by 'Time constraints due to work' (28.6%).

Rank: Similarly to the overall group, those connected to both officers and other ranks (either as a wife or partner, serving member, veteran, or relative) most commonly reported 'Time constraints due to work' (40.0% and 35.3%, respectively) as a challenge, followed by 'Time constraints due to caring' (36.5% and 32.4%, respectively), although those connected to officers were more likely to report both than those with a connection to other ranks. However, whereas the next most commonly reported challenge for those connected to officers was 'Negative group dynamics/social experiences' (18.8%), it was 'Musical ability—self' for those connected to other ranks (23.1%). Notably, those connected to other ranks were more likely to report challenges associated with costs, i.e., 'Costs for travel to rehearsals', 'Costs for travel to events', 'Membership costs ('subs')', and 'Costs of performance uniform/clothing' than those connected to officers (other ranks ranged from 5% to 13.9%, compared to 1.2%-5.9% for officers on these challenges).

Choir Accessibility

Figure 9 shows respondents' distance from choir rehearsals. Most participants (68.3%) lived within nine miles of their choir rehearsals. This is reflected in the fact that just 9.4% of respondents reported that the location of choir rehearsals was a challenge (see Figure 8).

Figure 9. Distance From Choir Rehearsals
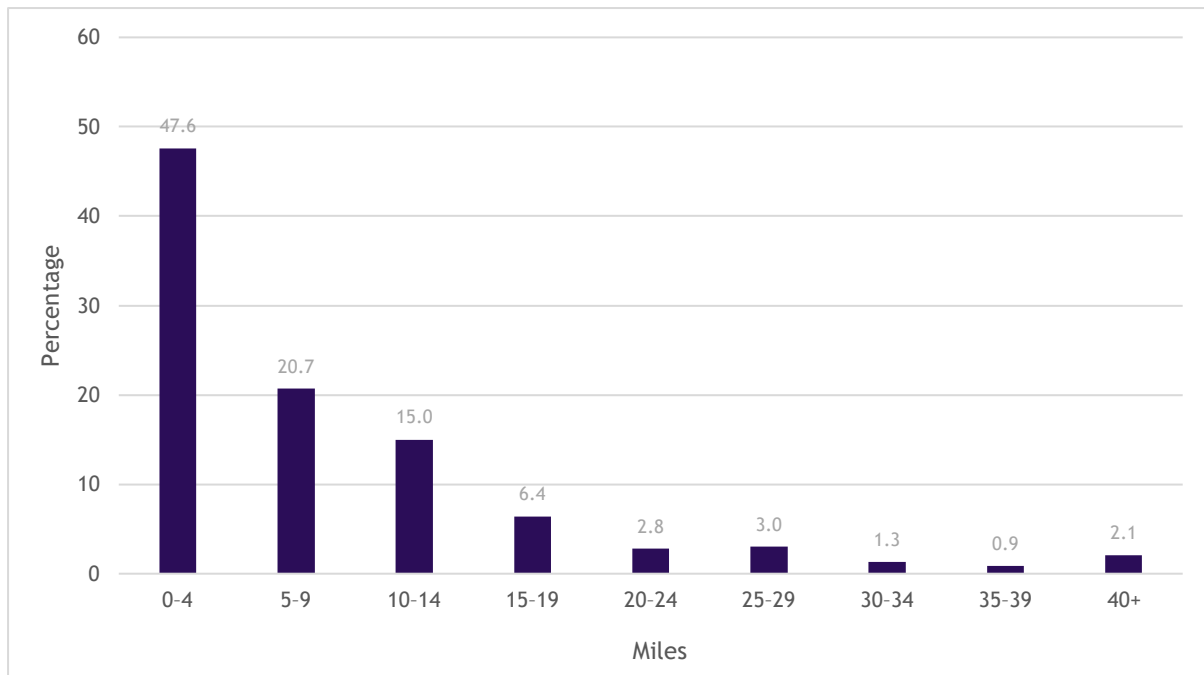
If respondents had experienced any accessibility issues, they were asked to expand on what accommodations were or could have been implemented to ensure that they had access to the choirs. For those who responded to this question (n = 65), the responses most commonly related to desired access to childcare provision or a lack of consideration by choirs in relation to their accessibility issues (often related to mobility and disability). In addition, several respondents highlighted issues with the accessibility of centrally organised events in particular.

1. Access to childcare provision:

Respondents most commonly highlighted the need for childcare support. This impacted members both financially, when paying out for childcare support, and in their ability to attend rehearsals and centrally organised events. This was particularly pertinent for those whose partner worked away from home during the week, and for those who had serving partners on deployment. Some reported that their local choir did have provision in place in the form of funding support for childcare or allowing children to be present at rehearsals.

"Childcare due to having 4 children, one with additional needs. The childcare options for events and rehearsals when my husband isn't available are non-existent, I've exhausted every option throughout the last 5 years."

"One choir ran a session during the day where children were welcome too. Another time my in-laws drove an hour each way each week to allow me to keep attending during a deployment. I have no idea how I'm going to get to choir next term if my husband is posted away."

2. <u>Considerations for disability and mobility:</u>

A number of respondents commented on the lack of accommodations made for reasons related to mobility or disability, which impacted their ability to attend choir or to have a positive experience. This included wheelchair access and the general accessibility and comfort (i.e., temperature and lighting) of venues, and a lack of adjustments for hidden disabilities (i.e., mental health conditions). Suggestions were also made for simple adjustments to support members' access to choirs, such as lift sharing, step-free access to venues, and larger font sizes in musical materials.

"I am a wheelchair user and the community centre where we rehearse does not have an accessible toilet, meaning if I need to use the loo, I have to go home."

"Making reasonable inclusive adjustments for members living with hidden disabilities (such as long COVID, autism or ADHD) would be useful. These people struggle to hold a folder, stand still for long periods, struggle to sing without music."

"Deafness and sometimes lack of understanding of choir lead of where best to stand for my own needs."

3. <u>Accessibility of centrally organised events:</u>

Some respondents highlighted difficulties with the accessibility of centrally organised events. This was due to the accessibility of venues, difficulties travelling the distances required, or disadvantages experienced by those with hidden disabilities.

"Sometimes find it hard having to explain need to be on the end of a row or able to get off a stage due to anxiety issues hence never take part in central events."

"Disability and lengthy travel are forgotten about by [the] CST when organising events."

Leaving the MWC Network

Figure 10 shows respondents who had and had not left the MWC network. Over two thirds of respondents had not left a choir (67.3%). For those that had left (*n* = 149), the majority (over three quarters; 78.5%) intended to join another choir (i.e., due to moving locations or taking a break). Figure 11 shows the reasons respondents endorsed for leaving. Over half of respondents that had left a choir had done so due to a new military posting or assignment (55.0%), which was by far the most common reason for leaving. However, one in five of those who had left a choir (22.0%) reported that this was due to negative group dynamics or social experiences, and 15.4% had left due to poor leadership by the committee.

Figure 10. Have You Left a Choir?

- ■ Yes, and did not intend to return
- ■ Yes, but intended to rejoin after taking a break
- ■ Yes, but intend to join another choir
- ■ No
- ■ Prefer not to answer

Figure 11. Reasons for Leaving a Choir

Repertoire—too difficult	0.7
Choir disbanded due to lack of a musical director	1.3
Costs—travel to events	1.3
Choir disbanded due to too few members/low engagement	2.0
Costs—childcare	2.0
Membership costs ('subs')	2.0
Musical ability—self	2.0
Costs—performance uniform/clothing	2.7
Costs—travel to rehearsals	2.7
Repertoire—not to personal taste	2.7
Lack of access to childcare	3.4
Repertoire—too easy	3.4
Poor leadership—CST	4.7
Time of choir rehearsals	4.7
Musical ability—others/choir	5.4
Lost interest	7.4
Location of choir rehearsals	8.1
Time constraints due to childcare/family life/other…	9.4
Poor leadership—musical director	10.1
Time constraints due to work	10.1
Poor leadership—committee	15.4
Negative group dynamics/social experiences	22.8
Military posting/assignment	55.0

Percentage

Note. For this question, participants could select all that apply, meaning that the proportions do not add up to 100%.

For respondents who chose 'Other' (*n* = 29) in response to this question, they were asked to specify why. The responses fell into the following categories:

- Moving house/military posting (46.0%);

- Organisation of the choirs, i.e., poor leadership and lack of members (19.0%);

- Personal circumstance, i.e., health and personal commitments (11.0%);

- Social/interpersonal reasons (12.0%);

- Core repertoire (4.0%);

- Location of rehearsals (4.0%);

- Lack of opportunities to perform (4.0%).

Why Others May or May Not Join the MWC Network

Figure 12 shows the reasons why respondents felt that eligible people may not join the MWC network. The most common reasons that respondents felt eligible people may not join a choir were due to time constraints associated with caring responsibilities (70.3%), followed closely by being unaware that they are eligible to join (69.0%). Over half of respondents also felt that time constraints due to work (54.9%) and musical ability/confidence (56.8%) might also stop people joining the MWC network.
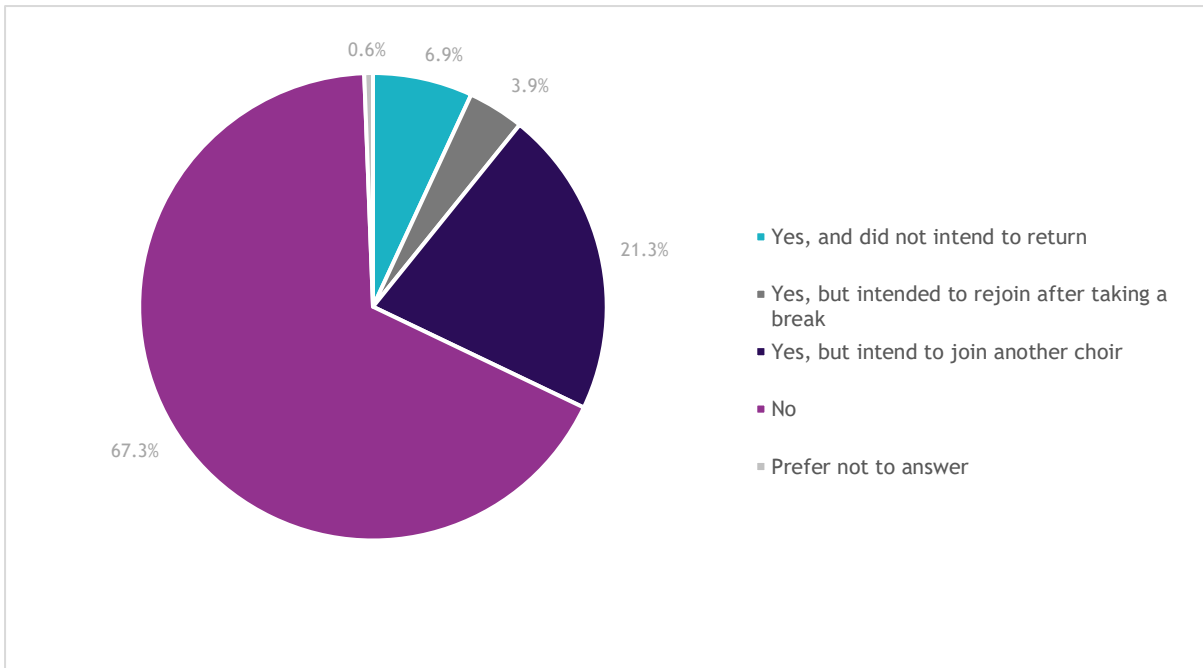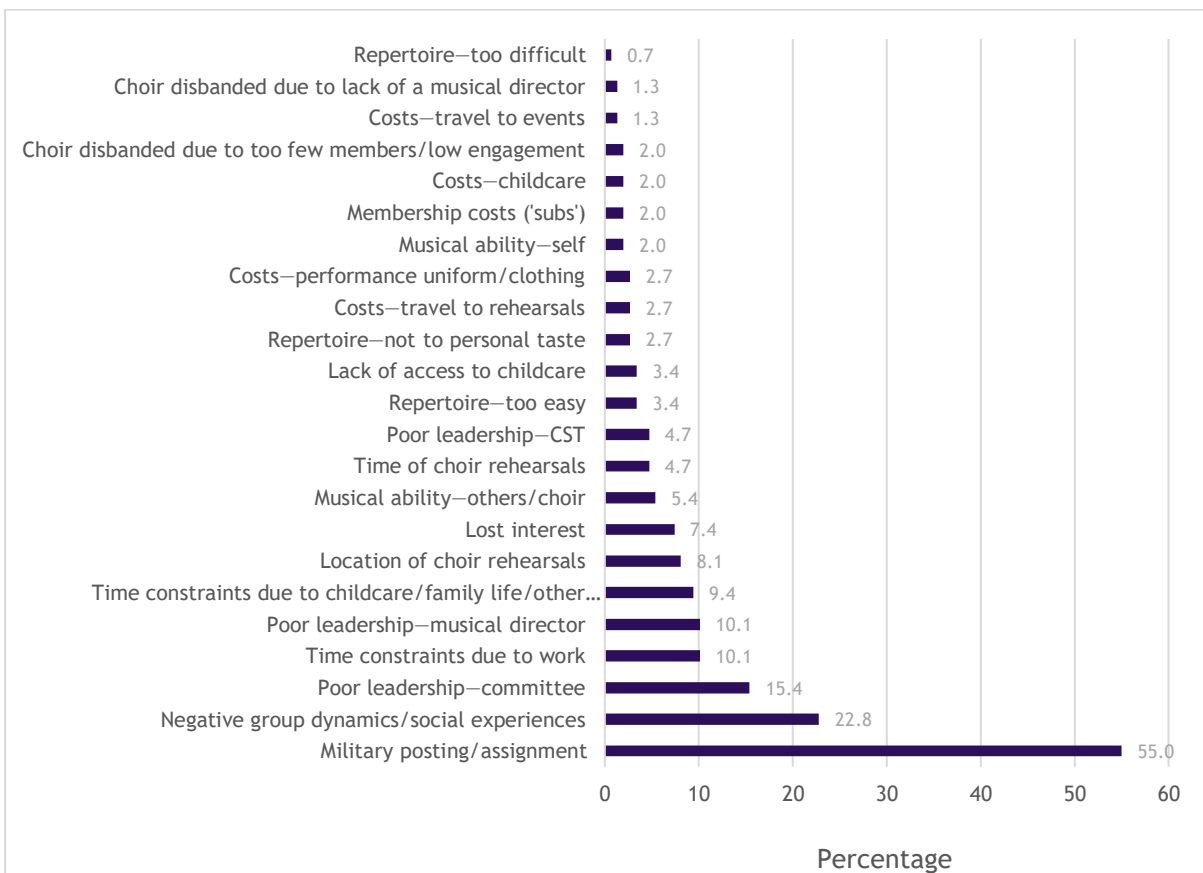
Figure 12. Reasons Why Eligible People May Not Join the MWC Network

Note. For this question, participants could select all that apply, meaning that the proportions do not add up to 100%.

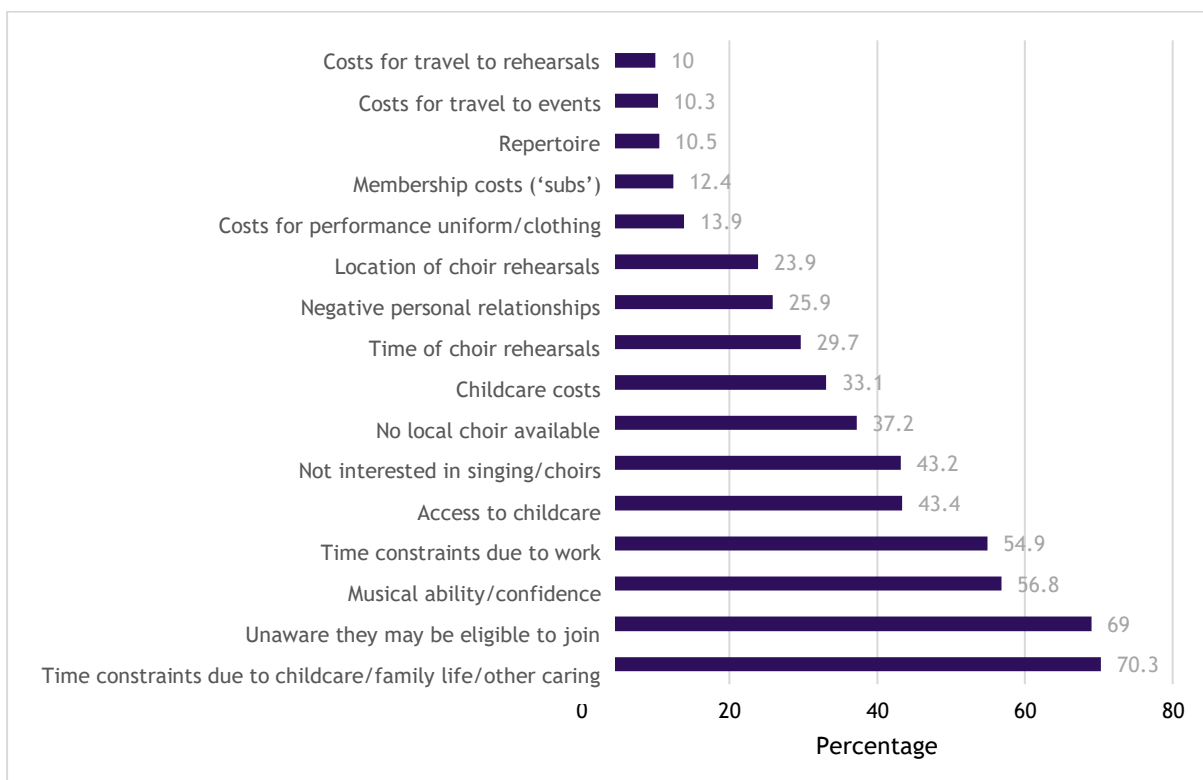For those who picked 'Other' in response to this question (*n* = 23), the responses fell into the following categories:

- Negative or preconceived perceptions of the MWC, i.e., they are 'cliquey', predominantly older age groups, or focus on religious music (52.0%);

- Limitations of the MWC's brand, i.e., perception that it is just for 'wives' (15.%);

- Difficulties with remote location or preference for remote attendance (10.0%);

- Waiting lists to join (10.0%);

- Belief that auditions are required to join (10.0%);

- Lack of diversity within choirs (5.0%).

Group Differences in Why Eligible Women May Not Join a Choir

Analysis focused primarily on differences within underrepresented groups, such as those in the lower age ranges, women who were currently serving, and women employed in the military community. We also explored differences by rank.

Age group: For the youngest age group (18–29 years), the most reported reason why eligible women may not join a choir was 'Time constraints due to work' (75.0%). This was followed by 'Time constraints due to childcare/family life/other caring responsibilities' (slightly lower than the overall group) and 'Musical ability/confidence' (notably higher than the overall group), both at 68.8%. When looking at respondents in the 30–39-year age group, the results were similar, with more weight given to caring and childcare difficulties. The most reported reason why eligible women may not join a choir for this group was 'Time constraints due to childcare/family life/other caring responsibilities' (79.9%), followed by 'Musical ability/confidence' (65.4%). 'Time constraints due to work' and 'Lack of access to childcare' were then both reported by 62.8%.

Military connection: For both serving women and women employed in the military community, the primary reason they felt eligible women may not join was 'Unaware that they might be eligible to join' (76.9% and 77.1%, respectively). For serving women, this was tied with 'Time constraints due to childcare/family life/other caring responsibilities' (76.9%), followed by 'Not interested in singing/choirs' (61.5%). Similarly, women employed in the military community also commonly reported 'Time constraints due to childcare/family life/other caring responsibilities' (71.4%), which was tied with 'Musical ability/confidence' (71.4%).

Rank: For those with a connection to officers, the most reported reason they felt eligible women may not join a choir was 'Time constraints due to childcare/family life/other caring responsibilities' (76.5%), followed by 'Musical ability/confidence' (60.0%) and 'Unaware that they might be eligible to join' (55.9%). In contrast, the most reported reason for those connected to other ranks was 'Unaware that they might be eligible to join' (76.1%), followed by 'Time constraints due to childcare/family life/other caring responsibilities' (68.1%) and 'Time constraints due to work' (56.7%).

Figure 13 shows what respondents felt would encourage others to join the MWC network. 'Emphasis on fun and socialising' was the most highly endorsed option (79.5%), followed closely by 'Awareness of eligibility' (71.6%), 'Emphasis on peer support, relationships, and community (70.1%), and 'Emphasis on the impact on emotional wellbeing' (69.0%).

Figure 13. What Would Encourage Others to Join the MWC Network?
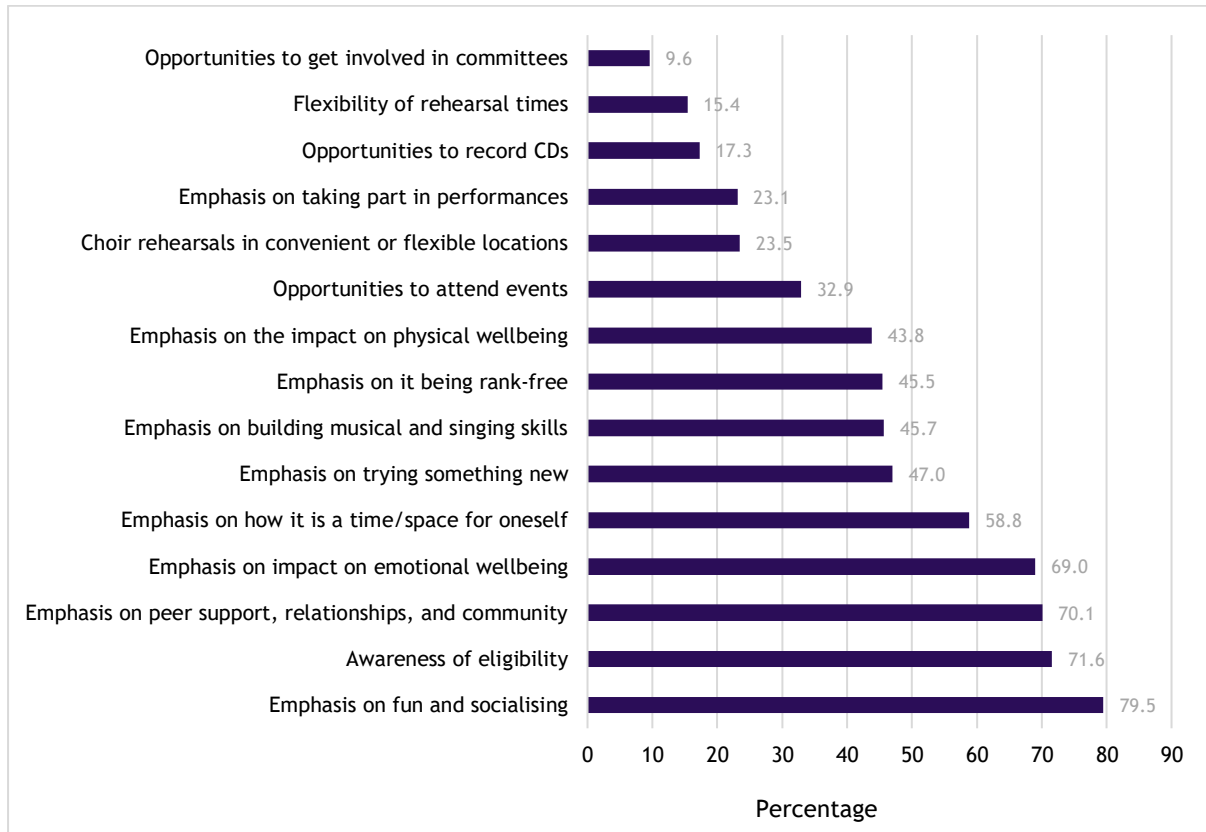
Note. For this question, participants could select all that apply, meaning that the proportions do not add up to 100%.

For those who picked 'Other' in response to this question (*n* = 9), the responses were varied, and included:

- Better access for remote locations and remote attendance options;
- Better representation from across ethnicities and ages;
- Better advertisement of the MWC;
- Childcare provision.

Group Differences in What Would Encourage Women to Join a Choir

Analysis focused primarily on differences within underrepresented groups, such as those in the lower age ranges, women who were currently serving, and women employed in the military community. We also explored differences by rank.

Age group: For the youngest age group (18–29 years), the most reported options were the same as the overall group, 'Emphasis on fun and socialising' (75.0%), followed by 'Awareness of eligibility' (68.8%) and 'Emphasis on peer support, relationships, and community' (68.8%). However, for 30–39-year-olds, the most reported option was 'Emphasis on peer support, relationships, and community', with over 10.0% more respondents choosing this option compared to the overall group (83.3% compared to 70.1%). This was followed by 'Emphasis on fun and socialising' (78.2%) and 'Emphasis on the impact on emotional wellbeing' (62.8%).

Military connection: Similar to the overall group, serving women most commonly reported 'Emphasis on fun and socialising' (76.9%) and 'Awareness of eligibility' (76.9%). However, in this group, this was followed by 'Emphasis on how it is a time/space for oneself' (69.2%). For women employed in the military community, the most reported option was 'Emphasis on the impact on emotional wellbeing' (82.9%), followed by the most common options for the overall group: 'Emphasis on fun and socialising' (80.0%), 'Awareness of eligibility' (74.3%), and 'Emphasis on peer support, relationships, and community (74.3%).

Rank: For those connected to both officers and other ranks, 'Emphasis on fun and socialising' was the most commonly endorsed option (80.0% and 81.1%, respectively), the same as that seen in the overall group. However, for those connected to officers, this was followed by 'Emphasis on peer support, relationships, and community' (72.4%) and 'Emphasis on the impact on emotional wellbeing' (65.3%). Meanwhile, for those connected to other ranks, 'Awareness of eligibility' (78.6%) was reported more often, followed by 'Emphasis on the impact on emotional wellbeing' (73.5%).

Summary of the Survey Results

- *Participant characteristics*: The survey sample was broadly representative of the MWC's membership, but appears to be older, less diverse, more educated, and have fewer caring responsibilities than the general UK military spouse population. Furthermore, most of the sample had prior experience of singing in a choir before joining the MWC network.

- *Involvement in the MWC network*: Respondents reported varied lengths of involvement in the MWC network. However, a quarter reported that they had been involved in a choir for 9–10 years, suggesting that one in four members have been involved since the establishment of the charity.

- *Reasons for joining and staying in a choir*: Word of mouth was the most common way in which members found out about and joined a choir. The most common reasons for joining and deciding to stay in a choir were to develop relationships and a sense of community/social inclusion, and for the enjoyment of music and singing. However, the improvement of members' emotional and physical wellbeing appears to become more important in deciding to stay in a choir.

- *Satisfaction with choir experience:* Most respondents were satisfied with their experience in the choirs. However, most dissatisfaction was seen for centrally organised events, which appears to be related to a perception of these as being London- and southern England-centric.

- *Challenges of being in a choir:* The most commonly reported challenges associated with being in a choir were time constraints due to work and caring responsibilities. However, one in five respondents also reported negative group dynamics and social experiences as challenges. Respondents felt that improved childcare provision and accommodations for those with disabilities and mobility issues could help overcome accessibility challenges.

- *Leaving a choir:* Two-thirds of respondents had not left a choir. Those who had left a choir most commonly did so due to moving locations due to postings. However, one in five of those who had left a choir reported that this was due to negative group dynamics and social experiences.

- *Why others may not join a choir:* The most common reasons that respondents felt that eligible women may not join a choir were due to time constraints and a lack of awareness of eligibility. It was felt that emphasising the fun and social side of the choirs was the most important way to encourage others to join, followed by raising awareness of the eligibility criteria.

- *Differences in underrepresented groups:* Women in the younger age groups (18–29 years) and currently serving women were more likely to report that improving or maintaining emotional and physical wellbeing was an important reason to join and stay in a choir. These groups were also almost twice as likely to report that time constraints due to work represented a challenge in being in a choir. For slightly older women, time constraints due to caring responsibilities became the most common challenge reported. Similarly, time constraints due to work and caring responsibilities were most commonly reported by younger women as reasons why others may not join a choir. Meanwhile, for currently serving women and women employed in the military community, awareness of eligibility was the most important reason that eligible women may not join a choir.

- *Difference by rank:* There was indication that for those whose military connection related to other ranks, as opposed to officers, improvements in wellbeing and personal fulfilment were more important in deciding to join and stay in a choir. Regarding the challenges associated with being in a choir, those in the 'Officers' category were more likely to report negative group dynamics and social experiences, whereas those in the 'Other rank' category were more likely to report challenges associated with the cost of being in a choir. Finally, those in the 'Other rank' category were more likely to feel that others may not join due to a lack of awareness of eligibility compared to those in the 'Officers' category.

Interview Results

Semi-structured interviews were carried out with current and previous MWC members to explore the following aspects of their choir membership in more depth:

- Reasons for joining the MWC network;
- Experiences in the MWC network and reasons for leaving;
- Previous musical experiences;
- Social experiences;
- Accessibility issues;
- Experiences of choir organisation.

Participant Characteristics

Most of the interviewees were current members of the MWC network; however, four were not currently members. Over a third were under the age of 40 years. The majority were residing in England; however, there was representation from MWC members in Cyprus, Scotland, and Wales. Over half had children under the age of 17 years, and one third reported having a long-standing illness or disability. All participants were White, and the majority identified as heterosexual. A comprehensive table outlining the sociodemographic characteristics of the sample can be found in Appendix 8.

Table 8 presents the interviewees' relationship to the military, which also indicates their eligibility categories for membership in the MWC network. The sample represents a range of military connections; however, no interviewees were currently serving UK Armed Forces personnel or sisters or daughters of currently serving UK Armed Forces personnel.

Table 8. Interviewees' Relationship to the Military

Relationship to the military	*n*	%
Wife, partner, fiancée, or co-habiting partner of a serving member of the UK Armed Forces (including Reservists)	14	73.7%
Wife, partner, fiancée, or co-habiting partner of a UK Armed Forces veteran (including Reservists)	2	10.5%
Widow of a UK Armed Forces veteran (including Reservists)	2	10.5%
Serving UK Armed Forces personnel (including Reservists)	0	0.0%
UK Armed Forces veteran (including Reservists)	5	26.3%
Mother of a serving member of the UK Armed Forces (including Reservists)	2	10.5%
Sister of a serving member of the UK Armed Forces (including Reservists)	0	0.0%

Daughter of a serving member of the UK Armed Forces (including Reservists)	0	0.0%
Woman employed within the military community	1	5.3%
Prefer not to answer/no answer	1	5.3%

Note. For this question, participants could select all that apply, meaning that the proportions do not add up to 100%.

Themes

The semi-structured interview transcriptions were analysed using reflexive thematic analysis,[16,17] which identified seven themes related to access, barriers, and facilitators to joining the MWC network.

Table 9 presents the themes and subthemes identified.

Table 9. Themes and Subthemes

Themes	Subthemes
Beyond a community choir: Meeting the unique needs of women in the military community	Shared experiences and understanding
	A mobile community
	Being far away from family and friends
A sense of self and community	Time to switch off
	A space to be oneself
	Being a part of something bigger
	Building friendships and a community
The singing itself	Enjoyment of singing
	Developing as a singer
	Singing empowering repertoire
	Going beyond expectations
Getting through the door	Lack of awareness of the MWC
	The importance of word of mouth
	Anxiety when joining a new group
	Being audition-free encourages joining
The choirs are not for me	Just 'military wives'? Eligibility assumptions
	A lack of younger members

	Representation
	Infiltrating the clique
	Physical accessibility
	Too demanding musically
Life gets in the way: Inevitable barriers?	Time constraints due to childcare
	Time constraints due to work
	The need to be flexible
	Personality clashes
Protecting the MWC's values	Access to support from leadership
	Leadership's role in managing personality clashes
	The CST having oversight of individual choirs

The themes and subthemes are described in detail below, using illustrative quotes from the participants.

Beyond a Community Choir: Meeting the Unique Needs of Women in the Military Community

The importance of the MWC being specifically for women in the military community was acknowledged throughout the interviews, and it was clear that a standard open community choir could not meet the needs of the members in the same way. The boundaries of the eligibility criteria for joining the MWC network helps to preserve the choirs for women with a military connection, and having this shared military background was identified as an important factor by almost all participants. A crucial feature of this theme is that the challenges that come about because of the unique nature of having a military life should not be a barrier to joining or maintaining membership. Three subthemes were identified regarding the unique needs of women with a military connection: (1) Shared experiences and understanding; (2) a mobile community; (3) being far away from friends and family.

Shared Experiences and Understanding

By bringing together a group of women who all have military experiences, members can understand and support one another through the challenging aspects of military life. Participants also spoke about how choir is a place where they do not need to explain the difficulties in their personal lives, because the women in the choirs intuitively understand what each other are going through. This shared understanding was important for not having to explain logistical disruptions, as well as for emotional wellbeing:

> "Being part of something for you as military wife is so important, or as a veteran's wife or a current serving [member], or as someone with a child in the military. Having somebody who gets it. They know what you're talking

about … We'll get through this together. We'll stand and we'll laugh, or we'll stand there and cry."

In particularly, some participants discussed how older members can provide support to younger members:

"One of the younger [members] … messaged me to say, 'How did you cope with [your husband working away a lot]?' … We should be building those networks, so us older ones can support some of the younger … [members] coming through who are scared about their partner being posted or going away."

A few interviewees also mentioned the strong connection they have with others who specifically share the same military connection:

"You still get the camaraderie, but mainly from people who are actually in the Forces or were in the Forces themselves … At first I was so welcomed into the choir by the other people who were ex-Forces [like me]."

"You feel closer to those that are actually military wives and the dynamics of the choir changes when there are less military wives … because people that have not experienced being a military wife and having their husband go away constantly … they haven't experienced saying goodbye to your husband in a car park on camp and not knowing if he's gonna come back."

This highlights the wide range of experiences across the military and within the eligibility criteria of the MWC's membership, as well as the importance of ensuring the inclusion of a range of members within each choir. Otherwise, members may feel disconnected from the group. Some interviewees mentioned the importance of the broad eligibility criteria to ensure numbers to maintain choirs, but that if the eligibility becomes too broad, the shared understanding could be lost among individuals with 'vague' military connections but little direct experience of military life.

A Mobile Community

The network of choirs across military bases means that members can easily switch choirs when moving postings, and this is further facilitated by the core repertoire. Many interviewees identified that moving to a new posting was the reason they had left a choir, which highlights how this is a typical experience for women in the military community. Constantly moving can be difficult emotionally, but the consistency within the network of choirs has helped to ease this challenge:

"You have to put so much effort in every time you move postings. It's completely draining, it's emotionally draining. It's so hard to just find friends all over and start all over again … Choir's great because actually that's a constant thing that I can go to and it's gonna be similar."

"[When I move], I know for the most part that some of those ladies I will probably see again, either through big centrally organised events or through another posting … so it's sad [to leave], but not as sad as it could be if there wasn't that ability to connect again throughout your time in the network."

> *"The choir for me is the first thing I look for when I know I've been posted because it just provides that support."*

The use of the MWC's core repertoire across choirs is an important aspect in facilitating transition to a new choir. When members have already learned and sung this repertoire with a previous choir, it makes turning up to a new choir that much easier:

> *"I describe it as a blanket … it's comfort. And sometimes when you arrive … we can turn up and not know anyone. So at least I know if I walk into choir, I've got my core songs. I know I can sing something."*

However, there seems to be some inconsistency in the use of the MWC's core repertoire, which can be upsetting when moving to a new choir and not knowing the music as well as established members:

> *"They did a lot of songs of their own … that's why I think I got a little bit upset at the start because I was like, they're not singing the Military Wives Choirs songs. And because of that, I don't know the music … I'm trying to tag along but I can't tag along because I really don't know what I'm singing … There wasn't a good enough chunk of Military Wives Choirs music … that was the real positive that I was looking forward to, joining the choir and being … able to [slot in]."*

Overall, the MWC as a network of choirs seems to be a very valuable resource for members once they join a choir. Interviewees not only spoke about the consistency within their choir's repertoire or as a general activity, but also as a group they can connect to, before even moving, to find out information about their new posting and the area. The MWC therefore seems to make moving to new postings an easier transition for women in the military community.

Being Far Away from Family and Friends

Women in the military community can often live far away from their family and friends, which can impact feelings of social connection, as well as access to the practical support that is often fulfilled by close family members, such as childcare. For women whose family is far away, the choirs can act as a support network similar to a family unit:

> *"It's really lovely that I have that kind of network here because … I'm not from here. So, none of my family is here. I don't have those kinds of family relationships other than … my husband and son … So, it's nice to kind of have a sisterhood, so to speak, when my actual blood family are 3000 miles [away]."*

However, being far away from family can also be a barrier to access, particularly due to childcare arrangements when partners are deployed:

> *"Getting childcare, it is hard work. When you move so often, you don't get to know people. You don't have those connections. If I wasn't military, I would be within 20 minutes' drive probably of my parents … so they could babysit. But because I'm in the military, I live here. I don't really know anybody very well to babysit or to look after the kids."*

Interviewees identified that this issue is of particular concern, because when a member's partner is deployed, this is often the time when they need the support of the choirs the most:

> "Sometimes when the [younger members'] husbands were away, when they really needed the choir, would be the time when they could least have it because of their children."

> "As soon as [my partner] went to go on exercise, well, that's me cut out of the choir and it started to make me feel a little bit like, hang on here a second … the choir is so I can have the social support but I can't go now because [my partner] is away and I've got the kids and I can't make it work … It just felt as soon as things went a bit difficult for you in the military, you had to cut yourself off from the choir … It kind of feels like when you're in those situations, actually the choir isn't there to support you any longer. That's when you get cut off, which kind of feels the direct opposite of what it's supposed to be."

All participants discussed the value of building friendships and connections by being involved in the MWC network, which may protect against the negative impact on wellbeing of family and friends being far away. However, it is important to support members in accessing the choirs during times when it might be most difficult for them, especially as they may not have usual support systems nearby.

A Sense of Self and Community

One of the motivations for members joining and remaining in a choir was how being involved contributes to an increased sense of self and community. Many interviewees spoke about the choirs as being a space where they can be themselves, to switch off, and to lift their mood. Expanding beyond benefits as an individual, all interviewees discussed the importance of the choirs in building social connections, friendships, and a community, which many perceived as being a key factor for membership beyond the singing or performances. For many, the choir rehearsals had become an important part of their weekly routines. Four subthemes were identified that related to a sense of self and community: (1) Time to switch off; (2) a space to be oneself; (3) being a part of something bigger; (4) building friendships and a community.

Time to Switch Off

The choir rehearsals were discussed by interviewees as time for them to switch off, taking their minds away from the challenges of their everyday lives. This is facilitated through both engaging in the music, as well as being able to socialise with other members. One participant spoke about how she experienced this at her first choir rehearsal, emphasising how socialising with others within the choir can help to take your mind off things:

> "We were going through a really tricky time at home … and I'd been really struggling, so to be somewhere laughing my head off, just having a great time, was a really nice break away from normality."

Others spoke about how the music itself provided an escape from external challenges, through having to concentrate on the music:

> "What I really loved is learning new music and having to concentrate on learning my line … When you're focusing and concentrating, it means you've got to switch off … you can't think about everything else going on because you're concentrating on what you're doing. And I'd say that was the best bit for me, because it was a good switch off."

Furthermore, sometimes members find validation through singing songs that resonate with them:

> "You know, we sang 'Fix You' one night at choir, and I sobbed and sobbed and sobbed. I was going through lots and lots of stuff, and I just cried … I felt so much better afterwards. It was so cathartic."

This time to switch off, through socialising and singing together, seems to help lift members' moods and increase their emotional wellbeing. Members identified the choir rehearsals being an important part of their week because it provides this time to switch off from their everyday life.

A Space to be Oneself

The choirs are a space where members feel that they can come as they are and be themselves. Members also come to choir as something specifically for themselves in their week when life might be busy with work or childcare responsibilities. This is an important factor for members' self-identity as part of the military community, where identity can often be connected to rank and role (or being a partner of a serving member). Being a space where members can be themselves is enabled by the MWC being a 'rank-free' organisation, which allows members to be themselves without the underlying awareness of theirs or their partners' rank that is often embedded in military culture. Most members did find the MWC to be rank-free, and this was a valued aspect of the organisation:

> "Rank just isn't mentioned … We're just people together."

> "I'm going to the choir. It's irrelevant what my husband's job is. Obviously, I'm there because he's in the military. But other than that, that's not all there is to me."

The rank-free nature of the choirs allows members to be themselves at rehearsals, not connected to their partner, family member, or rank, which perhaps is less likely in general military life or at military events:

> "It's not about what our husbands do, and I think that's the thing that maybe I find still within the military community. It can be so focused on the fact that we're there because our husbands are there."

> "When I joined the choir … it was the first place where I really felt like I was me … that is one of my things at choir is … I'm not mum, I'm not a dependent. I'm not his wife. Rank doesn't matter. You're asked what part you're singing."

This is also tied to having a shared understanding of military life, which means that choir rehearsals can be a space where members are around people who 'get it' and therefore are easily understood without having to explain what might be happening in their lives:

> *"It's just nice to be in a space where you are all going through the same thing, but you're not talking about what your husbands are doing all the time … I think because my family is not military, they've always got a ton of questions. So, it's quite nice to be surrounded by people who understand it and don't need to talk about it all the time. And I can just kind of be me for a little while."*

The choirs seem to allow members to leave the various roles and responsibilities they may have at the door, and just come to something for themselves once a week:

> *"I just love it. It's like it's my me space. It's my safe haven. They get me there. I can go and be silly. I can go and cry. I can go and laugh. I can go and sing. I can sit at the back with a cup of coffee if that's what I need to do."*

Having a space where military women can be themselves, and have time for themselves, seems to be an important aspect of the weekly choir rehearsals, allowing members to strongly feel their own self-identity, disconnected from rank, roles, or their partners or family members.

Being a Part of Something Bigger

In addition to the benefits of weekly singing for themselves, members also raised a wide range of aspects about the positive feelings of being a part of something bigger: From being able to support other members in their own local choir to being a part of the larger international MWC network. The positive brand identity of the MWC was mentioned, and how being a member of such an esteemed organisation feels significant:

> *"People have heard of the Military Wives Choirs. When you say you're part of that, it actually means a bit of something. And I liked being part of that bigger network."*

This relates to being involved in the centrally organised events, where choirs come together to perform for a big event:

> *"We met with so many other choirs and just talking to other women I'd never met before … And it was like, do you know what, this was what choir is for."*

Interviewees, however, also identified that local events, in members' local communities, are just as important as the larger centrally organised events, and emphasised the importance of ensuring that national events do not overshadow the core values at a local level:

> *"Sometimes I think [the centrally organised events] can be too much … it's taking away the power that you get from that local-level singing … It is about getting to know and be supported by that local group."*

Interviewees highlighted that being able to be a part of choir, contribute to their choir through taking on roles, and support other members has given them a strong sense of purpose:

> *"It's changed my whole life, really … I was in a really lonely place. And now my every single day … is filled with choir … It's become more than just going to choir every week and sing. It's become … a purpose to make sure that other people find that support."*

> *"It was another chance for me to get out and do something on a posting where I had no ability to find work or do anything else really, other than be in the house."*

Members also discussed how being a member of a choir meant supporting each other:

> *"You're all singing your part ... everybody's needed … I used to love that and hearing people's voices and knowing that they were there."*

> *"It's kind of the whole working together thing, and you know if one of us is struggling with a song and someone else isn't, we'll help each other."*

This sense of being a part of something bigger seems to be motivating and valuable for choir members. The unique nature of the MWC network of choirs, as well as the MWC's brand, contributes to this feeling.

Building Friendships and a Community

The MWC provides members opportunities to build friendships and a community. All interviewees mentioned how the choirs lead to increased social connections and friendships, and how this provides social support and camaraderie in and out of rehearsals. Moving due to military postings can remove members from their usual social support and it can be difficult to make new connections. Members discussed this as a motivation for joining a choir in the first place, and how the singing itself may be less important as a factor when deciding to join:

> *"I first joined when … my husband was working 24/7 … I was spending a lot of the day on my own … I was sitting in front of a laptop, working from home, and my only conversation was with the dogs. So actually getting out and joining the choir was an opportunity for me to get to know people, and it was quite a life saver at that point."*

> *"I joined to basically ... adult company, adult company and not feeling quite so alone. Can't sing for toffee."*

> *"It wasn't particularly the draw of choir or singing … It was more of the draw of other people … of friends … That's why I went."*

The choirs also bring together a group of people who might not have otherwise ever met, particularly members from different services or branches of the military, and facilitate getting to know people on a deeper level:

"Chances are, if it wasn't for choir, none of us would ever have met … I would have had no reason to ever meet them … So I think it's really nice to have different people in your life that wouldn't necessarily be in your life … We're surrounded by different people, different experiences. I think that's really, really important."

"I was meeting people I wouldn't normally meet, but at a different level, you know, people come out of their shell when they're singing."

These friendships and connections provide invaluable support when things get difficult:

"I know if it wasn't for the relationships and the friends and the support the choir had given me, I'm not sure I would be here. I went [through] a very, very dark time and it … got me through … week to week."

"I've sometimes gone [to choir] really stressed really. And some of the ladies are just great at even knowing what to say … knowing when to check if you're alright."

Being part of the MWC network also increases members' feeling of connection to the larger military community, and members highlighted the importance of being in their local community to support daily life:

"You go to a choir and suddenly you just open your doors to say like maybe 20 people who are in the same predicament as you, living in the same area and they're around. So that when you then walk around the estate, you bump into somebody you know, you've got a few connections already."

One member further highlighted the need for a broad range of members with different experiences, being within a members' local community, after moving to a new choir made up of mostly veterans' partners and the rehearsals taking place a fair distance away from the base:

"The choir doesn't feel like any part of the military community … it seems very removed. In that sense, so it doesn't feel like I'm missing out by not going because I know I'm not missing out on anything that would help support me in that way."

The choirs seem to fulfil a non-musical purpose in building social connections and a community; this is enabled through singing, as a common shared interest, but the singing and performing can be secondary to the social aspects of the choirs. Many choirs also offer socials outside of their choir rehearsals, which provides further support for wellbeing and friendship.

The Singing Itself

In addition to the non-musical outcomes that contribute to a sense of self and community, the singing itself is a motivating factor for involvement in the MWC network. Many members discussed their joy of singing, especially with others, and particularly singing repertoire that they feel is empowering. Interviewees also discussed developing musical skills and going beyond their own and others' expectations in terms of their musical abilities and

accomplishments. Through the MWC, members have been able to be involved in once-in-a-lifetime opportunities, including significant performances and recordings. Being able to improve in singing ability and perform together contributes to members feeling empowered and proud of what they have accomplished. There are four subthemes that relate to the singing itself: (1) Enjoyment of singing; (2) developing as a singer; (3) singing empowering repertoire; (4) going beyond expectations.

Enjoyment of Singing

The enjoyable experience of singing, particularly within a group, was shared by many interviewees. This joy of singing, for many members, is one of the reasons they are part of a choir:

> "That was one of the reasons I wanted to do it. Because … I've never been a confident singer, but I love singing."

For those with previous experiences of being in choirs or ensembles, the choirs were a way for them to engage in music again:

> "When I went to university that all fell back by the wayside cause I was busy and I thought this is just like a great opportunity, and not just to socialise but also to sing again."

For others, joining the MWC network was the first time they had realised how much joy they would gain from singing:

> "It just gave me so much joy. And I hadn't realised that singing would give me that joy."

In particularly, the joy of singing as a group and singing in harmony with others was emphasised:

> "I could always sing in the shower at home and do singing, but getting to do it on stage with a group of ladies … I would never really get the chance to do that otherwise."

Enjoying the experience of singing may be felt regardless of singing the repertoire perfectly or participating in large performances; it can be felt through just singing together in the rehearsal space each week. However, developing musical skills, becoming a better singer, aiming to sing challenging pieces, and performing also contributes to a sense of accomplishment, which is discussed further in the following subtheme.

Developing as a Singer

The choirs being audition-free and open to women with a wide range of musical abilities are important aspects of the MWC. Many members discussed how the choirs do feel welcoming to a range of singing abilities. Nevertheless, almost all members acknowledged that the choirs contribute to members becoming better singers and developing musical skills:

"The fact that I can now read music, the fact that I'm a far better singer now, it's all because of the Military Wives Choirs, not because of anything that went before it …. You learn so much from doing it."

Being in a choir can also contribute to members' confidence in singing:

"I was terrified because I was so scared … It did actually take me a long time to sing slightly louder … [realising] I could sing was actually quite nice. It was quite uplifting."

Learning more challenging pieces can also be an enjoyable part of being in a choir. Working on more challenging songs means that members are really focusing within rehearsals, and there is a sense of accomplishment when they can sing and perform them:

"I just thought you'd just sit around and have a sing. I didn't realise there'd be anything more to it. So I think I expected a lot less than what it is, but … the challenge makes it fun … I've done a few concerts now and I love it. I never thought I'd be in concerts and stuff. I absolutely love going to them. So I think that's a sense of achievement."

However, it is also important to ensure that the challenge and pressure of performing do not take away from the underlying values of the MWC:

"[In some choirs] there's too much pressure and I don't think it's what it's about, to be honest … but when you're singing for some of these big events … that ethos, you can't quite fulfil it so much."

Interviewees commented on the benefit of having access to teaching tracks, which enables those who cannot read music to practice effectively outside of rehearsals. Participants also commented on the importance of their musical director's support and teaching ability to help members develop as singers.

Singing Empowering Repertoire

The importance of repertoire came across throughout the interviews. Many members felt that the repertoire has become better over the years, and that providing a variety of music is key to meeting everyone's preferences. Interviewees identified the importance of singing empowering songs together as a group. Variety also allows for a mix of fun, with upbeat music alongside some of the songs that recognise the military life and community:

"The core repertoire … has really improved over the last few years. There's a lot more variety, there's a lot less of the traditional 'military wives' songs, which they have their place, they have their place at Remembrance services and big concerts and things. But it's nice to sing stuff that's a bit more upbeat and a bit more fun and a bit... some of it's more challenging, some of it's easier, but there's kind of something for everyone."

This is particularly highlighted regarding possible distressing emotional responses some members might have to songs about the more difficult aspects of military life:

"It's important that we celebrate and commemorate the military … [but] when life is a bit tough, and you sing and it brings back those memories … that is tough … There will be many times at choir where somebody is singing and is just crying while they sing."

"The core repertoire I think, personally, having lost my husband relatively recently, is quite difficult emotionally … I think they're meant to be supportive and uplifting for … military wives. But I would regard it as quite difficult for a military wife."

Interviewees also spoke about how they identify more with repertoire that articulates how they feel being a part of a choir itself:

"I think over the last sort of 5-6 years, it's gone from being quite 'Woe is me, my husbands in Afghanistan, everything is terrible' to a little bit more about 'Look at my friends, they're awesome.' And look where we are and look how amazing we are. And I think that's a really big thing … We're not a Military Wives Choir because we're sad, we're a Military Wives Choir because we've got friends and because we're doing the best we can, and that's really important."

"The songs that are the most powerful are the songs that speak about us … the most powerful are the ones that that we have some sort of connection to. They don't have to all be ... cause there is that thing of 'everything is sad'. It's not. And the songs that talk about friendship, I think as much as 'oh my husband's gone off to war' … they're about friendship and strength and looking after each other and having a bit of a laugh."

Some of the older, more traditional 'military wives' music can feel old-fashioned or cheesy, as well as reinforce old stereotypes of being a military wife:

"Songs that we do, some of them are great. Some of them are a bit old-fashioned or a bit cheesy. Particularly the ones that are commissioned specifically for the [MWC], they do tend to heap on the cheese, and I do worry that might put some people off. If they see a performance and they think, well it was really well sung but the songs were a bit cheesy."

"The core repertoire can be a bit … it almost implies that we all stand on the doorstep, with a handkerchief in one hand and a child on the other hip and sit there in floods of tears until our other halves come back. It has got better recently."

Although members recognise that it is impossible to meet everyone's taste in every piece, they appreciated being able to have input into the repertoire they sing:

"We've been really pleased, actually, that the [CST] asked the ladies what they wanted … rather than just going 'these are Military Wives [Choirs] songs' … We definitely get the feeling that with the [CST], things are a bit more collaborative now than they used to be. In that the choirs have a bit more input."

Going Beyond Expectations

The MWC provides opportunities for members to go above and beyond their own expectations of themselves as individuals and a group, as well as going beyond others' expectations of the choirs. Members spoke about how the choirs went beyond their initial expectations of joining their local choir:

> *"I didn't expect it to become as big a thing for me as it did. I thought it would just be a nice once a week hobby, and now … I've gotten to do and see so many amazing things … It was much bigger than I ever expected it would be."*

> *"I think I was expecting that it would be just like a good old sing-a-long in a room … I didn't think it'd be serious as it was now. Now I love that … some of the songs we sing are really challenging."*

Some interviewees spoke about how the choirs provided them with increased confidence, both in singing and outside of singing:

> *"My confidence has gone from there to there and I do credit a lot of that with being part of the choir."*

> *"The confidence it is giving me as a person and also, things that I never thought I could do."*

Others spoke about how audiences at MWC performances are often surprised by the ability of the choirs:

> *"We've done some fantastic performances and … people are absolutely amazed that most of you have no musical [background] or any qualifications."*

Being able to perform in concerts creates a sense of real achievement for members, especially those who never expected to be able to perform. The MWC's platform also provides members opportunities to be involved in highly public media appearances, performances at important events, and recordings:

> *"The recording studio in Abbey Road with Gary Barlow twittering it my ear thinking, 'Is this is really actually happening? Is this real?' And then at Buckingham Palace, when we stood there looking across … at thousands of people. So it was one of those … things that you will always remember. If it wasn't for the [MWC] starting in the first place, it would never have happened to us."*

> *"I've done amazing things that you never would have done and I really loved being part of those … You don't get that in any normal choir and you know that makes it feel a bit special and a bit different."*

Overall, the singing itself was highlighted as an important motivating factor, providing an enjoyable activity and opportunities for personal development and empowerment. It is important to recognise that this theme also suggests that the singing itself contributes to building social connectedness and a community, emphasised by the participants discussing the joy of singing together and being empowered through singing as a group of women.

Getting Through the Door

For potential members, just getting to the first choir rehearsal can be a challenge. This can be due to a lack of awareness of the MWC, or anxieties around joining a new group, especially if potential members are not confident in their singing ability. Ensuring that the MWC network is known throughout the military community is an important aspect; however, it was also emphasised that hearing about the MWC through a friend helped to ease some of the anxiety of joining a choir, particularly if new members had at least one person they know at their first rehearsal. Many members shared that their first rehearsal was very welcoming and friendly, yet interviewees also shared that the joining process can differ from choir to choir, which may lead to some choirs feeling less welcoming than others. Four subthemes related to barriers or facilitators to 'getting through the door' were identified: (1) Lack of awareness of the MWC; (2) importance of word of mouth; (3) anxiety when joining a new group; (4) being audition-free encourages joining.

Lack of Awareness of the MWC

Although the MWC does seem to have a well-known reputation and brand, there is a sense that for some potential recruits, there is a lack of awareness of the organisation and that there may be a choir they can join. Some members spoke about how there is an assumption that there are only a few choirs, not a whole network:

> "I'll be perfectly honest with you … until four years ago when I joined, I didn't know it existed in Scotland. I thought there were only two Military Wives Choirs. The two that had been developed by Gareth Malone … To this day I speak to people, and they say, 'Oh what do you do now?' and I say, 'I sing in the Military Wives Choirs' and they sort of look at me blankly and say, 'How do you do that?'"

Interviewees spoke about the importance of local-level promotion of the choirs, and that currently serving members or partners, who move a lot, may be harder to recruit than those living permanently in the local area due to being less aware of their local choir:

> "If the Military Wives Choirs do a huge campaign about who can join, unless we share it locally on the ground here, then no one in our criteria is gonna know. Because unless they're already following or on the lookout for what [the] Military Wives Choirs … are doing, then they're not gonna see it. I really think it comes down to a local level. Are your choirs shouting about this loud enough?"

> "It's difficult in the choir where I've just left [because] the advertising wasn't particularly great [and] because they hadn't got the active serving members as part of their choir. There wasn't really much of a buzz about it … It's easy if you live somewhere to go along … but it's harder to recruit the people who are in and out."

Others mentioned that there could be more support from the military on a larger level to make sure those who are eligible are aware the choirs exist:

"I do think the military itself could do a little bit more. I suppose it's still new to them, isn't it? I know it's 10 years, but to the military, that's a minor spot."

"I wonder if when they're recruits … perhaps it could be something as part of their training that they're introduced to the Military Wives Choirs. And even if it doesn't persuade them to join now, maybe in five- or six-years' time … they might … have a go."

Support from the military community may help to recruit members further through word of mouth, as most members acknowledged that they joined a choir after hearing about it from a friend or their serving partner, which is discussed further in the next subtheme.

The Importance of Word of Mouth

Hearing about the choirs through word of mouth was identified by many interviewees as the reason they went along to their first choir rehearsal. Many participants joined because a friend or connection invited them to come along to a rehearsal, encouraging them to give it a try:

"[I joined choir] through a friend. They said, 'Why don't you come along?' and I said, 'Well, I'm not musically gifted. I can't read music.' And they said, 'No, just come along, just come along and see.'"

"I wouldn't have gone if someone hadn't literally said to me, 'Come on, we're going, now get in the car."

Without this connection and support to join, many members may not consider joining or have the confidence to join. One member indicated that they also heard negative things about the choirs, but some encouragement from another connection meant she ended up giving it a go anyway:

"I got a phone call from another girl saying, 'I'm thinking of going this choir thing. Do you want to come?' [but I'd] just heard really bad things about it. [She said], 'No, come on. I'm getting in the car now and I don't want to walk in on my own. I'll come and pick you up.' … And I literally walked in and was like, yeah, this is me. I love this. And that was it."

Reaching out through social media is also an important facilitator to encourage others to join:

"I think it was basically, there was a post [that] went out on our home residents' page saying, 'I'm driving to choir tonight … if you want to come with me' and I thought, yeah, I do. I don't even care what it's like. I need to get out of this house."

Another member spoke about how she found out about the first rehearsal through her partner, which highlights the importance of ensuring the larger military community is aware of and supports the MWC:

"I think my husband only told me that day that he'd heard. So we hadn't even heard that it was forming … that hadn't reached me because I'm not in that military wife connection."

Having a connection, whether a friend or family member or just someone reaching out through social media, makes it easier to consider joining in the first place and overcome some of the initial difficulties in joining a choir for the first time. This seems to be particularly important to overcome some of the anxieties that individuals might feel when joining a new group.

Anxiety When Joining a New Group

Turning up to a new group, especially without support from a friend or connection, can often be daunting and intimidating:

"I think the first actual rehearsal was quite intimidating … I don't think anyone was unkind, I don't think there was any real reason … I think the first few rehearsals felt a little bit like that."

This anxiety may be increased even further when turning up to a choir for the first time, where individuals may lack confidence in their singing ability or feel exposed having to sing in front of strangers:

"People's own self-awareness of their musical ability, or lack thereof, is probably a very big bar to ... taking that step into a room and exposing yourself in front of a group of what is initially strangers."

Even those who have previous experience in the MWC network may feel intimidated joining a new choir and a new group of women:

"When you're going to a new choir, it is quite daunting walking in. And it's just easier to say [you're] not gonna do it anymore."

Many interviewees spoke about how going with someone else who is new, or knowing someone who is already a member, helps to ease this anxiety of joining a new group of women:

"I think if it hadn't been for her [making] a point of being like, 'Come on, just come along and try.' And then knowing her there—I didn't know her well, but I knew her face, at least—it wasn't quite as scary going in."

Most interviewees spoke about how welcoming they were made to feel during their first rehearsal, even if they had been worried about going:

"I was petrified. I thought, I'm this old lady meeting all these much younger ladies. But they made me feel so welcome that it didn't matter. Age just didn't matter."

"Welcoming … doesn't even describe it enough. The ladies that were there, they just made me feel instantly like, 'Come and join in, you don't need to be embarrassed, you don't need to be shy.' … Instantly you just strike up relationships."

It is important that this welcoming and friendly environment is maintained weekly and new members are supported during their first rehearsals:

> "Someone being there at the start of a session who welcomes people, old and new, and checks that if somebody's new … just somebody to take them and [help them] meet some other girls and get a cup of tea and things like that. That first link is really important and sometimes that doesn't happen."

Furthermore, making the choirs as easy as possible to join helps to make a more welcoming atmosphere that puts potential members at ease when they join a choir:

> "I certainly wouldn't have auditioned … or if you had to fill in a form or anything like that. I think what's really nice is that you can just go along … let's get you in and let's get you singing, and then we'll do the paperwork."

When there are barriers, this can lead to potential members feeling unwelcomed and may put them off joining. This was raised by interviewees, who spoke about members having to prove eligibility to join a choir:

> "When I emailed to sign up, the … first thing was, 'Can you get your husband to e-mail to prove that you're a military wife?' … I've been a member of two Military Wives Choirs … I'm living on a patch, I've just moved here and … you're not gonna give me any rehearsal details … until [you've] had an e-mail from my husband. Really bad start when you've just moved somewhere and you're just trying to break in."

Easing potential members' anxiety about joining a group is an important element in them making the first step of joining their first rehearsal. Seemingly small barriers such as paperwork can be a reason potential members do not join, but also if members do not feel welcomed from the start, then they may not feel comfortable continuing in a choir.

Being Audition-Free Encourages Joining

The MWC's ethos of being welcoming to women with a range of musical abilities is enforced through the choirs being audition-free to join, which encourages women to come along and give it a try despite their own confidence in their singing or musical ability. This also, as discussed above, removes a potential barrier to people deciding to join and give it a try. Many interviewees shared that they would not have joined a choir if they had to take part in an audition:

> "I would never have gone for an audition. I could be musically talented, but I don't think I'd … go and do that … obviously that's a big thing about the Military Wives Choirs, is that it's got to be open arms."

A handful of participants said that the audition would not have put them off, but they appreciated the fact that other members would be more likely to join without auditions and they like the ethos of the choirs being open to everyone:

> "I have past musical experience, [being audition-free] didn't … make me feel any better, but it did make me feel that it would have been a more open and welcome environment to other members coming in, so that they wouldn't

feel that it was an exclusive club, which is not something that I was really looking for.”

Many members confirmed that the choirs do feel accepting to women with a range of musical abilities. No interviewees suggested auditions should be implemented, recognising the importance of the choirs being open to those with little or no musical background.

The Choirs Are Not For Me

This theme considers the current membership make-up of the MWC and why certain women may feel like the choirs are not 'for' them. Some women in the military community may not realise they are eligible due to the name of the organisation, which may lead women to think it is just for 'wives'. Other women may not identify with the brand due to the name or the image associated with the organisation. Some potential members may not feel that they are welcome due to issues around rank and cliques within some military communities. The physical accessibility of rehearsal and performance spaces was also raised. Furthermore, some members raised concerns about the challenge of some of the music, time pressures in learning all the music, and the pressures of performing. Six subthemes were identified that related to members feeling that 'the choirs are not for me': (1) Just 'military wives'? Eligibility assumptions; (2) a lack of younger members; (3) representation; (4) infiltrating the clique; (5) physical accessibility; (6) too demanding musically.

Just 'Military Wives'? Eligibility Assumptions

The name of the 'Military Wives Choirs' may mean that women who have a different connection to the military do not realise they are eligible or identify with the brand. Wives commented that they would not have realised they were eligible if they were not a wife or may have been hesitant to join if they were not married to someone serving in the military:

> *"It was obvious that it was for me, and it was obvious that I was eligible. I think if, for example, [my husband] and I had moved in together before we got married, I might have had a bit [of] hesitation over what it says. It's for wives, and if we're not married … then maybe I'm not allowed to join."*

> *"I wouldn't have [joined if I wasn't a wife] and I think that a big part of that is the fact that we're called [the] Military Wives Choirs."*

Others commented that they wouldn't have known they were eligible without a friend or family member encouraging them to join:

> *"It was my daughter who said I'm eligible. It never occurred to me that I was, to be quite honest."*

There is also the potential that members without the same experiences of being a military partner may feel that it would not be appropriate for them to join a space that is assumed to be for this specific community:

> *"[If I wasn't a wife], I personally don't think that [it] would have felt right to go and join the wives."*

"I almost feel a bit of a fraud because my husband's not actually done deployments. He's done the odd trips away, the training, the working away. He's done bits of that, but we've never actually done proper deployments."

Some members commented on the lack of serving women joining the choirs, and how this was potentially due to the branding:

"I would love to see more serving women, whether that's civil servants, reservists … I don't know if maybe the brand itself doesn't necessarily appeal quite so much [to serving women], or there isn't a realisation that maybe as a serving person yourself, you could join, and it would be something for you."

"I did genuinely think [in] the beginning it was military wives because the choir that was on TV, the choir that got to number one, they were military wives … so I think that … still is a really common misconception of who can join."

Members with experience of trying to recruit new members spoke about how difficult it is to overcome this assumption when explaining the eligibility:

"[It's] very, very hard … We're still finding people go, 'Oh I didn't know we could join.' But I don't know how you can get over that in the end … We can keep saying it … but unless you actually change the name, I don't think you're gonna get around it."

One member spoke about how the brand is unhelpful for awareness of eligibility, whilst recognising that there is a strong history and connection to the name:

"In some respects, the name is not that helpful if we want to increase [recruitment] but on the other hand, it is a strong [name] that people recognise."

Although there is a strong tradition of the current brand, making the name more inclusive may make a broader range of women feel welcome to join and that the choirs are also for them.

A Lack of Younger Members

Membership seems to skew to older members, where young members seem less likely to get involved. Some members comment on this missing younger demographic and how it is important to have younger women also join the choirs:

"I do think one of the negatives about the choir that I'm currently in, is that we haven't got a broad age range … It feels there's far more older people there and I count myself in that … I think we're losing that younger element, which is a shame … We need some of that young blood to come through."

Interviewees commented on the value of having both older and younger members, particularly where older members can support the younger women:

"The choir is made up of quite a lot of older veterans' wives, who are very experienced in [how] things around here work and this community kind of

operates. So it's been really helpful getting advice from them about day-to-day things."

However, if the membership is not broad and encompassing, younger potential members may not feel that the choirs are giving them the opportunity to make connections with people in the same situation as themselves:

"There were hardly any … serving wives or partners … So I'm not meeting anyone here who I live with, which was the whole point … I'm not making any friends. With all due respect, [they were] very friendly people, but not people [in the same situation] … This choir was just a community choir."

The membership may be 'ageing' due to how many women got involved when the first choirs started, as there was so much hype and buzz about the MWC due to the recordings and media coverage at that time. Just under half of the interviewees spoke about the 'Gareth Malone era' of the choirs and the hype that surrounded the choirs at this time, which led to them becoming involved:

"We celebrated our 10th birthday at the beginning of this year. So, there are ladies who have been in the choir since it's very inception … Of course there was a lot of interest at that stage."

"A couple of my friends had really enjoyed the Gareth Malone show. And they're like, 'Oh, we're doing this thing.' And so then I had to figure out what it was all about."

Younger members may now feel that the choirs are old-fashioned and may not identify with the brand:

"To be honest, it has this reputation or image of being a bit kitschy and a little bit old-fashioned … [so I did think] maybe this isn't my kind of thing, but I thought I would go on and try it anyway."

However, they may also not have the time or confidence to be involved in a choir:

"The things attached to that point in your life might mean that it's harder for you to [have the time to go to rehearsals]. You might not be as confident to go out and do something new because you're still quite young … Most of the ladies I know, are that middle age range, where our kids might be a bit older …. so we've got the time."

There is also the possibility that at some choirs, the underlying military culture of rank may mean younger women do not feel welcomed:

"[At one choir] there's a heavy weighting of officers … they say it's not very welcoming to the junior ranks' other halves. That might be simply that they feel a little bit intimidated, whereas if they actually went along, [they'd] probably find it was fine. It's probably a little bit of both."

Representation

Similarly to younger women or serving women potentially not identifying with the brand, some members raised that they do not feel that certain groups are represented within the current branding or publicity of the MWC:

> "I don't think we connect very well [to some communities] … so what are we doing to make them aware that they can come. It was something that I picked up on when I was in … a very international choir. How do [we] make people feel that they can come, even if English isn't their first language? … Getting into those wider communities … that are part of the British military … I still think we're quite White middle-class."

One interviewee also raised that having a brand that is focused on being a wife, when some women may not identify as a wife, as well as gender, when some individuals may not identify with the gender they were assigned at birth, may put people off joining:

> "[Being] the Military 'Wives' Choirs, I don't know if that puts people off because it's becoming more and more accepted that you don't actually need to be married to be in service family accommodation … And not necessarily everybody identifies as being female … Does it perhaps need a rebrand? … Changing up the tradition of it … would it improve uptake?"

Infiltrating the Clique

Cliques form within some choirs, which can cause negative dynamics between members but also make members feel unwelcomed. Although having a 'core' membership of women who live in the area permanently can help maintain a choir over several years, the cliques between these permanent members can sometimes feel difficult to break into for members who are moving through on a posting:

> "[In the choir] there was a group of older women, they weren't old but older, who settled in the area who … used the choir as their choir, ran things in their way … That can be quite difficult, because … if you're one of the people who is coming through in a more transient way, you kind of feel like it's not really your choir. It's their choir, and you're just a guest."

> "I did kind of feel like it's a little bit of a clique. They don't mean to, they're very, very lovely, but I was thinking, there's a group of people in that choir who always go off and do social things together … It can be quite difficult when they're all there all the time. They all know each other very well. You come in as a newcomer, you're always a bit of a newcomer."

These cliques may also come about because of the unique nature of being in the military, where such cliques and communities may form based on how the military functions:

> "It's a strange community, the military community … It can be obviously cliquey between the serving personnel, between the spouses and then you've got constant outsiders coming in and going and … Everyone's trying to find their spot."

This underlying culture in the military may contribute to potential members thinking that the choirs would be cliquey. However, there were a couple of interviewees that commented that the choirs were not as cliquey as they had expected them to be:

> "My concern going in, was that it might be very cliquey … You may get sort of little cliques of enlisted soldiers' wives and officers' wives, which is one of the usual dynamics that everyone hates and always causes problems. But that doesn't really exist in our choir."

The experience of cliques within the choirs seems to vary between choirs, but may be particularly prevalent in choirs with a core membership of permanent members. The assumption that there will be cliques may also be a reason some women do not consider joining in the first place.

Physical Accessibility

Physical accessibility to rehearsal and performance spaces can be a barrier due to physical disabilities, but also due to travel limitations. It was raised that physical accessibility for people with disabilities can be easily ignored if you do not have a member that currently has physical disabilities:

> "If there isn't disabled people involved, they're not gonna notice where things are inaccessible … [but a disabled person could join or a current member could] become disabled."

Therefore, it is important to ensure that choir rehearsal spaces and any booked performances are accessible. Additionally, there is a need for flexibility for members with health conditions attending rehearsals:

> "Due to health issues, there could be a couple of weeks where I just can't physically have the energy to go … and then you'll get, 'Well, if you want to do this concert, you need to turn up.' … In the end you are discriminating against me because of my health … it's not the fact that I don't want to."

This member acknowledged that they now have hybrid rehearsals, which allows for members to attend online when they struggle to physically go in person. Other members commented that accommodations had been made for them during performances, such as being able to sit if they cannot stand for long periods of time:

> "I just sat in front of the other two altos who could make it and we sang like that. So they didn't mind about my mobility problems."

Furthermore, although there is a recognition of the value of having rehearsals on camp, this also creates a barrier to those joining who do not live nearly or have easy access:

> "[If] somebody had said, I'll give you a lift, I'd have been there by now … This is the reason why I'm not joining … because I don't wanna drive to those camps. I've never been to them before. I don't know where the guard room is, I don't know what the process is. That's my barrier to go, that's literally my barrier."

"We are struggling to get [base passes for] people who don't have [them] … The hoops you have to jump through to try and get someone who say is a veteran's wife who doesn't have access to camp … is just so much faff … it's pushing us to maybe consider moving off camp, which we don't want to do, cause camp is free and it's nice to have that visibility."

Where to hold rehearsals may come down to current membership in a choir, but this may also impact who joins in the future. For example, serving members who live on camp may be less likely to join a choir who rehearses externally, whereas it may be more difficult for those living outside of camp to join rehearsals on camp.

Too Demanding Musically

A lack of confidence in singing ability can be a barrier to getting involved in the MWC network in the first place, but the demands of challenging repertoire and performance pressures can also lead to members finding it challenging to maintain their membership in a choir. Firstly, more than half of the interviewees spoke about either having a lack of confidence in their singing, or this being the main reason given to them by others for not wanting to join:

"[I didn't have any musical experience] apart from being in school. And then I was told I was tone deaf. So that's [why it] actually took me a lot to join … I was still convinced I was tone deaf."

Although the choirs are open to people with no musical training or experiences, some interviewees shared that it could be quite intimidating to join, especially if it feels like the choirs have an emphasis on performing or have a lot of members with strong music skills:

"The premise is supposed to be that you don't need to read music, you don't need to have any musical ability even but if you don't have any background in music at all, coming to something that is very musical, could be quite intimidating in itself."

"When I arrived at the choir, the very first question I was asked was, 'Can you read music?' … They've all got musical experience; they can read [music], they go to other choirs, they can play an instrument etcetera … Somebody said to me, it doesn't matter if you don't read music, it's fine. But I felt like, in that particular choir, [there] was a massive emphasis on it."

Once joining, members can find it challenging to keep up with learning all of the music and the pressure of performing:

"[My previous] choir used to work on a song for months and then [in this new choir], we used to do two or three new songs a week and … I thought, 'God. I've barely got my head round it' and, so, I was more reluctant, I'll be honest, to try and perform."

"We used to have a Christmas concert, [for] which we had to learn all our songs [off by heart], which nearly killed me because I'm slightly older than most of them."

Members mentioned that additional musical training, particularly for learning to read music, might be helpful for members without this previous experience:

> "Maybe … online courses or guides … [for] things like reading music. Because I know that we've got quite a few ladies that cannot read music … They learn primarily by listening, … which is fine, but it does take them longer. Whereas because I can follow the notes, I think I pick it up quicker."

A lot of members mentioned that the teaching tracks are very helpful and they are used regularly to learn the music, especially for those who do not read music, but these can at times either be difficult to access or of poor quality:

> "The 365 SharePoint … it doesn't work very well … If you can't get access to that SharePoint or there isn't a teaching track for your part or the teaching track is so bad, then you don't want to be practicing."

> "A little bit more focus needs to go into making [the teaching tracks] better, because that's the way we're learning at home … I would say that's a big one … make sure that the teaching tracks that are provided for the choirs are accurate to the music."

Life Gets in the Way: Inevitable Barriers?

There are certain barriers to involvement in the MWC network that seem inevitable and just a part of life. Many interviewees recognised these barriers, but often felt unsure about how members could be supported to overcome them. However, members did discuss some potential support mechanisms that can help with these barriers, particularly around designing the choirs to be flexible to ensure that they can be accessed regardless of everyday responsibilities. Members also spoke about negative social experiences and personality clashes, which many felt were also inevitable, but that there could be better support from leadership to manage such challenges. Four subthemes were identified related to inevitable barriers: (1) Time constraints due to childcare; (2) time constraints due to work; (3) the need to be flexible; (4) personality clashes.

Time Constraints Due to Childcare

Many interviewees spoke about time constraints due to childcare responsibilities, whether they had experienced this themselves or know other members who struggle with this. This can be a significant barrier to joining and maintaining membership in the MWC network due to the need to find childcare, as well as childcare costs:

> "Where I'm at now, a majority [of the serving personnel] are brand new regiment soldiers. So all their wives [have young children] … and [their partners] deploy quite often, so they find it very difficult to be able to find, especially in numbers, appropriate childcare."

> "[If members' partners] are deploying and [they have] six months without them at home … affording a babysitter can be really difficult. So I think that that's probably a big thing for people leaving."

Some participants spoke about how often choirs are accommodating to children, either just having babies present in the rehearsals or providing on-site childcare, but it was also highlighted that evening rehearsals can be difficult for certain age groups:

> "When the babies are babies, I've been very supported at rehearsals … but as soon as you get to the point where actually things become a little bit more tricky, [I just couldn't go]."

> "I know choirs … [will] have childcare and pay for crèches and childminders … but actually choir's an evening activity … choir doesn't start til half past 7. And … they've got school the next morning."

Time Constraints Due to Work

Some interviewees also spoke about time constraints due to work responsibilities. Interviewees shared that their workloads and commitments could be too high to take on anything else:

> "I moved here … with every intention of joining the choir. But because I did the move on my own and my husband was settling into a new role, and I had quite a lot of stuff going on with my work commitments as well, I decided that I would wait."

Others mentioned having meetings during working hours, and how this is maybe due to old-fashioned expectations of military wives:

> "[Sometimes there are] meetings or activities that are during working hours … I can't do those hours, I'm working. I think there is still a very old-fashioned expectation that if you're a military wife, you don't work outside the home and you're free all day."

This impacts not only attending rehearsals and committee meetings, but members' availability to practice throughout the week:

> "Because I'm running a business, I don't have that much time to practice … It's mainly the fact that I don't have other rehearsal time and I'm expected to practice in between."

The Need to be Flexible

At times, members cannot make rehearsals or practice as much as they would like due to childcare and work commitments. Interviewees emphasised the need to be flexible to overcome the challenge of members inevitably having busy work and home lives. Some suggested changing, or being more flexible, with rehearsal times:

> "They're all weekday rehearsals, sometimes on a weekend when you're not working, you can come along then … sometimes swap the times around and make it more accessible."

"Even if we started ... an hour or an hour and a half later, it would just give people a little bit of flexibility, both with their childcare commitments or with their work commitments."

Interviewees recognised, however, that scheduling conflicts would always occur and it would be hard to meet everyone's needs. It was suggested that flexibility in attending or being late is necessary to give everyone an opportunity to attend:

"You can't make it a daytime activity because that excludes everyone who works. And you're never gonna get a night or time that suits everybody. I had a girl recently who said, 'Well, I'm not sure I can keep coming to choir, there's too much and I'm too busy.' But you don't have to get there at half 7, if you can't get there till 8 o'clock. Don't worry about it."

"It's up to you as to what you want and how much time you have, but on the other hand, you don't have to go every week. There isn't that expectation. So there's no pressure."

The values of the MWC as an organisation were highlighted, emphasising the importance of members attending when they can, rather than putting performance preparation above social support:

"[At this choir], there was much more of an expectation that you should be at most rehearsals, and that's just not realistic ... Then you think, well, I can't come then [and you leave] ... [but actually], if somebody is having a really hard time at home or work, and their husband's away, and they've managed to get themselves through the door for 30 minutes, that should be encouraged, not discouraged, because actually, if what you're really trying to deliver is the mental health benefits, then that person probably needs that more than anyone else in that room ... [but they could] feel very unwelcome because they've only managed to get themselves there for half an hour."

A couple of members mentioned how their choirs were now holding hybrid rehearsals, so if people could not come in person, they could still attend online, which could help them to keep up with repertoire and practicing:

"Regular basis Zooming is quite good, but I don't know whether that's something that all choirs do ... that would be a huge benefit if you weren't able to get there for whatever reason."

Others mentioned the need to offer extended choir breaks:

"We need to have some realisation that it might not just be a month that [members need an extended break for], it might be six months or whatever."

Personality Clashes

Negative group dynamics and personality clashes were reported by several interviewees. There were various reasons reported for these negative experiences. Some participants discussed this perhaps being due to power dynamics within choir committees, with some members not being open to change when new members bring different ideas:

> *"[The base I am at] is quite transitory. People tend to stay 18 months, two years maybe … But then you also have quite a few ladies who have chosen to live here. So, people either go quickly or they stay forever … That's where those conflicts come from because people come in expecting something, and then the older members have got the way they want it to be, and it can just be a bit awkward sometimes."*

Many felt that the negative dynamics came down to personality clashes:

> *"Those bad experiences have only been conflict of personality, as opposed to an actual bad experience singing or taking part in an actual choir event … Just like at your job or anywhere else, you will come up against those people that you just don't get along [with] for whatever reason and things happen. But for me, I try to let them go as quickly as possible so it doesn't ruin the experience."*

Members could also be under stress, whether due to upcoming performances or external stresses in their lives, which then impacts relationships within the choirs:

> *"Essentially, lots of people from very different backgrounds with very different opinions in a room together, put a little bit of stress on them, like a challenge of a concert coming up. It's gonna happen, isn't it? I don't think there's anything that could change that."*

Some interviewees commented that these clashes could often be due to people's strong opinions about the MWC and passion about their choir's success:

> *"Different people wanting to do different things, and often with committee meetings and the general meetings, it can get a little bit … uncomfortable for some people, but it is just the way of working through that and chatting through it and people do get very passionate."*

There is a range of severity of these negative social experiences; sometimes members are able to ignore it and avoid the 'politics', but other times this makes people question their membership in their choir and leave:

> *"[I've questioned my membership because of these negative experiences], and I know of people who have left because of those experiences."*

> *"I think people left the choirs because the dynamics within them. Rather than raising it for support, they just said this isn't something I want to be in, because ultimately people are coming along for a pleasurable experience, if it's not a pleasurable experience, then at some point you say this isn't for me, especially if you've got a lot of other pulls on time."*

This is particularly important where new members might be coming into a space where these social tensions are apparent:

> *"The person that was a choir lead when I joined … she was unwelcoming, uninviting … and, to be honest, she wasn't there on my first session. She was there on my second session, and ... if I met her on my first session and I didn't know anyone, I probably wouldn't go back."*

> *"Obviously for somebody, particularly somebody who's less confident, if they're coming into a situation where they can feel tension or they get ignored, which is the worst thing, then it's very easy for them to walk away and not come back. And that's a shame."*

Additionally, this can put potential members off joining in the first place:

> *"I was sat chatting to somebody, one of my friends or neighbours came around, [and she said], 'Oh I was in one of these choirs, and it was awful, they were so bitchy'. And I was like, 'OK, I won't bother.'"*

Some interviewees commented that although these personality clashes occur, they try to ignore them to continue enjoying their choir:

> *"I really enjoy singing and the significant number of people in the choir that I enjoy being with and singing with and try to ignore the other bits … you just put up with it sort of thing."*

> *"I just enjoy the singing; I personally don't get involved in the drama or the politics. I try to stay out of all of that if at all possible … I wanna go to choir to have a nice time, not to get involved in drama."*

Protecting the MWC's Values

This theme outlines aspects of leadership that could be improved or central strategies that could be implemented to protect the core values of the MWC. Members raised concerns about the consistency of the ethos across individual choirs, where some choirs did not meet the values in the same way as others. It was felt that the CST has a role to play in protecting these values consistently across choirs, otherwise the purpose of the MWC may be lost. Additionally, awareness of available support needs to be increased, and further support around conflict resolution needs to be available to avoid escalating negative social dynamics. Furthermore, it was raised that some choirs and choir members may need access to financial support for childcare, travel costs, and running costs. Three subthemes were identified related to protecting the MWC's values: (1) Access to support from leadership; (2) leadership's role in managing personality clashes; (3) the CST having oversight of individual choirs.

Access to Support From Leadership

Members spoke both about a lack of awareness of support provided by the various committees and a lack of access to support in general. Interviewees commented on not knowing about the structures of committees within the MWC network and who they should approach for specific challenges. Some interviewees raised that the CST is not always visible, and local members may not be aware of them and the support they can offer:

> *"I think it could be made more obvious that [the CST] are there, and [what] they might be able to help you with. I just don't think there's very much awareness of their role."*

This also included members not knowing the specific job roles of the CST:

"I think a bit more clarity on what each person's job requirements are [in the CST], so that we are sending the right e-mail to the right person … [then] we can better work between each other, I think that might help a lot of the problems."

Furthermore, there seemed to be a lack of awareness of the purpose of the RVG versus the committees versus the CST. There seems to be a lack of clarity for members of the purpose and roles within these various groups:

"I don't know what any of these people do. I don't know really what the committee jobs are. I don't know what the regional people's jobs are."

It was also mentioned that members sometimes do not know who their RVG representative is:

"Each choir should have a rep. I do not know who our rep is. It's a really good idea to have the RVG as a go between choirs and [the CST]. However, … the members do not know what they do."

However, in addition to members not being aware of the available support, they may not be comfortable raising personal concerns or accessibility issues, for example. Therefore, guidance for members about confidentiality and neutral leadership representatives they can approach may be beneficial:

"We do try to accommodate [any accessibility needs], but sometimes people don't tell you that they might have an issue …. We [need to] make people aware … that they can come in private to their … committee lead or something like that. And they would keep all that obviously confidential."

Members expressed that there are times when it is difficult to access support for the choirs from the CST and leadership. This was often raised in terms of responsiveness to e-mails and access to staff:

"I think we need a bigger [CST].. I think of late they've been quite swamped and things have been missed."

"A majority [of my experiences with the CST have been] positive. Sometimes communication is better than others. Sometimes I find that they're a bit stretched thin, so they may not give the level of support that … committees or choir members feel that they need, especially if they feel that their issue is urgent."

The time constraints on the CST can mean that they become reactive to issues rather than proactive:

"[When I was on the committee], you didn't feel as though you necessarily had their full support. They were reactive, if not proactive … you had to go to them. They weren't reaching out to you."

Furthermore, financial support for individual choirs was also raised, as some choirs have greater ability to support their members financially than others:

"We manage our budget very strictly … There's definitely more support that the [CST] could do from a financial point of view, not all choirs are equal … [For example], sometimes just that distance does get forgotten when you [have national events] … it can be hard to ask the ladies to be the ones that are sucking up that cost."

"[The choir subs are] £10 a month, [that] is £120 a year … that is a lot of money to some people and the only way that you could not pay that money is to either take a break or leave the choir."

Financial support may be useful for childcare costs, bursaries for membership subscription costs and black dress costs where members are struggling to pay, and travel costs for national and local performances, as well as increasing access to social opportunities outside of choir rehearsals.

Leadership's Role in Managing Personality Clashes

Personality clashes are, at times, inevitable; however, some members reflected that, if not managed carefully, clashes can grow into larger negative social experiences and cause tension within choirs. When this has happened, there were some views shared in reflection about leadership's delayed role in managing the situation. If leadership could become involved earlier, it may be that escalation of the situation could be avoided:

"We did feel that [the CST] didn't necessarily support us as well as we could have been and, actually, had they supported us better early on, it wouldn't have gotten to the point where they needed to come … to do an investigation, basically."

There was acknowledgement and appreciation for the support given by the current CST and their responsiveness to issues, which interviewees mentioned had improved in recent years. However, interviewees also shared that it was unclear who members should speak to if they are experiencing negative social dynamics at their choir, and members might also find it difficult to find a neutral person to speak to about such difficulties. Interviewees suggested implementing a clearer process for members in these situations:

"If there could be a clearer process for what happens if things get really bad and people are struggling to enjoy choir because of negative group dynamics … [or] role within [the committee] … someone neutral that you could speak to."

There is the additional concern, however, that the committee members and RVG representatives, who might be the frontline of these issues, do not necessarily have the experience or training to support conflict resolution, which can lead to things escalating. Several interviewees suggested implementing conflict resolution training for those in leadership positions:

"If we had some … help with conflict resolution or mediation that would probably be helpful … something to learn to deal with people because most of

us … don't have any kind of formal training in anything, especially not on how to deal with people."

It was recognised that, ultimately, if members are experiencing tension or bullying within their choir, they may leave without seeking support, especially if it is not immediately clear who is a neutral person they can speak to. Additionally, higher-level oversight to catch negative social experiences early on may be helpful.

The CST Having Oversight of Individual Choirs

Whilst recognising that the individual choirs in the MWC network have unique needs and cultures, it was also emphasised that sometimes the choirs can be run in ways that conflict with the values of the MWC. Interviewees mentioned the importance of retaining the core values across choirs to support the longevity of the organisation, as well as ensure that it is meeting the needs of its members:

"It is important for the longevity [of the organisation] to protect what the Military [Wives] Choirs is about, so that it doesn't just become what I feel like it has done in quite a few places, where it's just it's a nice community choir."

There is a need to ensure that leadership within the choirs, including the choir leads, committees, and musical directors, reinforces these values:

"We've had really good choir leads that lead and manage exceptionally well, and their ethos, values and principles are the same as the foundation. But sometimes those values are not reflected in local choirs."

Interviewees suggested guidance or a charter as something that can be referred to:

"I think we're in a stronger place as a choir to go actually … this is what we expect from our members. This is the charter you agreed to. And if you're not interested in doing that, then this isn't the place for you."

In particular, there seem to be regional inconsistencies regarding the focus on musical quality and rehearsal attendance pressures over providing emotional support:

"If [the MWC's] message is: This choir isn't all about performing albums in the Royal Albert Hall. This is about day-to-day support. That's the message that should be coming through. It doesn't matter if you can't come every week. It doesn't matter if you can't sing … What matters is [having a] safe space and [support]. But at the moment, I'm not sure that that is how people perceive things."

Furthermore, if the CST can have more oversight of the individual choirs, this will help catch challenges and issues before they escalate and allow the team to be more proactive, taking some of the stress away from committee members and RVG representatives. This need for someone to 'check in' was raised during the interviews:

"Sometimes you do feel as though you could just do with somebody checking in on you rather than having to wait until you needed to cry help."

Summary of the Interview Results

Seven themes were identified through the qualitative analysis of the semi-structured interviews:

- *Beyond a community choir*: The importance of the MWC meeting the unique needs of the women in the military community;

- *A sense of self and community*: Benefits related to self-identity, wellbeing, and community as motivating factors;

- *The singing itself*: Personal development and empowerment through singing as motivating factors;

- *Getting through the door*: Barriers and facilitators to eligible members getting to their first rehearsal;

- *The choirs are not for me*: Why some potential members might not feel that the choirs are 'for' them;

- *Life gets in the way—inevitable barriers?*: Barriers to involvement in the MWC network that seem inevitable and 'just a part of life';

- *Protecting the MWC's values*: Leadership's role in maintaining the MWC's core values.

Discussion

The current research addressed the access barriers and facilitators to joining the MWC network, a choir network for women in the military community. The research was undertaken to determine factors that relate to the challenges in joining and maintaining membership in the MWC network, with the aim to increase diversity of the membership of these choirs. In order to identify the access barriers and facilitators within the MWC network, the current research carried out a systematic scoping review, a survey of current and previous members, and semi-structured interviews with current and previous members.

The scoping review found that there is a lack of previous research looking specifically at the barriers and facilitators to accessing adult community choirs more broadly; most of the previous research looked at the benefits of joining a choir and, occasionally, the motivations for joining a community choir. However, the previous research failed to recognise that community choirs lack diversity in their membership in general, tending to have an overrepresentation of older, White, further educated, and affluent members. There is a clear need for this research to increase the diversity of membership within the MWC network and community choirs more broadly, and to expand access to group singing, which has been shown to have benefits for wellbeing and social inclusion.

In this research, most survey respondents were middle-aged, White, British women, which is representative of the MWC's wider membership. The current MWC members are therefore slightly older than the wider UK military spouse population and more likely to be of British nationality. Furthermore, the survey respondents were more highly educated than the general military spouse population. This suggests a lack of diversity in the current membership in terms of younger members, range of education backgrounds, and ethnicity, which is in line with previous research that has found that those accessing community choirs are generally older and White and have engaged in higher education.[19,31,35] Furthermore, although they are eligible as women within the military community, currently serving UK Armed Forces personnel and women employed within the military also make up a very small percentage of the MWC's current membership. Therefore, although the MWC is designed to support all women in the military community, certain groups of women in this community are not accessing this available support.

Although the participants in the current research generally had very positive experiences within the MWC network, the findings also highlighted several challenges and negative experiences that may be affecting the retainment or satisfaction of the current membership. When looking at the barriers to joining the MWC network in the first place, current choir members reported experiences of a range of challenges, which may lead to negative experiences and leaving a choir. Crucially, these challenges can undermine the wellbeing, musical development, and social benefits of being involved in a choir.

Facilitators and Motivations

The findings of this research showed that members generally have very high levels of satisfaction with the MWC and value the community and opportunities that have come about due to being involved. In particular, the survey found that members were most satisfied with

choir logistics (rehearsal time and location), costs associated with choir, their musical director, and the MWC's ethos of 'Sing, Share, Support'. The interviews highlighted key factors that seem to enable access in the first place, such as the choirs being audition-free and having an existing connection to a MWC member that provides encouragement to come to choir. Importantly, potential members may need to be motivated by their own enjoyment of singing to make the commitment in the first place, but are also motivated to join to build social connections and a sense of community. The survey results suggested that once joining a choir, members are further determined to continue due to experiencing the positive impact on their emotional and physical wellbeing and wanting to continue in their personal development. The interview findings emphasised the importance of the MWC being specifically for women in the military community. These facilitators and motivations are described in more detail below.

Being Audition-Free

The findings of the current research showed that the choirs being audition-free is a valued quality of the MWC; most interviewees said they would not have joined if there was an audition, and those that had the confidence to audition recognised the importance of the choirs being audition-free to increase access. This is in line with previous research, which has emphasised the importance of audition-free community choirs to enable access to a range of people regardless of musical ability, previous training, or confidence.[23,28,34,18]

Word of Mouth

Previous research has found that most choir members are encouraged to join through an existing friend or family member in the choir,[19,28,30,34,35] which was also reflected in the current study, where the most common way survey respondents had heard about the MWC was through word of mouth. The interviews emphasised that this minimises anxiety for members attending their first rehearsal, through already having a connection there who they know. However, it is important to recognise that relying on word-of-mouth awareness of the choirs may be limiting diversity by recruiting via pools of people with similar demographic backgrounds as the current members; for example, this has been highlighted in previous literature as a potential reason for the membership of choirs tending to be older.[35]

The Singing Itself

Enjoyment of the singing itself is, of course, a substantial factor in making a commitment to attending weekly rehearsals and practicing regularly outside of rehearsals. This was found to be one of the most common motivations for joining the MWC network in the current research, and has also been found in several previous research studies.[19,21,23,24,26,25,27,28,30,31,32,36,37] An important aspect of this is members already knowing that they enjoy group singing, which was reflected by most of the surveyed members having previously sung in a choir. Previous research has also found that past music experiences are an important factor for joining a community choir,[27,30] but the importance of these early experiences being positive and supportive has been acknowledged.[36] Therefore, members who enjoy singing but have had no previous experiences in choirs, have had negative

experiences, or have low confidence in their singing ability may be less likely to come forward.

Social Connection and Belonging

The other most common motivation for joining the MWC network was for social benefits such as building relationships and a community. Previous research has also emphasised the importance of choirs fulfilling the need for social connection and belonging[19,24,28,31,25] and wanting to engage in a shared culture or heritage.[35] The literature has suggested that increasing social connections may be of equal importance to the singing itself for motivating members to join,[23] and this is perhaps particularly important for MWC members, who may be moving more regularly than the general public and because women are more likely to join a choir to meet new people.[21,31] Furthermore, members indicated opportunities for fun and socialising as the most important thing to emphasise when recruiting new members to the choirs.

Importantly, choir singing may be uniquely placed to offer these social benefits over other group activities. Previous research has found that singing and group music activities in particular increase social connectedness and social bonding. For example, research participants who sing together show significantly greater perceived social connectedness compared to when engaging in non-singing activities,[40] and such increase in feelings of group closeness is found in both small and large choirs.[41] The social benefits specific to music engagement may be due to the physiological responses to singing and music, which may induce and foster social connections in choir members.[4244] Therefore, choir singing may be especially relevant as an activity to increase social connections and the sense of belonging.

Emotional and Physical Wellbeing

The survey results found that the impact of being in a choir on emotional and physical wellbeing was a motivating factor for continued involvement in said choir. For younger members and currently serving women, improving or maintaining emotional wellbeing was rated as the most important reason for joining in the first place. This is similar to findings from previous research showing that choir members often join and maintain membership in choirs due to the perceived wellbeing benefits, particularly for emotional wellbeing.[21,30,25] Importantly for the MWC, women have been found to be more likely to join a choir in response to challenges in their personal lives.[31]

Personal Development

The survey findings suggested personal development as a motivating factor for continued involvement in the MWC network. This may be due to members feeling a sense of accomplishment once joining a choir, and the choir going beyond their own and others' expectations. Previous research findings have also found that development or maintenance of musical skills can be a motivating factor for choir membership[24,31,33] and being in a community choir provides opportunities for new learning.[23,22] For women, being in a choir seems to contribute to increased confidence and self-worth,[31] potentially through providing new opportunities and overcoming new challenges. The interview participants had varied

opinions on the importance of musical outcomes, with some emphasising that their main motivation for taking part was socialising and some more concerned about musical quality, which is similar to previous research that shows variation between these main motivations for participating.[24]

Meeting the Unique Needs of Women in the Military Community

The interviews also found that the ability of the choirs to meet the unique needs of women in the military community is an important element of the MWC. This includes building a community of women with similar backgrounds, where members feel understood intuitively and where they can seek practical and emotional support from those with similar experiences. Previous research has also shown the value of community choirs in terms of drawing together people with shared heritage and culture, when this might not be facilitated through other social circles.[33,22,25,35] Furthermore, the current research identified that members strongly value the network of choirs developed through the MWC, which facilitates continued involvement with a community that is often having to move due to postings. Beyond continued involvement, however, being a member of a choir and having core repertoire provides some consistency in otherwise transient lifestyles within the military.

Barriers and Challenges

Experiences with the MWC seem strongly positive, and the current findings suggest that most members within the MWC network have not left a choir; when they do, it is mostly due to a military posting, with the majority intending to join another choir in the network. However, members do sometimes leave for other reasons, and there are also aspects of the choirs that members are less satisfied with that could be improved to increase access and satisfaction. These challenges are described in detail below.

Time Constraints

Similar to previous research,[19,34,29] time constraints seem to be the largest barrier for MWC engagement. Within the survey, time constraints (due to both work and caring responsibilities or family life) were the most often reported challenge for choir membership. For the youngest members (18–29-year-olds), this was due to work, which was reported twice as often for this groups compared to the overall group. This was also reported most often as a challenge by members who are currently serving in the military. For slightly older members (30–39-year-olds) and women employed in the military community more broadly, time constraints due to childcare or caring responsibilities were most often reported, followed also by work commitments.

This is further reflected in comparing the survey sample to the more general UK military spouse population, who are more likely to be in employment and more likely to have children than MWC members. Therefore, women with children and/or in employment seem to be less likely to access the choirs at all than those who do not have these external demands on their time, which aligns with previous research finding that older retired members have more disposable time for choir[25] and hiatuses often occur when having children.[27] Within the interviews, participants emphasised how childcare responsibilities may be felt more acutely

for women in the military community. This is due to living far away from friends and family, who would usually support them, not knowing or having access to childminders, and, for partners of military personnel, experiencing long stretches of time when their partners are deployed.

It is acknowledged in previous research and within the interviewee responses of the current research that time constraints due to work and caring responsibilities are difficult to overcome.[29] However, MWC members emphasised the importance of making and having this time for themselves amongst their busy schedules. This is described in the previous literature as giving members a sense of autonomy in terms of their time,[23] and MWC members spoke about how this contributes to an increased sense of self-identity through having a space where they can let go of other roles they have in life and just be themselves. Importantly for the MWC as a women's choir, past research has found that having this space away from work and home is a strong motivating factor for women.[31]

Furthermore, in addition to not accessing a choir at all due to time constraints, these time constraints may also impact choir rehearsal attendance and ability to practice consistently. This of course impacts choirs more widely, but it has also been found previously that this contributes to a lack of preparation, which can increase performance stress and dissatisfaction with the choir experience.[29] This may also impact the ability for these groups of women to engage in leadership opportunities within their choir, such as on the committee, which may mean they are also not represented during decision-making processes.

Negative Social Experiences

Negative group dynamics or social experiences were also raised as a challenge in the findings of the current research, similar to previous studies.[23,12] Nearly one in five respondents reported this as a challenge in the current survey, and this was also the fourth most reported challenge overall. Significantly, of those reporting that they had left a choir, negative social experiences were the second most reported reason for leaving, with one in five previous members reporting that they had left due to this.

Within the interviews, many suggested that negative social experiences were due to personality clashes, as well as disagreements regarding the running of the choir. Members felt that such clashes were inevitable when you bring a group of women together with various backgrounds, who have strong and diverse opinions about how to run something they are passionate about. However, there was also recognition that these clashes can sometimes grow into more substantial tension within the choir, causing members to discontinue their membership. The findings also suggest that cliques can form within choirs, and this can create an unwelcoming atmosphere of 'us and them', particularly between more permanent members and members who are transient due to military postings. Previous research has highlighted the importance of managing these difficult social situations, recognising that this can negatively impact the psychological benefits of being in a choir.[23]

Accessibility

The survey found that over a quarter of the sample had a long-standing disability or illness. Although it was acknowledged in the interviews that accommodations have been made for members with accessibility needs, the survey responses indicated that there was a lack of consideration of accessibility generally, particularly related to mobility and disability. This perhaps suggests that once accessibility issues are raised, adjustments are made to ensure that individuals can access the choirs, but that this is not necessarily implemented as standard across the network. This included wheelchair access for rehearsal and performance spaces, comfort of venues (i.e., temperature and lighting), lift sharing, providing repertoire in a larger font, and adjustments for hidden disabilities.

The interview findings emphasised that accessibility is not necessarily thought of until there is a member with a disability and highlighted that those with hidden disabilities might not be comfortable raising their needs with the committee. Interestingly, accessibility has not been addressed in the previous literature, which may reflect individuals with accessibility issues historically not accessing choirs in the first place or not reporting their accessibility needs or challenges within the choir space.

Appeal of the Repertoire

Previous research has identified that liking and identifying with the style and genre of the choir's repertoire is an important aspect of choir membership.[23,27,25,30,31,20] As it is difficult to meet a range of preferences and abilities, this was raised as a challenge for the MWC. The survey found that the core musical repertoire is one of the aspects of the choirs that members were least satisfied with, with the repertoire not being to personal taste being identified as a challenge for members. For the youngest members, the aspect of the choirs they were least satisfied with was the core repertoire, and they also showed higher dissatisfaction with the local repertoire than the overall group. Currently serving women were also least satisfied with the core repertoire, and reported the music not being to their own taste.

Within the interviews, it was found that members valued repertoire that empowers them through singing as strong women together and were less satisfied with the songs that presented an 'old-fashioned' or 'stereotypical' representation of military wives. It was also highlighted that some women can be distressed or upset by songs about the more difficult aspects of military life. Previous literature has identified the importance of the musical director selecting repertoire that meets the preferences and abilities of the membership,[33] and members having more input into repertoire choices seems to improve satisfaction. This may explain the findings of the current study, where members seemed to be more satisfied with their local repertoire than the national core repertoire. Although MWC members have input into the national core repertoire, it may be challenging to meet preferences and abilities across such a large network. Members may also decide to join based on enjoying a choir's repertoire, style, and genre,[27,31] and negative preconceived perceptions about the genre may impact this. This seems to be a challenge of the MWC, as the results found that potential members may think the repertoire is all religious music or old-fashioned.

Musical Ability and Confidence

The current findings reinforce previous research, identifying potential members' lack of confidence in their musical abilities as a large challenge for joining a community choir[19,28] and, furthermore, that musical challenges may discourage members from continuing.[26,28] For joining in the first place, over half of the MWC members reported musical ability or confidence as a reason eligible members may not come forward, particularly for younger and currently serving women. The interview results also emphasised this lack of musical confidence as a barrier for involvement and suggested that this was compounded by the anxiety of joining a group of strangers.

Musical ability can also be a challenge after joining, particularly if the repertoire is too difficult, if members have a lack of time to practice, or if the performance pressures are too high. In the survey, one in five respondents rated that their own musical ability was a challenge of being in their choir and, importantly, musical ability was likely to be rated as a challenge by the youngest members and by currently serving women. If members are finding that the music is too challenging, or that they do not have enough practice time in between rehearsals, this will likely decrease their satisfaction with the choir experience[29] and contribute to increased stress and anxiety related to being in a choir.[33]

Centrally Organised Events

This research found that centrally organised MWC events are an essential and much valued aspect of being involved in a choir. These events have led to members being involved in once-in-a-lifetime opportunities and reinforce the sense of belonging and connection within the larger MWC network. However, centrally organised events were also found to be the aspect of the choirs that members were overall least satisfied with. Members commented on a lack of inclusivity for these events, where members particularly felt that these were often southern England- and London-centric. This led to feelings of being treated differently across regions, feeling left out, and frustration due to difficulties in travelling for members who live farther afield. Furthermore, members sometimes felt that coordination was at times poor, where there was a lack of information or very short notice, making attendance more difficult. Finally, within the interviews, it was emphasised that centrally organised events should not overshadow the core values of the MWC; that is, providing a weekly supportive space in the local community.

Effectiveness of Leadership and Access to Support

Previous literature has highlighted the importance of leadership within community choirs in the satisfaction of members.[30,25,29] Within the MWC network, members tended to rate their satisfaction with their musical director as quite high; however, other leadership roles within the organisation were not always perceived to be as effective. One of the aspects that members were least satisfied with was the CST, and one in 10 members who had left a choir did so due to poor leadership within their committee. The findings suggest that there is a lack of awareness of leadership roles within the MWC network and, furthermore, that access to leadership can be difficult, particularly due to poor responsiveness of the CST. This may

lead to a decrease in satisfaction with the MWC for members, as previous research shows that communication from choir leadership increases satisfaction.[29]

Members raised that the response to challenges from the CST can feel reactive rather than proactive, which can leave situations unresolved, contributing to the escalation of issues and challenges. Additionally, members felt that, at times, committees can become 'cliquey', where members hold positions for too long, and power dynamics within committees can create negative experiences for members. This also contributes to difficulties for members raising challenges and concerns with someone who they perceive as neutral and unbiased.

Awareness of Eligibility

The research found that a significant concern for MWC's membership is awareness of eligibility. This was the second most indicated reason members felt others did not join a choir, and was the primary reason indicated by serving members and women employed in the military. The findings suggest that members feel that the name of the charity does not represent the broad range of eligible members, which may be a significant factor in why potentially eligible members are not joining. Members indicated that this has been difficult to overcome when they are trying to recruit others to join the choirs and is an ongoing concern. Previous research has also found that, often, individuals might be interested in joining a choir but lack awareness of local opportunities to do so.[19] MWC members indicated increasing awareness of eligibility as one of the most important ways to encourage others to join; perhaps particularly for serving women and other women employed in the military community, who were more likely to indicate this as a way to improve recruitment.

Financial Barriers

The results of this research found that financial barriers seemed less of a concern for the current and previous MWC members sampled; however, costs were, at times, indicated as challenges and reasons for leaving or not joining. Choir-related costs may include travel costs to rehearsals and performances, childcare, membership subs, and concert uniforms. Of these, the highest rated challenge for members was travel costs for performances and events, followed by the costs of uniforms. Interestingly, although overall costs for travel to rehearsals did not appear to be a challenge for most members, it was one of the second most reported challenges for the youngest members (18–29-year-olds). Very few members overall rated childcare costs as a challenge, perhaps because this only affects a subset of the membership or because the MWC can support childcare costs; the slightly older members (30–39-year-olds), who were more likely to indicate time constraints due to childcare responsibilities, were also more likely to indicate a lack of access to childcare as a challenge over the costs involved. Furthermore, non-officer connections were more likely to report challenges associated with costs than officer connections.

For those who had left a choir, choir-related costs were cited infrequently as a reason for leaving. Additionally, members were unlikely to indicate these as reasons potential members might not join a choir in the first place. Previous research has indicated that community choir membership tends to be above average in terms of financial means,[19] so these results

may be reflective of an affluent MWC membership. However, it could also be that the MWC as an organisation has been able to provide financial support to members to ensure that financial access is not a barrier, although younger members and non-officer connections seem to be more affected by financial constraints than other groups. There may be a lack of awareness of financial support in some cases, particularly for potential members who are unfamiliar with the MWC.

Maintaining the MWC's Values and Addressing Challenges

Overall, MWC members have had very positive experiences participating in the choirs and tend to be satisfied across all aspects of the choirs. However, the current research found that there are some key challenges within the organisation and across individual choirs. These challenges seem to be limiting access to eligible members, particularly those who are younger, have diverse backgrounds and ethnicities, and who may be less educated. Furthermore, these difficulties may be contributing to negative experiences for members, undermining the potential benefits they should be offered through being involved in a choir. Although there seem to be many choirs that have provided positive experiences for members, this perhaps varies across different choirs and regions, and this lack of consistency needs to be managed, especially as an organisation catering to women who move often due to military postings. Therefore, the next section will present the research recommendations, which aim to address the following:

- Awareness of the MWC and member eligibility;
- Enabling access and inclusivity;
- Supporting current MWC members.

Limitations

It is important to note that similar to all primary research, there are some limitations to this research. Only previous and current members of the MWC were surveyed and interviewed. This means that we do not have the perspectives of those who have never accessed the MWC previously. There may be barriers that are not addressed or are more acutely experienced by the groups of women who have never accessed a choir before.

Furthermore, those who had time to respond to the survey and participate in the interviews were less likely to have constraints on their time, and therefore those with external demands on their time may be less likely to have had their voices heard. However, it was clear that many interviewees were motivated to engage in the research to ensure that their negative experiences and challenges were addressed, with a desire to improve the choir experience and increase inclusivity.

Finally, it was only possible to make demographic comparisons with the general military spouse population, which does not cover the more diverse eligible membership of the MWC as a whole. This was due to the limited number of women in the other membership categories and the lack of comparable datasets available for this type of analysis. As such, it will be

necessary for the MWC to monitor the representativeness and diversity of their members that fall outside of the wives and partners membership category.

Research Recommendations

Recommendations based on the findings of the current research are presented below. These recommendations were co-designed between the research team and the MWC. The recommendations fall under three broad categories: increasing awareness of the MWC and member eligibility; enabling access and inclusivity; and supporting current MWC members.

Increasing Awareness of the MWC and Member Eligibility

The following recommendations aim to increase the diversity and inclusivity of MWC members by increasing awareness of the organisation itself, the benefits that the MWC offers, and promoting the broad membership eligibility for women in the military community.

1. Focus recruitment on underrepresented groups, including younger groups (under 40 years of age), current service personnel, and other membership categories (rather than wives/partners).

2. Implement strategies to raise awareness of the membership eligibility criteria.

    a. Consider a rebrand, as the current name 'Military Wives Choirs' does not represent all eligible members.

3. Highlight the positive impact of choral singing on emotional wellbeing and on building relationships and a community.

4. Emphasise the choirs being audition-free and not focused on musical ability, whilst also providing an opportunity to develop strong singing skills to attain high musical standards.

5. Become part of the national conversation regarding music and singing for wellbeing.

    a. Be recognised as a recommended organisation within the social prescribing agenda.

Enabling Access

The following recommendations are suggested to find ways of enabling access to the choirs, supporting members to come along to their first rehearsal and maintain their membership.

1. Implement strategies to welcome new members. This may include implementing a buddy system and new member inductions.

2. Develop strategies to increase the inclusivity of centrally organised events and address barriers to involvement, particularly to those that are London-based for members living farther away.

3. Promote flexibility of rehearsals to tackle time constraints due to work and caring responsibilities. This may include flexibility in attendance policies, timing of rehearsals, offering additional or flexible rehearsal times, and allowing members to attend remotely.

4. Increase members' and committees' awareness of the MWC's childcare policy to support members with caring responsibilities.

5. Develop standards for ensuring rehearsal and performance spaces are physically accessible.

6. Improve the quality of teaching tracks and enable easier access to resources through providing training to members.

Supporting Current MWC Members

The following recommendations address challenges that current members face, and can sometimes lead to members leaving a choir or not being able to enjoy the full benefits of being involved.

1. Implement strategies to ensure the proactiveness of choir leadership to the challenges and concerns raised.
    a. Develop a system to maintain oversight of individual choirs to ensure that they are meeting the MWC's core values.
    b. Increase members' awareness of available support through the committees, RVG, and CST.

2. Implement methods to tackle negative group dynamics and poor leadership.
    a. Offer conflict resolution and leadership training for the CST, RVG, and committee members.
    b. Develop a standard of practice for choir leads and musical directors to emphasise the MWC's core values, use of core repertoire, and focus on wellbeing and minimising performance pressures.

3. Increase the diversity of leadership positions by breaking down barriers to underrepresented groups joining committees. This could include recruitment targeted towards committee positions and emphasising transferable employability skills.
    a. Implement ways to reward and recognise contributions from committee and RVG volunteers.

4. Implement the collection of more diversity data on membership.

5. Develop a routine monitoring framework, in collaboration with ARU, based on the findings of this research.

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Appendices

Appendix 1: Scoping Review Protocol

The scoping review protocol has been published on the Open Science Framework repository and can be accessed here.

Methods

The scoping review[1,2] was undertaken and reported following the Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses Extension for Scoping Reviews (PRISMA-ScR).[3] A scoping review was chosen in order to broadly map the current literature exploring access barriers and facilitators in community choirs and identify types of evidence used previously to explore these concepts.

The review aimed to address the following research question: *What barriers and facilitators to accessing adult community choirs have been identified in previous literature?*

Search Strategy

Search terms and selection criteria were developed using the PICo (Population, phenomenon of Interest, and Context) framework. The use of this framework within a scoping review was decided to allow for an exploration of access barriers and facilitators regardless of design or method used. The identified search terms are outlined in the table below:

PICo	Review Area	Search Terms
Population	Adults	-
Phenomenon of Interest	Access barriers	Exclu* OR unmotivat* OR barrier* OR dislike* OR negativ* OR challeng* OR obstacle* OR difficult* OR inaccess*
	Access facilitators	Inclu* OR motiv* OR divers* OR facilitat* OR like* OR positiv* OR promot* OR enabl* OR help OR access*
Context	Community choirs	Choir* OR singing group* OR choral group* OR vocal group* OR amateur sing* OR choral ensemble* OR sing* for wellbeing

The complete search string was therefore:

(choir* OR "singing group*" OR "choral group*" OR "vocal group*" OR "amateur sing*" OR "choral ensemble*" OR "sing* for wellbeing") AND (exclu* OR unmotivat* OR barrier* OR dislike* OR negativ* OR challeng* OR obstacle* OR difficult* OR inaccess* OR inclu* OR motiv* OR divers* OR facilitat* OR like* OR positiv* OR promot* OR enabl* OR help OR access*)

The database searches were limited to the title, abstract, and keyword fields to refine the search results and ensure the retrieval of the most relevant articles.

To cover multidisciplinary perspectives on this topic, 14 databases were included in the search: Scopus, Web of Science, ERIC, PubMed, CINAHL Plus, Embase, Medline, PsychINFO, Military and Government Collection, British Education Index, Professional Development Collection, Musical Periodicals Database, Performing Arts Periodicals Database, and APA PsychArticles.

i. Selection Criteria

The following inclusion and exclusion criteria were used to screen the literature identified from the database searches:

PICo	Inclusion Criteria	Exclusion Criteria
Population	Adults	Specific clinical populations or conditions, children, music students
Phenomenon of Interest	Access barriers or facilitators	Not relevant to access barriers or facilitators
Context	Community choirs, leisure choirs, amateur choirs, singing for wellbeing groups, non-competitive university choirs, church/religious choirs, older people choirs, virtual choirs	Professional choirs, music student choirs, choirs for specific clinical populations such as dementia choirs, prison choirs, intergenerational choirs, workplace/staff choirs, refugee choirs

Due to resource limitations, included studies were limited to the English language. There were no restrictions on date of publication. Inclusion was restricted to peer-reviewed published articles; book chapters and dissertations were excluded. However, one book chapter was included as an exception due to reporting primary research data that was relevant to the research question.

ii. Screening Procedures

Studies identified from the searches were uploaded into the Rayyan web-tool for screening of articles against the inclusion and exclusion criteria. The screening procedure was:

1. All identified references were de-duplicated.

2. Two or more reviewers screened all titles and abstracts against the selection criteria.

3. Full-text articles of all potentially eligible studies identified in Step 2 were obtained.

4. Two or more reviewers screened the full-text articles against the selection criteria for inclusion in the review.

The number of studies selected for inclusion within the scoping review is reported using the PRISMA flow diagram.[4]

Data Extraction and Charting Strategy

Data were extracted and charted from the articles selected for inclusion by two or more reviewers. The data extraction included the details outlined in the data extraction tool below:

Author(s):	
Year of publication:	
Country:	
Aims:	
Population and sample size:	
Methodology:	
How access barriers and facilitators were identified:	
Key findings related to access barriers and facilitators:	

In the final report, the extracted descriptive data are presented in a table and the main findings related to access barriers and facilitators are discussed narratively in the key categories.

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Appendix 2: Online Survey Questions

Your involvement in Military Wives Choirs

First, we want to find out a bit about your experiences within a Military Wives Choir (or multiple choirs), what has been positive as well as what has been challenging. This information is collected anonymously and will be reported anonymously in any outputs.

We acknowledge that some members belong to multiple Military Wives Choirs. In these cases, for questions that ask you to reflect on your experiences specific to your choir, please answer based on your general/average experiences across all your choirs.

1. How many Military Wives Choirs are you currently a member of?

2. How many Military Wives Choirs are you ever been a member of?

3. Approximately how many years have you been or were you involved in Military Wives Choirs?

4. How did you first hear about Military Wives Choirs (Select all that apply)?

   - Word-of-mouth
   - Social media
   - Newsletter
   - Media (radio, television coverage)
   - Other

   a. If you selected Other, please specify:

5. What age were you when you joined your first Military Wives Choir?

6. Have you ever held a role on a Military Wives Choir committee? This may be a Choir Committee, Regional Voices Group, MWC Trustee, etc.

   - Yes, currently
   - Yes, previously
   - Yes, previously and currently (for example, left and returned to a committee or left one committee and joined another)
   - No
   - Prefer not to answer

   a. If yes, which committee(s):

7. Have you been involved in a centrally organised event? Centrally organised event refers to those events organised by the Choirs Support Team. For example, concerts, committee days, etc.

   - Yes
   - No

- Unsure

- Prefer not to answer

Your experiences in Military Wives Choir

8. Think about when you first chose to join a Military Wives Choir. How important were the following aspects in terms of why you decided to join the choir? Rate each aspect on the following scale: (i) Not at all important; (ii) Slightly important; (iii) Moderately important; (iv) Very important; (v) Extremely important; (vi) Unsure.

   - Improving and/or maintaining emotional wellbeing (mood, self-expression)

   - Personal development and fulfilment (musicianship, sense of achievement, recognition, educational, intellectual)

   - Improving and/or maintaining physical wellbeing (activity, leisure, recreation)

   - Relationships (friendships, networking)

   - Social inclusion and community (community integration, social support, contributing to the community, supporting others)

   - The music/singing itself (creativity, enjoyment, musical aesthetics)

   a. In terms of why you decided to join the choir(s), are there any other aspects or any aspects you'd like to expand on?

9. Think about your experience of being in the choir(s). How important were the following aspects in terms of why you decided to stay in the choir(s)? Rate each aspect on the following scale: (i) Not at all important; (ii) Slightly important; (iii) Moderately important; (iv) Very important; (v) Extremely important; (vi) Unsure.

   - Improving and/or emotional wellbeing (mood, self-expression)

   - Personal development and fulfilment (musicianship, sense of achievement, recognition, educational, intellectual)

   - Improving and/or maintaining physical wellbeing (activity, leisure, recreation)

   - Relationships (friendships, networking)

   - Social inclusion and community (community integration, social support, contributing to the community, supporting others)

   - The music/singing itself (creativity, enjoyment, musical aesthetics)

   a. In terms of why you decided to stay in the choir(s), are there any other aspects or any aspects you'd like to expand on?

10. Consider your satisfaction with the following aspects of the organisation of the choir. If you are in multiple choirs, please consider your average/general experiences across all choirs. Rate each aspect on the following scale: (i) Not at all satisfied; (ii) Slightly

satisfied; (iii) Moderately satisfied; (iv) Very satisfied; (v) Completely satisfied; (vi) Unsure; (vii) Not applicable.

- The musical repertoire (MWC core repertoire) – level of difficulty
- The musical repertoire (MWC core repertoire) – genre and style
- The musical repertoire (local repertoire) – level of difficulty
- The musical repertoire (local repertoire) – genre and style
- The musical director of your choir
- The rehearsal location
- The rehearsal location
- The rehearsal time
- The choir committee
- The Choirs Support Team
- Events/performances (centrally organised)
- Events/performances (local)
- Membership costs (subs)
- The Military Wives Choirs brand
- The Military Wives Choirs ethos of 'Sing, Share, Support'

a. In terms of why you decided to stay in the choir(s), are there any other aspects or any aspects you'd like to expand on?

11. What are/were the challenges of being in the choir for you? Select all that apply

- Time constraints due to work (for attending rehearsals, learning the music)
- Time constraints due to caring / childcare / family life (for attending rehearsals, learning the music)
- Costs for travel to rehearsals
- Costs for travel to events
- Childcare costs
- Lack of childcare
- Location of the choir rehearsals
- Time of the choir rehearsals
- Repertoire – too difficult
- Repertoire – too easy
- Repertoire – not to personal taste

- Musical ability – self

- Musical ability – others/choir

- Negative group dynamics/social experiences

- Poor leadership – Choirs Support Team

- Poor leadership – musical director

- Membership costs (subs)

- Not enough members / low engagement

- Finding/keeping a musical director

- Other

a. If you selected Other, please specify:

12. Have you left a choir?

- Yes, and did not intend to return

- Yes, but intended to rejoin after taking a break

- Yes, but intended to join another choir (I.e. due to moving)

- No

- Prefer not to answer

13. If you have left a choir, why did you leave? Select all that apply.

- Time constraints due to work (for attending rehearsals, learning the music)

- Time constraints due to childcare / family life / other caring responsibilities (for attending rehearsals, learning the music)

- Location of the choir rehearsals

- Time of the choir rehearsals

- Repertoire – too difficult

- Repertoire – too easy

- Repertoire – not to personal taste

- Musical ability – self

- Musical ability – others/choir

- Negative group dynamics/social experiences

- Poor leadership – Choirs Support Team

- Poor leadership – musical director

- Membership costs (subs)

- Costs for travel to rehearsals

- Costs for travel to events

- Choir disbanded due to too few members / low engagement

- Choir disbanded due to lack of musical director

- Other

14. Do you or have you experienced any accessibility issues? Accessibility refers to any issues that might affect your ability to engage in a Military Wives Choir or other activities (due to, for example, physical or learning disabilities, lack of access to transport or childcare, etc.)

    - Yes

    - No

    - Unsure

    - Prefer not to answer

15. If you do or have experienced accessibility issues, please expand on what accommodations have or could be implemented to ensure you are able to access the choirs (examples of accommodations might include, for example, step-free access, on-side childcare, shuttles, large-font repertoire, etc.):

Your opinions on member recruitment

16. What do you think prevents eligible people from joining a Military Wives Choir? Select all that apply.

    - Unaware that they may be eligible

    - No local choir available for them

    - Time constraints due to work

    - Time constraints due to childcare / family life / other caring responsibilities

    - Childcare costs

    - Access to childcare

    - Location of the choir rehearsals

    - Time of the choir rehearsals

    - Repertoire

    - Musical ability/confidence

    - Not interested in singing / choirs

    - Negative personal relationships with other members

    - Membership costs (subs)

- Costs for travel to rehearsals

- Costs for travel to events

- Other

a. If you selected Other, please specify:

17. What do you think would encourage others to join a Military Wives Choir? Select all that apply.

- Awareness of eligibility

- Emphasis on having fun and socialising

- Emphasis on building musical and singing skills

- Emphasis on taking part in performances

- Emphasis on peer support, relationships, and community

- Emphasis on impact on physical wellbeing

- Emphasis on impact on emotional wellbeing

- Emphasis on trying something new

- Emphasis on how it is a time/space for yourself

- Emphasis on being 'rank free'

- Opportunities to record CDs

- Opportunities to attend events

- Opportunities to get involved in committees

- Flexibility of rehearsal times

- Choir rehearsals in convenient or flexible locations

- Other

a. If you selected Other, please specify:

18. Have you been involved in setting up a new Military Wives Choir?

- Yes, I have helped set up a choir

- Yes, I have helped set up multiple choirs

- No, but I would be interested in helping to set up a choir

- No, I have no interest in helping to set up a choir

- Prefer not to answer

a. If you have been involved in setting up a Military Wives Choir, how challenging did you find it?

- Not challenging at all – no barriers to setting up the choir

- A little bit challenging – some barriers, which were easy to overcome

- Fairly challenging – quite a few barriers, which were somewhat difficult to overcome

- Very challenging – a lot of barriers, which were very difficult to overcome

- Extremely challenging – a lot of barriers, which we were not able to overcome

- Prefer not to answer

   b. Please expand if you would like:

19. What do you think is needed to support individuals in setting up choirs? Select all that apply.

- Financial support / funding

- Support from Choirs Support Team

- Information about the logistics of starting and sustaining a choir

- Information about how to recruit members

- Information about how to recruit a musical director

- Awareness of option to set up new choirs

- Other

   a. If you selected Other, please specify:

Your previous musical experience

20. Prior to joining a Military Wives Choir, had you ever sung in a choir?

- Yes, as a child

- Yes, as an adult

- Yes, as a child and as an adult

- No

- Prefer not to answer

21. Prior to joining a Military Wives Choir, did you ever receive formal musical training?

- Yes, school lessons

- Yes, private lessons

- Yes, school and private lessons

- No

- Prefer not to answer

   a. If yes, for how many years?

- 0-4
- 5-9
- 10
- 14
- 15+

    b. If yes, on what instrument or voice?

22. Have you learned to read music?

- Yes, prior to joining a Military Wives Choir
- Yes, since joining a Military Wives Choir
- No
- Prefer not to answer

23. How confident are you in reading music?

- Not confident at all
- Slightly confident
- Somewhat confident
- Fairly confident
- Completely confident
- Prefer not to answer

Your current social support

The section asks a few questions about your current level of social support overall. Please consider any social support you receive both within and outside Military Wives Choirs

24. How many people are so close to you that you can count on them if you have great personal problems?

- None
- 1-2
- 3-5
- 5+

25. How much interest and concern do people shown in what you do?

- None
- Little
- Uncertain
- Some

- A lot

26. How easy is it to get practical help from neighbours if you should need it?

- Very difficult

- Difficult

- Possible

- Easy

- Very easy

27. How far are you from your close friends and family? Select all that apply.

- My close friends and family are local (I.e. walking distance or short drive)

- My close friends and family fairly nearby (I.e. travelling by car/public transit in under 1 hour)

- My close friends and family are in the same country, but a fair distance away (I.e. travelling by car/public transport in 1-5 hours)

- My close friends and family are in the same country, but quite far away (I.e. travelling by car/public transport in 6-10 hours or short flight)

- My close friends are in a very far away or overseas country (I.e. travelling by long haul flight)

Your relationship to the military

We are asking the following questions to find out about how current and previous members have accessed the MWCs. We want to know how these various factors might affect individuals' experiences of the choirs in different ways. This information is collected anonymously and will be reported anonymously in any outputs.

28. What is your relationship to the military? Select all that apply:

- Wife, partner, 1 or co-habiting partner of a serving member of the UK Armed Forces (including Reservists)

- Serving UK Armed Forces personnel (including Reservists)

- UK Armed Forces veterans (including Reservists)

- Mother of currently serving UK Armed Forces personnel (including Reservists)

- Sister of currently serving UK Armed Forces personnel (including Reservists)

- Daughter of currently serving UK Armed Forces personnel (including Reservists)

- Wife, partner, fiancée or co-habiting partner of a serving non-UK Armed Forces personnel on a UK posting

- Wife, partner, fiancée or co-habiting partner of a UK Armed Forces veteran (including Reservists)

- Women employed within the military community for an organisation that provides a direct service to serving military personnel and families

- Other

a. If you selected Other, please specify:

For the following questions, please answer according to your and/or your relatives' *current branch/rank in the military* OR *branch/rank just prior to leaving*:

29. If you are or were a serving member, what is/was your service branch?

- British Army

- Royal Air Force

- Royal Marines

- Royal Navy

- Not applicable

- Other

a. Are/were you a Regular or a Reservist?

b. If you selected Other, please specify your service branch:

c. What is/was your rank?

30. If your relative is or was a serving member, what is/was their service branch? For the purposes of this survey, relatives include partners, children, siblings, or parents. You will have the option of adding multiple relatives (up to 4 total).

- British Army

- Royal Air Force

- Royal Marines

- Royal Navy

- Not applicable

- Other

a. Are/were they a Regular or a Reservist?

b. If you selected Other, please specify their service branch:

c. What is/was their rank?

Your living arrangements

We are asking the following questions to find out if members' living arrangements impact experiences and access to Military Wives Choirs. This information is collected anonymously and will be reported anonymously in any outputs.

31. Where do you currently live?

- England

- Northern Ireland

- Scotland

- Wales

- International

- Prefer not to answer

a. If England, Northern Ireland, Scotland or Wales, which county?

b. If international, in which country do you live?

32. If you or your partner/ relative are currently serving, how far do you live from the serving person's establishment/ base? Please indicate number of miles:

33. How far do you live from the nearest base to you? Please indicate number of miles:

34. How far did or do you currently live from your choir rehearsals? Please indicate the number of miles. If you are a member of more than one choir, select all that apply.

a. Please expand if necessary:

35. In which type of accommodation do you live?

- Service accommodation

- Rented, private

- Rented, council or housing association

- Owned

- Neither renting or owning (for example, living with family or friends whilst not paying rent)

- Other

- Prefer not to answer

a. If you selected Other, please specify:

36. Would you describe the area you live as...

- Urban

- Suburban

- Rural

- Unsure

- Prefer not to answer

- Other

  a. If you selected Other, please specify:

37. How many times have you moved house since joining a Military Wives Choir (I.e. since joining your first Military Wives Choir)

Demographics

We are asking the following questions to find out about the current and previous membership of the MWCs. We want to know how these various factors might affect individuals' experiences of the choirs in different ways. This information is collected anonymously and will be reported anonymously in any outputs.

38. What is your age?

39. How would you describe your ethnicity? Choose one option that best describes your ethnic group or background.

- White: British

- White: Irish

- White: Other

- Mixed: White and Black Caribbean

- Mixed: White and Black African

- Mixed: White and Asian

- Mixed: Other

- Asian/Asian British: Indian

- Asian/Asian British: Bangladeshi

- Asian/Asian British: Pakistani

- Asian/Asian British: Other

- Asian/Asian British: Chinese

- Black/Black British: Caribbean

- Black/Black British: African

- Black/Black British: Other

- Prefer not to answer

- Other

  a. If you selected Other, please specify:

40. What is your nationality?

a. If you selected Other, please specify:

41. How would you describe your sexual orientation?

- Asexual

- Bisexual

- Gay/Lesbian

- Heterosexual

- Prefer not to answer

- Other

a. If you selected Other, please specify:

42. What is the highest level of education you have completed?

- No formal qualifications

- Entry Level certificate/award/diploma, Functional skills, skills for life.

- GCSE grade D-G, Foundation Diploma, Level 1 key skills/NVQ/Skills for life/BTEC/Functional skills

- GCSE grade A*-C, Higher Diploma, Level 2 key skills/NVQ/Skills for life/BTEC/Functional skills

- AS/A levels, Advanced diploma, International Baccalaureate, Level 3 Key Skills/BTEC/NVQ

- Certificate of HE, HNC, Level 4 Key Skills/NVQ/BTEC Professional Qualification Diploma of HE, HND, Foundation degree, Level 5 BTEC Professional Qualification Bachelor's degree, Graduate certificate, Graduate Diploma, Level 6 BTEC Professional Qualification

- Master's degree, Postgraduate certificate or diploma, NVQ Level 5, Level 7 BTEC Professional Qualification

- Doctorate, Level 8 Vocational qualifications.

- Other

a. If you selected Other, please specify:

43. Do you have any long-standing illness, disability or impairment? (Long-standing means anything that has or is likely to affect you over 12 months)

- Yes

- No

- Unsure

- Prefer not to answer

44. Do you have any children aged 17 or under?

- Yes

- No

- Prefer not to answer

a. If yes, how many children do you have in each of the following age categories?

- 0-4

- 5-9

- 10-14

- 15-17

45. Do you have any dependents aged 18 and over? Dependent refers to any individuals to whom you provide significant financial and/or care support (outside of paid work). For example, family members or relatives who you care for.

- Yes

- No

- Prefer not to answer

a. If yes, how many dependents aged 18 and over do you have?

46. If you have children or adult dependents, how many hours per week (on average) are you involved in caring responsibilities for them?

47. What is your current employment Status? Select all that apply

- Employed full-time

- Employed part-time

- Self-employed

- Unemployed, looking for work

- Unemployed, not currently looking for work

- Retired

- Other

a. If you selected Other, please specify:

48. Does your current employment allow for location transfer? By location transfer, we mean that within your current employment, you would be able to relocate and remain in your post.

- Yes

- No

- Unsure

- Prefer not to answer

49. Do you spend time volunteering?

- Yes

- No

- Prefer not to answer

a. If yes, please specify how many hours per week?

Appendix 3: Survey methods

Participants and Sampling

Based on a total membership of the MWC of 1700 (the population size), a 5% margin of error, and a 95% confidence level, a target sample size of 314 was calculated to provide a representative sample of the MWC's current membership. A total of 468 participants were recruited to take part in this study (431 current and 37 previous members). The number of current members who participated (n = 431) represents 23.5% of the MWC's membership.

The only inclusion criteria to take part was current or past membership of the MWC network. To be eligible to join the MWC network, individuals had to fall into one of the following categories:

- Wives, partners, fiancées, or co-habiting partners of serving members of the UK Armed Forces (including Reservists);

- Serving UK Armed Forces personnel (including Reservists);

- UK Armed Forces veterans (including Reservists);

- Immediate family members (mother, sister, or daughter) of serving members of the UK Armed Forces (including Reservists);

- Wives, partners, fiancées, or co-habiting partners of serving members of the non-UK Armed Forces on a UK posting;

- Wives, widows, partners, fiancées, or co-habiting partners of UK Armed Forces veterans (including Reservists);

- Women employed within the military community for an organisation that provides a direct service to serving military personnel and families.

Participants were recruited to take part by the MWC's executive team. Advertisements were sent out via their membership mailing list, newsletters, and social media platforms. Additionally, the survey link was disseminated by word of mouth via the MWC's Experts-by-Experience (EbyE) members to increase the sample of previous members.

Data Collection

A self-report online survey was set up by the Anglia Ruskin University (ARU) research team using the 'Online Surveys' (formally Bristol Online Surveys) platform (https://www.onlinesurveys.ac.uk/). The survey, which consisted of questions related to sociodemographics, military connection, previous musical experience, and experiences as part of the MWC network, took approximately 20-30 minutes to complete. The survey was piloted with the MWC's EbyE group prior to dissemination to the general membership, to ensure usability and comprehensibility, and feedback was used to develop a final version of the survey for dissemination.

Participants were provided with an information sheet at the start of the survey and were required to provide informed consent prior to taking part. Participation was anonymous and participants were not asked to provide any identifiable data as a part of the survey.

Survey Measures and Development

The full version of the survey questions is available in Appendix 2. Initial areas of interest were developed by the research team with the MWC's executive team, and the full survey was drafted iteratively with the MWC's EbyE group during a number of virtual meetings with and via email. Questions were answered using a mixture of Likert scales, multiple choice questions, and free-text questions.

Sociodemographic information was collected for each participant, including age, ethnicity, nationality, country of residence, type of location (i.e., urban vs. rural), sexual orientation, level of education, disability and accessibility requirements, dependents, employment status, and living situation.

Information regarding military connection was collected, including type of connection (wife or partner, current service personnel, etc.), type of service (full-time Regular or Reservist), service branch (Army, Royal Navy, Royal Marines, Royal Air Force, or Merchant Navy), and rank on discharge (commissioned or other ranks). Participants were also asked how far they lived from their or their partner/relative's military base. Participants could add more than one military connection if applicable.

Participants were asked about the following aspects of their experience and perceptions of the MWC:

1. Membership of the MWC network (i.e., current or past member, number of choirs engaged with, ages of joining and years of involvement, roles undertaken, performance involvement, and involvement in setting up a choir).

2. Reasons for joining and staying in a choir.

3. Satisfaction with various aspects of the choirs.

4. Challenges of being in a choir.

5. Reasons for leaving a choir (if applicable).

6. Perceptions of why others may or may not join a choir.

Participants were also asked about their previous musical experience, including prior experience in choirs, formal musical training, and ability to read music.

Social support was measured using the Oslo Social Support Scale-3 (OSSS-3).[1] The OSSS-3 is a three-item self-reported measure of the level of social support. It consists of three items that ask for the number of close confidants, the sense of concern from other people, and the relationship with neighbours, with a focus on the accessibility of practical help. Participants were also asked how close they lived to close family and friends.

Data Analysis

Data were downloaded from the Online Surveys platform for analysis. Quantitative data were input into SPSS and analysed descriptively. Results are presented in the Survey Results (Section 4) using percentages. Free-text qualitative responses were input into excel and analysed thematically. These data are reported by presenting the identified themes in the responses and illustrated with quotes where appropriate.

The OSSS-3 was analysed by looking at the sum scores of the responses, which can range from 3 to 14, with high values representing strong levels and low values representing poor levels of social support. The OSSS-3 sum score can be operationalised into three broad categories of social support: (1) 3–8, poor social support; (2) 9–11, moderate social support; (3) 12–14, strong social support.

To assess the representativeness of the sample, the following data sources were utilised:

1. The UK Tri-Service Families Continuous Attitudes Survey (FAMCAS) Results 2022,[2] consisting of data collected by the Ministry of Defence from 4312 military spouses and partners. This dataset was used to assess the representativeness associated with sample age, nationality, home ownership, level of education, employment status, and dependents.

2. Data on the membership status of the MWC network (i.e., type of member and service branch connection), which were provided by the MWC's executive team.

Group differences in responses were explored in the following focus areas:

- Reasons to join and stay in a choir;

- Satisfaction with aspects of the choirs;

- Challenges associated with being in a choir;

- Why others may or may not join a choir.

This analysis focused on the differences observed in underrepresented groups in the MWC's membership, including respondents in the lower age bands and according to military connection and rank. For brevity, only notable differences are reporting in the Survey Results, with the full data tables available on request.

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Appendix 4: Interview Guide

Question	Prompts
Relationship with the military	
1. Can you tell me about your relationship with the military?	• Before joining MWC, what was your experience of being in the military community? • In what ways has joining MWC changed your experience of being in the military community? • How has your connection to / role in the military influenced your experience of MWC?
Joining the Military Wives Choir	
2. Why did you decide to join the MWC?	• How did you hear about the MWC? • What were your hesitations about joining the MWC? • How did MWC being audition-free influence your decision to join?
3. How did you experience joining the MWC?	• What were you expecting when you joined? • What was your first rehearsal like? • What were your 'musical' expectations? (i.e. genre/style of music, difficulty of music, skill of the choir) • How would you describe the differences between your expectations and the reality of MWC? (inc. musical)
4. One of the main reasons highlighted for women not joining MWC was a lack of awareness of eligibility. What were your experiences in learning about the eligibility criteria?	• In what ways did this influence you when joining the MWC? • How do you think awareness of the eligibility criteria can be increased?
Continued involvement in MWC	
5. How would you describe your experiences of being in the MWC?	• Why did you decide to stay in the choir? • Are there any positives or negatives of being in the choir? • What has your experience been of MWC being rank free?

		• What has your experience been of MWC being tri-service?
6.	If you have left a choir, why did you leave?	• How would you describe your experiences of leaving the choir? • In the survey, one of the main reasons for leaving was military posting/assignment. What have your experiences of this been? • If you left and joined a new choir, what were your experiences of this? • If you left and did not re-join a choir, what were your experiences of this?
7.	Why do you think other members may have left the choir?	
Previous musical experiences		
8.	Had you been involved in musical activities (choirs, bands, lessons, etc.) before joining the MWC? What were your previous musical experiences?	• If yes, how does the MWC compare to your previous musical experiences? • If yes, do you feel that your previous musical experience was important for joining the MWC? • If you've never been in a choir before, what was your experience of joining a choir for the first time?
9.	In the survey, a challenge reported was members' own musical abilities. How do you think your own musical abilities may have influenced your experience of MWC?	• If this has been a challenge for you, how have you overcome it? / What do you need to overcome this challenge? • Do you feel various levels of musical abilities are welcomed in the choir? – linked to the 'no auditions' policy • Has the MWC supported the development of your singing/music skills? • How could the MWC support members with this challenge? • How do you feel about the MWC repertoire (core and local)? Is it too challenging or not challenging enough?
Social experiences (positive and negative)		
10.	In the survey, one of the main reasons for joining and staying in the MWC was for 'relationships' – for example, making new friends, community and support for	• How have social experiences and relationships influenced your experience of MWC? • How would you describe the friendships and social connections you have made?

self and others. What have your experiences of this been?	
11. On the other hand, another challenge reported in the survey was negative group dynamics and social experiences. What have your experiences of this been?	• How have negative group dynamics and social experiences influenced your experience of MWC? • If this has been a challenge for you, how have you overcome it? / What do you need to overcome this challenge? • If you have experienced this, has it impacted led you to question your role or membership in the choir? • How could MWC support members with this challenge?

Accessibility	
12. In the survey, the most reported challenge was time constraints due to work and childcare or caring responsibilities. What have your experiences of these been?	• If this has been a challenge for you, how have you overcome it? / What do you need to overcome this challenge? • How could MWC support members with this challenge?
13. If you have accessibility needs, what has been your experience of accessing the MWC?	• How have your accessibility needs been met or overcome within the MWC? • If your accessibility needs have not been met, how could MWC support you in rehearsals and performances?
14. What have your experiences been in attending centrally organised events and performances?	• How do you think centrally organised events could be improved or more accessible?

Choir organisation	
15. What have your experiences been with your MWC choir committee?	• Have you ever held a choir committee role? • How could support from the choir committee be improved?
16. What have your experiences been with the MWC's Choirs Support Team?	• How could support from the Choirs Support Team be improved?

Any other business	
17. Is there anything further you would like to add about your experiences in MWC?	
18. Is there anything further you would like to add about how MWC can expand to new members?	

Appendix 5: Interview Methods

Semi-structured interviews were carried out to gain deeper understanding of previous and current MWC members' experiences within the choirs, particularly around reasons for joining a choir and maintaining membership, as well as why members have left choirs.

Participants and Sampling

The semi-structured interviews were carried out with a subsample of participants who completed the survey. The only inclusion criteria to take part was current or past membership of the MWC network. To be eligible to join the MWC network, individuals had to fall into one of the following categories:

- Wives, partners, fiancées, or co-habiting partners of serving members of the UK Armed Forces (including Reservists);

- Serving UK Armed Forces personnel (including Reservists);

- UK Armed Forces veterans (including Reservists);

- Immediate family members (mother, sister, or daughter) of serving members of the UK Armed Forces (including Reservists);

- Wives, partners, fiancées, or co-habiting partners of serving members of the non-UK Armed Forces on a UK posting;

- Wives, widows, partners, fiancées, or co-habiting partners of UK Armed Forces veterans (including Reservists);

- Women employed within the military community for an organisation that provides a direct service to serving military personnel and families.

Participants were able to express their interest in taking part in an interview and consent to be contacted upon completion of the survey. Interested participants provided their contact details separately from the survey to retain anonymity of their survey responses. A total of 19 participants took part in the semi-structured interviews, which included 15 current and four previous members of the MWC network. The sample of current members was randomly selected from current members who consented to be contacted for interview. Due to a limited number of previous members volunteering to participate in an interview, a purposeful sample included all previous members who expressed an interest.

Data Collection

Interviews took place virtually via Microsoft Teams with a member of the ARU research team. Prior to attending the interview, participants completed a short survey to provide their sociodemographic details, which was set up using the 'Online Surveys' (formally Bristol Online Surveys) platform (https://www.onlinesurveys.ac.uk/) and took approximately 5 minutes to complete. The interview was then scheduled at a convenient time for the participant and took approximately 45–60 minutes to complete. Interviews were audio/video-recorded and the Microsoft Teams automatic transcription was also recorded.

Upon invitation to take part, participants were provided with an information sheet and were required to provide informed consent to participate. Participants were given a participant ID number and all transcript and sociodemographic data were de-identified. Audio/video data were used only for checking and confirming the transcriptions and were subsequently deleted.

Interview Questions and Development

The full version of the interview questions is available in Appendix 4. The questions focused on understanding the key issues identified from the survey in more depth and were drafted iteratively with the MWC's EbyE group in a virtual meeting and via e-mail. All participants were asked the main questions, with prompts used when necessary to support more in-depth and detailed answers. The questions focused on participants' experiences in the following areas:

- Reasons for joining the MWC network;

- Experiences in the MWC network and reasons for leaving;

- Previous musical experiences;

- Social experiences;

- Accessibility issues;

- Experiences of choir organisation.

Sociodemographic information was collected for each participant, including age, ethnicity, nationality, country of residence, sexual orientation, level of education, disability, dependents, and employment status. Information regarding military connection was also collected, including type of connection (wife or partner, current service personnel, etc.), type of service (full-time Regular or Reservist), service branch (Army, Royal Navy, Royal Marines, Royal Air Force, or Merchant Navy), and rank on discharge (commissioned or other ranks).

Data Analysis

Interview transcriptions were downloaded from the Microsoft Teams recordings. Each transcription was checked by a member of the research team for errors to ensure accuracy. The transcriptions were then imported into NVivo qualitative data analysis software for analysis. One member of the research team analysed all interview transcriptions using reflexive thematic analysis,[1,2] which allows for the development of themes based on patterns identified within the data across participants. An inductive approach to analysis was taken, allowing for the themes to develop based on the participants' experiences. The following steps were followed based on the reflexive thematic analysis guidance:

1. Data familiarisation: The data familiarisation step involves the researcher familiarising themselves with the interview transcription data. This was done through listening to the audio recordings, checking the transcriptions, and re-reading the transcriptions.

2. Coding: After familiarisation, the researcher coded each transcription. This process involved identifying key phrases within the transcription text and assigning a descriptive category describing the meaning of the phrase. Codes could be semantic, where meaning was explicitly identified by the participants themselves, but also latent, where implicit or underlying meaning was captured by the researcher based on familiarisation with the data. During this process, the researcher kept notes of potential themes developing within the transcriptions.

3. Generating initial themes: Upon completion of coding, the researcher began the identification of initial themes based on patterns within the codes across participants. The assigned codes were grouped into initial theme groups for exploration.

4. Developing and reviewing themes: Once the initial themes had been identified, the researcher then reviewed the themes against the original coding and their own research notes. The researcher also shared and discussed potential themes with the other researcher who undertook interviews and transcriptions. This allowed for an iterative process to refine the themes and ensure the themes represent the participants' experiences accurately and deeply.

5. Refining, defining, and naming themes: Themes were then named and defined by the researcher, which also involved continued refinement of the final themes and subthemes presented.

6. Writing up: The themes and subthemes are presented in the final report; they are described in detail using quotations to describe the participants' experiences.

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Appendix 6: List of Included Studies in the Systematic Review

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Appendix 7: Sociodemographic Characteristics of the Survey Sample

The below table presents the sociodemographic characteristics of the survey respondents.

Variable	Proportion (%)
Age (years)	
18-29	3.5%
30-39	16.8%
40-49	29.0%
50-59	29.0%
60-69	15.7%
70-79	5.4%
80+	0.6%
Ethnicity	
White	99.6%
Mixed: White and Asian	0.2%
Prefer not to answer	0.2%
Nationality	
American	0.4%
Australian	0.2%
Belgian	0.2%
British	95.9%
Canadian	0.4%
French	0.4%
German	0.7%
Luxembourger	0.2%
Norwegian	0.2%
South African	0.4%
Spanish	0.2%

Swedish	0.2%
Ugandan	0.2%
Other	0.2%

Sexual orientation	
Asexual	1.5%
Bisexual	1.1%
Gay/lesbian	1.1%
Heterosexual	88.2%
Other	0.2%
Prefer not to answer	7.8%

Housing	
Service accommodation	28.5%
Rented (private)	6.5%
Rented (council/housing association)	0.4%
Own house	62.4%
Neither renting nor owning (i.e., live with friends or family, not paying rent)	0.6%
Other	0.4%
Prefer not to answer	1.1%

Type of area	
Urban	15.1%
Suburban	33.5%
Rural	45.9%
Unsure	3.7%
Other	0.4%
Prefer not to answer	1.1%

Location	
England	77.6%

Northern Ireland	0.4%
Scotland	10.3%
Wales	5.6%
International	6.0%
Prefer not to answer	0.2%

Education

No formal qualifications	1.1%
Entry-level qualifications	1.1%
GCSE-level or equivalent	12.9%
A-level or equivalent level	12.9%
Degree or equivalent level	37.6%
Higher degree or equivalent level	30.4%
Other	3.9%

Employment status

Employed full-time	36.5%
Employed part-time	27.1%
Self-employed	7.3%
Unemployed, looking for work	1.3%
Unemployed, not looking for work	7.1%
Retired	17.9%
Other	2.8%

Employment allows location transfer

Yes	24.4%
No	57.2%
Unsure	12.6%
Prefer not to answer	5.8%

Volunteering

Yes	43.9%

No	52.2%
Prefer not to answer	3.9%

Longstanding illness or disability

Yes	27.9%
No	68.8%
Unsure	1.3%
Prefer not to answer	1.9%

Accessibility issues

Yes	11.5%
No	86.5%
Unsure	0.4%
Prefer not to answer	1.5%

Children aged 17 years of under

Yes	42.7%
No	57.3%

Dependents aged 18 years or over

Yes	23.7%
No	75.8%
Prefer not to answer	0.4%

Appendix 8. Sociodemographic Characteristics of the Semi-structured Interview Sample

The below table presents the sociodemographic characteristics of the semi-structured interview participants.

Variable	*n*	Proportion (%)
Current or previous MWC member		
Current	15	78.9%
Previous	4	21.1%
Age (years)		
18-29	1	5.3%
30-39	6	31.6%
40-49	3	15.8%
50-59	5	26.3%
60-69	1	5.3%
70-79	3	15.8%
80+	-	-
Ethnicity		
White: British	18	94.7%
White: Other	1	5.3%
Nationality		
American	1	5.3%
British	18	94.7%
Sexual orientation		
Heterosexual	16	84.2%
Other	1	5.3%
Prefer not to answer/no answer	2	10.5%
Location		
Cyprus	1	5.3%

England	12	84.2%
Scotland	4	21.1%
Wales	1	5.3%
Prefer not to answer/no answer	1	5.3%

Education

No formal qualifications	1	5.3%
A-level or equivalent level	1	5.3%
Degree or equivalent level	7	36.8%
Higher degree or equivalent level	9	47.4%
Prefer not to answer/no answer	1	5.3%

Employment status

Employed full-time	3	15.8%
Employed part-time	7	36.8%
Self-employed	1	5.3%
Unemployed, not looking for work	2	10.5%
Retired	4	21.1%
Student	1	5.3%
Prefer not to answer/no answer	1	5.3%

Volunteering

Yes	12	63.2%
No	6	31.6%
Prefer not to answer/no answer	1	5.3%

Longstanding illness or disability

Yes	6	31.6%
No	12	63.2%
Prefer not to answer/no answer	1	5.3%

Children aged 17 years of under

Yes	11	57.9%

No	7	36.8%
Prefer not to answer/no answer	1	5.3%

Dependents aged 18 years or over

Yes	3	15.8%
No	15	78.9%
Prefer not to answer/no answer	1	5.3%

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